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A SON OF HAGAR.

A ROMANCE OF OUR TIME

BY

HALL CAINE,

Author of "The Bondsman," "The Deemster," etc.

"God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is."

NEW YORK
HURST & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS.

TO
R.D. BLACKMORE.

It must be an exceeding great reward, beyond all the rewards of material success, to know that you have written a book that is deep, tranquil, strong and pure. Again and again you have nobly earned that knowledge. Across the more than thirty years that divide us, the elder from the younger brother, the veteran from the raw comrade, let me offer my hand to you as to a master of our craft.

To the author, then, of a romance that has no equal save in Scott, I humbly dedicate this romance

 CUMBRIAN WORDS.

barn=child; dusta=dost thou; hasta=hast thou.

laal=little; leet=alight; girt=great.

sista=seëst thou.

varra=very.

wadsta=wouldst thou.

wilta=wilt thou.

Shaf!=*an expression of contempt.*

PREFACE.

In my first novel, "The Shadow of a Crime," I tried to penetrate into the soul of a brave, unselfish, long-suffering man, and to lay bare the processes by which he raised himself to a great height of self-sacrifice. In this novel the aim has been to penetrate into the soul of a bad man, and to lay bare the processes by which he is tempted to his fall. To find a character that shall be above all common tendencies to guilt and yet tainted with the plague-spot of evil hidden somewhere; then to watch the first sharp struggle of what is good in the man with what is bad, until he is in the coil of his temptation; and finally, to show in what tragic ruin a man of strong passions, great will and power of mind may resist the force that precipitates him and save his soul alive—this is, I trust, a motive no less worthy, no less profitable to study, in the utmost result no less heroic and inspiring, than that of tracing the upward path of noble types of mind. For me there has been a pathetic, and I think purifying, interest in looking into the soul of this man and seeing it corrode beneath the touch of a powerful temptation until at the last, when it seems to lie spent, it rises again in strength and shows that the human heart has no depths in which it is lost. If this character had been equal to my intention, it might have been a real contribution to fiction, and far as I know it to fall short of the first deep blow of feeling in which it was conceived, it is, I think, new to the novel, though it holds a notable place in the drama—it would be presumptuous to say where—unnecessary, also, as I have made no disguise of my purpose.

One of the usual disadvantages of choosing a leading character that is off the lines of heroic portraiture is that the author may seem to be in sympathy with a base part in life and with base opinions. In this novel I run a different risk. I shall not be surprised if I provoke some hostility in making the bad man justify his course by the gaunt and grim morality that masquerades as the morality of our own time, while the good man is made to justify his one dubious act by the full and sincere and just morality that too often wears now the garb of vice—the morality of the books of Moses. This novel relies, I trust, on the sheer humanities alone, but among its less aggressive purposes is that of a plea for the natural rights of the bastard. Those rights have been recognized in every country and by every race, except one, since the day when the outcast woman in the wilderness hearkened to the cry from heaven which said, "God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is." In England alone have the rights of blood been as nothing compared with the rights of property, and it is part of the business of this novel to exhibit these interests at a climax of strife. I have no fear that any true-hearted person will accuse me of a desire to cast reproach upon marriage as an ordinance. Recognizing the beauty and the sanctity of marriage, I have tried to show that true marriage is a higher thing than a ceremony, and that people who use the gibbet and stake for offenders against its forms are too often those who see no offense in the violation of its spirit.

My principal scenes are again among the mountains of Cumberland; but in this second attempt I have tried to realize more completely their solitude and sweetness, their breezy healthfulness, and their scent as of new-cut turf, by putting them side by side with scenes full of the garrulous clangor and the malodor of the dark side of London.

When I began, I thought to enlarge the popular knowledge of our robust north-country by the addition of some whimsical character and quaint folk-lore. If much of this quiet local atmosphere has had to make way before one strong current of tragic feeling, I trust some of it remains that is fresh and bracing in the incidents of the booth, the smithy, the dalesman's wedding, the rush-bearing, the cock-fighting, and the sheep-shearing. Those readers of the earlier book who found human nature and an element of humor in the patois, will regret with me the necessity so to modify the dialect in this book as to remove from it nearly all the race quality that comes of intonation.

I ought to add that one of my characters, Parson Christian, is a portrait of a dear, simple, honest soul long gone to his account, and that the words here put into his mouth are oftener his own than mine.

I trust this book may help to correct a prevailing misconception as to the morals and mind of the typical English peasantry. It is certain that the conventional peasant of literature, the broad-mouthed rustic in a smock-frock, dull-eyed, mulish, beetle-headed, doddering, too vacant to be vicious, too doltish to do amiss, does not exist as a type in England. What does exist in every corner of the country is a peasantry speaking a patois that is often of varying inflections, but is always full of racy poetry, illiterate and yet possessed of a vast oral literature, sharing brains with other classes more equally than education, humorous, nimble-witted; clear-sighted, astute, cynical, not too virtuous, and having a lofty, contempt for the wiseacres of the town.

The manners and customs, the folk lore and folk-talk of Cumberland are far from exhausted in my two Cumberland novels; but it is not probable that I shall work in this vein again. In parting from it, may I venture to hope that here and there a reader grown tired of the life of the great cities has sometimes found it a relief to escape with me into these mountain solitudes and look upon a life as real and more true; a life that is humble and yet not low; a life in which men may be men, and the rude people of the soil need study the face of no master save nature alone?

A SON OF HAGAR.

BOOK I.

RETRO ME, SATHANA!

PROLOGUE.

IN THE YEAR 1845.

It was a chill December morning. The atmosphere was dense with fog in the dusky chamber of a London police court; the lights were bleared and the voices drowsed. A woman carrying a child in her arms had been half dragged, half pushed into the dock. She was young; beneath her disheveled hair her face showed almost girlish. Her features were pinched with pain; her eyes had at one moment a serene look, and at the next moment a look of defiance. Her dress had been rich; it was now torn and damp, and clung in dank folds to her limbs. The child she carried appeared to be four months old. She held it convulsively at her breast, and when it gave forth a feeble cry she rocked it mechanically.

"Your worship, I picked this person out of the river at ha'past one o'clock this morning," said a constable. "She had thrown herself off the steps of Blackfriars Bridge."

"Had she the child with her?" asked the bench.

"Yes, your worship; and when I brought her to land I couldn't get the little one out of her arms nohow—she clung that tight to it. The mother, she was insensible; but the child opened its eyes and cried."

"Have you not learned her name?"

"No, sir; she won't give us no answer when we ask her that."

"I am informed," said the clerk, "that against all inquiries touching her name and circumstances she keeps a rigid silence. The doctor is of opinion, your worship, that the woman is not entirely responsible."

"Her appearance in court might certainly justify that conclusion," said the magistrate.

The young woman had gazed vacantly about her with an air of indifference. She seemed scarcely to realize that through the yellow vagueness the eyes of a hundred persons were centered on her haggard face.

"Anybody here who knows her?" asked the bench.

"Yes, your worship; I found out the old woman alonger she lodged."

"Let us hear the old person."

A woman in middle life—a little, confused, aimless, uncomfortable body—stepped into the box. She answered to the name of Drayton. Her husband was a hotel porter. She had a house in Pimlico. A month ago one of her rooms on the first floor back had been to let. She put a card in her window, and the prisoner applied. Accepted the young lady as tenant, and had been duly paid her rent. Knew nothing of who she was or where she came from. Couldn't even get her name.

Had heard her call the baby Paul. That was all she knew.

"Her occupation, my good woman, what was it?"

"Nothing; she hadn't no occupation, your worship."

"Never went out? Not at night?"

"No, sir; leastways not at night, sir. I hopes your worship takes me for an honest woman, sir."

"Did nothing for a living, and yet she paid you. Did you board her?"

"Yes, your worship; she could cook her wittles, but the poor young thing seemed never to have heart for nothing, sir."

"Never talked to you?"

"No, sir; nothing but cried. She cried, and cried, and cried, 'cept when she laughed, and then it were awful, your worship. My man always did say as how there was no knowing what she'd be doing of yet."

"Is she married, do you know?"

"Yes, your worship; she wears her wedding-ring quite regular—only, once she plucked it off and flung it in the fire—I saw it with my own eyes, sir, or I mightn't ha' believed it; and I never did see the like—but the poor creature's not responsible at whiles—that's what my husband says."

"What was her behavior to the child? Did she seem fond of it?"

"Oh, yes, your worship; she used to hug, and hug, and hug it, and call it her darling, and Paul, and Paul, and Paul, and all she had left in the world."

"When did you see her last before to-day?"

"Yesterday, sir; she put on her bonnet and cape and drew a shawl around the baby, and went out in the afternoon. 'It will do you a mort of good,' says I to her; 'Yes, Mrs. Drayton,' says she, 'it will do us both a world of good.' That was on the front doorsteps, your worship and it was a nice afternoon, but I had never no idea what she meant to be doing of; but she's not responsible, poor young thing, that's what my—"

"And when night came and she hadn't got home, did you go in search of her?"

"Yes, your worship; for I says to my husband, says I, 'Poor young thing, I can't rest in my bed, and knowing nothing of what's come to her.' And my man, he says to me, 'Maggie,' he says, 'you go to the station and give the officers her description,' he says—'a tall young woman as might ha' been a lady, a-carrying a baby— that'll be good enough,' he says, and I went. And this morning the officer came, and I knew by his face as something had happened, and—"

"Let us hear the doctor. Is he in court?"

"Yes, your worship," said the constable.

Mrs. Drayton was being hustled out of the box. She stopped on the first step down—

"And I do hope as no harm will come to her—she's not responsible—that's what my hus—"

"All right, we know all that; down with you; this way; don't bother his worship!"

At the bottom of the steps the woman stopped again with a handkerchief to her eyes.

"And it do make me cry to see her, poor thing, and the baby, too, and innocent as a kitten—and I hopes if anything is done to her as—"

Mrs. Drayton's further hopes and fears were lost in the bustle of the court. The young woman in the dock still gazed about her vacantly. There was strength in her firmly molded lip, sensibility in her large dark eyes, power in her broad, smooth brow, and a certain stateliness in the outlines of her tall, slim figure.

The doctor who had examined her gave his report in a few words; the woman should be under control, though she was dangerous to no one but herself. Her attempt at suicide was one of the common results of disaster in affairs of love. Perhaps she was a married woman, abandoned by her husband; more likely she was an unfortunate lady in whom the shame of pregnancy had produced insanity. She was obviously a person of education and delicacy of feeling.

"She must have connections of some kind," said the magistrate; and, turning to the dock, he said quietly, "Give us your name, my good lady."

The woman seemed not to hear, but she pressed her child yet closer to her breast, and it cried feebly.

The magistrate tried again.

"Your baby's name is Paul, isn't it? Paul—what?"

She looked around, glanced at the magistrate and back at the people in the court, but said nothing.

Just then the door opposite the bench creaked slightly, and a gentleman entered. The woman's wondering eyes passed over him. In an instant her torpor was shaken off. She riveted her gaze on the new-comer. Her features contracted with lines of pain. She drew the child aside, as if to hide it from sight. Then her face twitched, and she staggered back into the arms of the constable behind her. She was now insensible. Through the dense folds of the fog the vague faces of the spectators showed an intent expression.

It was observed that the gentleman who had entered the court a moment before immediately left it. The magistrate saw him pass out of the door merely as a distorted figure in the dusky shadows.

"Let her be removed to the Dartford asylum," said the magistrate; "I will give an order at once."

A voice came from the body of the court. It was Mrs. Drayton's voice, thick with sobs.

"And if you please, your worship, may me and my husband take care of the child until the poor young thing is well enough to come for it? We've no children of our own, sir, and my husband and me, we'd like to have it, and no one would do no better by it, your worship."

"I think you are a good woman, Mrs. Drayton," said the magistrate. Then, turning to the clerk, he added: "Let inquiries be made about her, and, if all prove satisfactory, let the child be given into her care."

"Oh, thank your worship; it do make me cry—"

"Yes, all right—never mind now—we know all about it—come along."

The prisoner recovered consciousness in being removed from the dock; the constable was taking the child out of her arms. She clung to it with feverish hands.

"Take me away," she said in a deep whisper, and her eyes wandered to the door.

"Stop that man!" said the magistrate, pointing to the vague recesses into which the spectator had disappeared. An officer of the court went out hastily. Presently returning: "He is gone," said the officer.

"Take me away, take me away!" cried the prisoner in a tense voice. "Paul, Paul, my own little Paul!" The woman's breath came and went in gusts, and her child cried from the convulsive pressure to her breast.

"Remove them," said the bench.

There was a faint commotion. Among the people in the court, huddled like sheep, there was a harsh scraping of feet, and some suppressed whispering. The stolid faces on the bench turned and smiled slightly in the yellow gleam of the gas that burned in front of them. Then the momentary bustle ended, the woman and child were gone, and the calm monotony of the court was resumed.

Six months later a handsome woman, still little more than a girl, yet with eyes of suffering, stepped up to the door of a house in Pimlico and knocked timidly.

"I wish to see Mrs. Drayton," she said, when the door was opened by an elderly person.

"Bless you, they're gone, Mrs. Drayton and her Husband."

"Gone!" said the young woman, "gone! What do you mean?"

"Why, gone—removed—shifted."

"Removed—shifted?" The idea seemed to struggle its slow way into her brain.

"In course—what else, when the big hotel fails and he loses his job? Rents can't be paid on nothing a week, and something to put in the mouth besides."

"Gone? Are you mad? Woman, think what you're saying. Gone where?"

"How do I know where? Mad, indeed! I'll not say but other folk look a mort madder nor ever I looked."

The young woman took her by the shoulder.

"Don't say that—don't say you don't know where they're gone. They've got my child, I tell you; my poor little Paul.

"Oh, so you're the young party as drowned herself, are you? Well, they're gone anyways, and the little chit with them, and there's no saying where. You may believe me. Ask the neighbors else."

The young woman leaned against the door-jamb with a white face and great eyes.

"Well, well, how hard she takes it. Deary me, deary me, she's not a bad sort, after all. Well, well, who'd ha' thought it! There, there, come in and sit awhile. It is cruel to lose one's babby—and me to tell her, too. Misbegotten or not, it's one's own flesh and blood, and that's what I always says."

The young woman had been drawn into the house and seated on a chair. She got up again with the face of an old woman.

"Oh, I'm choking!" she said.

"Rest awhile, do now, my dear—there—there."

"No, no, my good woman, let me go."

"Heaven help you, child; how you look!"

"Heaven has never helped me," said the young woman. "I was a Sister of Charity only two years ago. A man found me and wooed me; married me and abandoned me; I tried to die and they rescued me; they separated me from my child and put me in an asylum; I escaped, and have now come for my darling, and he is gone."

"Deary me, deary me!" and the old woman stroked her consolingly.

"Let me go," she cried, starting up afresh. "If Heaven has done nothing for me, perhaps the world itself will have mercy."

The ghastly face answered ill to the grating laugh that followed as she jerked her head aside and hurried away.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE YEAR 1875.

It was Young Folks' Day in the Vale of Newlands. The summer was at its height; the sun shone brightly; the lake to the north lay flat as a floor of glass, and reflected a continent of blue cloud; the fells were clear to their summits, and purple with waves of heather. It was noontide, and the shadows were short. In the slumberous atmosphere the bees droned, and the hot air quivered some feet above the long, lush grass. The fragrance of new-mown hay floated languidly through a sub-current of wild rose and honeysuckle. In a meadow at the foot of the Causey Pike tents were pitched, flags were flying, and crowds of men, women, and children watched the mountain sports.

In the center of a group of spectators two men, stripped to the waist, were wrestling. They were huge fellows, with muscles that stood out on their arms like giant bulbs, and feet that held the ground like the hoofs of oxen. The wrestlers were calm to all outward appearance, and embraced each other with the quiet fondling of lambs and the sinuous power of less affectionate creatures. But the people about them were wildly excited. They stopped to watch every wary movement of the foot, and craned their necks to catch the subtlest twist of the wrist.

"Sista, Reuben, sista! He'll have enough to do to tummel John Proudfoot. John's up to the scat to-day, anyways."

"Look tha! John's on for giving him the cross-buttock."

John was the blacksmith, a big buirdly fellow with a larger blunt head.

"And he has given it too, has John."

"Nay, nay, John's doon—ey, ey, he's doon, is John."

One of the wrestlers had thrown the other, and was standing quietly over him. He was a stalwart young man of eight-and-twenty, brown-haired, clear-eyed, of a ruddy complexion, with a short, thick, curly beard, and the grace and bearing that comes of health and strength and a complete absence of self-consciousness. He smiled cheerfully, and nodded his head in response to loud shouts of applause. "Weel done! Verra weel done! That's the way to ding 'em ower! What sayst tha, Reuben?"

"What a bash it was, to be sure!"

"What dusta think you of yon wrestling, ey, man?"

"Nay, nay, it's verra middling."

"Ever seen owt like it since the good auld days you crack on sa often, auld man?"

"Nay, he doont him verra neat, did Paul—I will allow it."

"There's never a man in Cumberland need take a hand with young Paul Ritson after this."

"Ey, ey; he's his father's son."

The wrestler, surrounded by a little multitude of boys, who clung to his sparse garments on every side, made his way to a tent.

At the same moment a ludicrous figure forced a passage through the crowd, and came to a stand in the middle of the green. It was a diminutive creature, mounted on a pony that carried its owner on a saddle immediately below its neck, and a pair of paniers just above its tail. The rider was an elderly man with shaggy eyebrows and beard of mingled black and gray. His swarthy,

keen wizened face was twisted into grotesque lines beneath a pair of little blinking eyes, which seemed to say that anybody who refused to see that they belonged to a perfectly, wideawake son of old Adam made a portentous mistake. He was the mountain peddler, and to-day, at least, his visit was opportune.

"Lasses, here's for you! Look you, here's Gubblum Oglethorpe, pony and all."

"Why, didsta ever see the like—Gubblum's gotten hissel into a saddle!"

Gubblum, from his seat on the pony, twisted one half of his wrinkled face awry, and said:

"In course I have! But it's a vast easier getting into this saddle nor getting out of it, I can tell you!"

"Why, how's that, Gubblum?" cried a voice from the crowd.

"What, man, did you never hear of the day I bought it?"

Sundry shakes of many heads were the response.

"No?" said Gubblum, with an accent of sheer incredulity, and added, "Well, there is no accounting for the ignorance of some folks."

"What happened to you, Gubblum?"

Gubblum's expression of surprise gave place to a look of condescension. He lifted his bronzed and hairy hand to the rim of his straw hat to shade his eyes from the sun.

"Well, when I got on to auld Bessy, here, I couldn't get off again—that's what happened."

"No? Why?"

"You see, I'd got my clogs on when I went to buy the saddle in Kezzick, and they're middling wide in the soles, my clogs are. So when I put my feet into the stirrups, there they stuck."

"Stuck!"

"Ey, fast as nails! And when I got home to Branth'et Edge I couldn't get them out. So our Sally, she said to my auld woman, 'Mother,' she said, 'we'll have to put father into the stable with the pony and fetch him a cup of tea.' And that's what they did, and when I had summat into me I had another fratch at getting out of the saddle; but I couldn't manish it; so I had—what you think I had to do?"

"Nay, man, what?"

"I had to sleep all night in the stable on Bessy's back!"

"Bless thee, Gubblum, and whatever didsta do?"

"I'm coming to that, on'y some folks are so impatient. Next morning that lass of mine, she said to her mother, 'Mother,' she said, 'wouldn't it be best to take the saddle off the pony, and then father he'll sure come off with it?'"

"And they did do it?"

"Ey, they did. They took Bessy and me round to the soft bed as they keeps maistly at the back of a stable, and they loosened the straps and gave a push, and cried 'Away.'"

"Weel, man, weel?"

"Weel! nowt of the sort! It wasn't weel at all! When I rolled over I was off the pony, for sure; but I was stuck fast to the saddle just the same."

"What ever did they do with thee then?"

"I'm coming to that, too, on'y some folks are so mortal fond of hearing theirselves talk. They picked me up, saddle and all, and set me on the edge of the kitchen dresser. And there I sat for the best part of a week, sleeping and waking, and carding and spinning, and getting fearful thin. But I got off at last, I did!" There was a look of proud content in Gubblum's face as he added, "What a thing it is to be eddicated! We don't vally eddication half enough!"

A young fellow—it was Lang Geordie Moore—pushed a smirking face between the shoulders of two girls, and said:

"Did you take to reading and writing, then, Gubblum, when you were on the kitchen dresser?"

There was a gurgling titter, but, disdainful to notice the interruption, Gubblum lifted his tawny face into the glare of the sun, and said:

"It was my son as did it—him that is learning for a parson. He came home from St. Bees, and 'Mother,' he said, before he'd been in the house a minute, 'let's take fathers clogs off, and then his feet will come out of the stirrups.'"

A loud laugh bubbled over the company. Gubblum sat erect in the saddle and added with a grave face:

"That's what comes of eddication and reading the Bible and all o' that! If I had fifty sons I'd make 'em all parsons."

The people laughed again, and crowed and exchanged nods and knowing winks. They enjoyed the peddler's talk, and felt an indulgent tenderness for his slow and feeble intellect. He on his part enjoyed no less to assume a simple and shallow nature. A twinkle lurked under his bushy brows while he "smoked the gonies." They laughed and he smiled slyly, and both were satisfied.

Gubblum Oglethorpe, peddler, of Branth'et Edge, got off his pony and stroked its tousled mane. He was leading it to a temporary stable, when he met face to face the young wrestler, Paul Ritson, who was coming from the tent in his walking costume. Drawing up sharply, he surveyed Paul rapidly from head to foot, and then asked him with a look of bewilderment what he could be doing there.

"Why, when did you come back to these parts?"

Paul smiled.

"Come back! I've not been away."

The old man looked slyly up into Paul's face and winked. Perceiving no response to that insinuating communication, his wrinkled face became more grave, and he said:

"You were nigh to London three days ago."

"Nigh to London three days ago!" Paul laughed, then nodded across at a burly dalesman standing near, and said: "Geordie, just pinch the old man, and see if he's dreaming."

There was a general titter, followed by glances of amused inquiry. The peddler took off his hat, held his head aside, scratched it leisurely, glanced up again at the face of young Ritson, as if to satisfy himself finally as to his identity, and eventually muttered half aloud:

"Well, I'm fair maizelt—that's what I am!"

"Maizelt—why?"

"I could ha' sworn I saw you at a spot near London three days ago."

"Not been there these three years," said Paul.

"Didn't you wave your hand to me as we went by—me and Bessy?"

"Did I? Where?"

"Why, at the Hawk and Heron, in Hendon."

"Never saw the place in my life."

"Sure of that?"

"Sure."

The grave old head dropped once more, and the pony's head was held down to the withered hand that scratched and caressed it. Then the first idea of a possible reason on Paul's part for keeping his movements secret suggested itself afresh to Gubblum. He glanced soberly around, caught the eye of the young dalesman furtively, and winked again. Paul laughed outright, nodded his head good-humoredly, and rather ostentatiously winked in response. The company that had gathered about them caught the humor of the situation, and tittered audibly enough to provoke the peddler's wrath.

"But I say you have seen it," shouted Gubblum in emphatic tones.

At that moment a slim young man walked slowly past the group. He was well dressed, and carried himself with ease and some dignity, albeit with an air of listlessness—a weary and dragging gait, due in part to a slight infirmity of one foot. When some of the dalesmen bowed to him his smile lacked warmth. He was Hugh Ritson, the younger brother of Paul.

Gubblum's manner gathered emphasis. "You were standing on the step of the Hawk and Heron," said he, "and I waved my hand and shouted 'A canny morning to you, Master Paul'—ey, that I did!"

"You don't say so!" said Paul, with mock solemnity. His brother had caught the peddler's words, and stopped.

"But I do say so," said Gubblum, with many shakes of his big head. Let any facetious young gentleman who supposed that it was possible to make sport of him, understand once for all that it might be as well to throw a stone into his own garden.

"Why, Gubblum," said Paul, smothering a laugh, "what was I doing at Hendon?"

"Doing! Well, a chap 'at was on the road along of me said that Master Paul had started innkeeper."

"Innkeeper!"

There was a prolonged burst of laughter, amid which one amused patriarch on a stick shouted: "Feel if tha's abed, Gubblum, ma man!"

"And if I is abed, it's better nor being in bed-lam, isn't it?" shouted the peddler.

Then Gubblum scratched his head again, and said more quietly: "It caps all. If it wasn't you, it must ha' been the old gentleman hissel'."

"Are we so much alike? Come, let's see your pack."

"His name was Paul, anyways."

Hugh Ritson had elbowed his way through the group, and was now at Gubblum's elbow listening intently. When the others had laughed, he alone preserved an equal countenance.

"Paul—what?" he asked.

"Nay, don't ax me—I know nowt no mair—I must be an auld maizelin, I must, for sure!"

Hugh Ritson turned on his heel and walked off.

CHAPTER II.

The Vale of Newlands runs north and south. On its east banks rise the Cat Bell fells and the Eel Crag; on the west rise Hindscarth and Robinson, backed by Whiteless Pike and Grasmoor. A river flows down the bed of the valley, springing in the south among the heights of Dale Head, and emptying into Bassenthwaite on the north. A village known as Little Town stands about midway in the vale, and a road runs along each bank. The tents were pitched for the sports near the bed of the valley, on the east side of the Newlands Beck. On the west side, above the road, there was a thick copse of hazel, oak, and birch. From a clearing in this wood a thin column of pale blue smoke was rising through the still air. A hut in the shape of a cone stood a few yards from the road. It was thatched from the ground upward with heather and bracken, leaving only a low aperture as door. Near the hut a small fire of hazel sticks crackled under the pot that swung from a forked triangle of oak limbs. Fagots were stacked at one end of the clearing; a pile of loose bark lay near. It was a charcoal pit, and behind a line of hurdles that were propped with poles and intertwined with dead grass and gorse, an old man was building a charcoal fire.

He was tall and slight, and he stooped. His eyes were large and heavy; his long beard was whitening. He wore a low-crowned hat with broad brim, and a loose flannel jacket without a waistcoat. Most of us convey the idea that to our own view we are centers of our circles, and that the universe revolves about us. This old man suggested a different feeling. To himself he might have been a thing gone somehow out of its orbit. There was a listless melancholy, a lonely weariness in his look and movements. An old misery seemed to sit on him.

His name was Matthew Fisher; but the folk of the country-side called him Laird Fisher. The dubious dignity came of the circumstance that he was the holder of an absolute royalty on a few acres of land under Hindscarth. The royalty had been many generations in his family. His grandfather had set store by it. When the lord of the manor had worked the copper pits at the foot of the Eel Crag, he had tried to possess himself of the royalties of the Fishers. But the peasant family resisted the aristocrat. Luke Fisher believed there was a fortune under his feet, and he meant to try his own luck on his holding some day. That day never came. His son, Mark Fisher, carried on the tradition, but made no effort to unearth the fortune. They were a cool, silent, slow, and stubborn race. Matthew Fisher followed his father and his grandfather, and inherited the family faith. All these years the tenders of the lord of the manor were ignored, and the Fishers enjoyed their title of courtesy or badinage. When Matthew was a boy there was a rhyme current in the vale which ran:

"There's t' auld laird, and t' young laird, and t' laird among t' barns.
If iver there comes another laird, we'll hang-him up by t' arms."

There is a tough bit of Toryism in the grain of these northern dalesfolk. Their threat was idle; no other laird ever came. Matthew married, and had one daughter only. He farmed his few acres with poor results. The ground was good enough, but Matthew was living under the shadow of the family tradition. One day—it was Sunday morning, and the sun shone brightly—he was rambling by the Po Beck that rose on Hindscarth and passed through his land, when his eye glanced over a glittering stone that lay among the pebbles, at the bottom of the stream. It was ore, good full ore, and on the very surface. Then the Laird Fisher sunk a shaft and all his earnings with it in an attempt to procure iron or copper. The dalespeople derided him, but he held silently on his way.

"How dusta find the cobbles to-day—any softer?" they would ask.

"As soft as the hearts of most folk," he would answer, and then add in a murmur, "and maybe a vast harder nor their heads."

The undeceiving came at length, and then the Laird Fisher was old and poor. His wife died broken-hearted. After that the laird never rallied. The breezy irony of the dalesfolk did not spare the old man's bent head. "He's brankan" (holding up his head) "like a steg swan," they would say

as he went past. The shaft was left unworked, and the holding lay fallow. Laird Fisher took wage from the lord of the manor to burn charcoal in the copse.

The old man had raised his vertical shaft, and was laying the oak limbs against it, when a girl of about eighteen came along the road from the south, and clambered over the stile that led to the charcoal pit. She was followed by a sheep-dog, small and wiry as a hill-fox.

"Is that thee, Mercy?" said the charcoal-burner from the fire, without turning.

The girl was a pretty little thing; yet there was something wrong with her prettiness. One saw at once that her cheeks should have been pink and white like the daisy, and that her hair, which was yellow as the primrose, should have tumbled in wavelets about them. There ought to have been sunshine in the blue eyes, and laughter on the red lips, and merry lilt in the soft voice. But the pink had faded from the girl's cheek; the shadow had chased the sunshine from her eyes; her lips had taken a downward turn, and a note of sadness had stolen the merriment from her voice.

"It's only your tea, father," she said, setting down a basket. Then taking up a spoon that lay on the ground, she stirred the mess that was simmering over the fire. The dog lay and blinked in the sun.

A rabbit rustled through the coppice, and a jay screeched in the distant glade. But above all came the peals of merry laughter from below. The girl's eyes wandered yearningly to the tents over which the flags were flying.

"Do you hear the sports, father?" she said.

"Ey, lass, there's gay carryin's-on. They're chirming and chirping like as many sparrows." The old man twisted about. "I should have thowt as thou'd have been in the thick of the thrang thysel', Mercy, carryin' on the war."

"I didn't care to go," said Mercy in an undertone.

The old man looked at her silently for a moment.

"Ways me, but thoos not the same heartsome lass," he said, and went on piling the fagots around the shaft. "But I count nowt of sec wark," he added, after a pause.

Little Mercy's eyes strayed back from the bubbling pot to the tents below. There was a shout of applause.

"That's Geordie Moore's voice," thought Mercy. She could see a circle with linked hands. "They're playing the cushion game," she said under her breath, and then drew a long sigh.

Though she did not care to go to the sports to-day, she felt, oh! so sick at heart. Like a wounded hare that creeps into quiet ambush, and lies down on the dry clover to die, she had stolen away from all this noisy happiness; but her heart's joy was draining away. In her wistful eyes there was something almost cruel in this bustling merriment, in this flaunting gayety, in this sweet summer day itself.

The old charcoal-burner had stepped up to where the girl knelt with far-away eyes.

"Mercy," he said, "I've wanted a word with you this many a day."

"With me, father?"

The girl rose to her feet. There was a look of uneasiness in her face.

"You've lost your spirits—what's come of them?"

"Me, father?"

The assumed surprise was in danger of breaking down.

"Not well, Mercy—is that it?"

He took her head between his hard old hands, and stroked her hair as tenderly as a mother might have done.

"Oh, yes, father; quite well, quite."

Then there was a little forced laugh. The lucent eyes were full of a dewy wistfulness.

"Any trouble, Mercy?"

"What trouble, father?"

"Nay, any trouble—trouble's common, isn't it?"

The old man's voice shook slightly, and his hand trembled on the girl's head.

"What have I to trouble me!" said Mercy, in a low voice nigh to breaking.

"Well, you know best," said the charcoal-burner. Then he put his hand under the girl's chin and lifted her face until her unwilling eyes looked into his. The scrutiny appeared to console him, and a smile played over his battered features. "Maybe I was wrong," he thought. "Folk are allus clattering."

Mercy made another forced little laugh, and instantly the Laird Fisher's face saddened.

"They do say 'at you're not the same heartsome little lass," he said.

"Do they? Oh, but I am quite happy! You always say people are busybodies, don't you, father?"

The break-down was imminent.

"Why, Mercy, you're crying."

"Me—crying!" The girl tossed her head with, a pathetic gesture of gay protestation. "Oh, no; I was laughing—that was it."

"There are tears in your eyes, anyways."

"Tears? Nonsense, father! Tears? Didn't I tell you that your sight was failing you— ey, didn't I, now?"

It was of no use to struggle longer. The fair head fell on the heaving breast, and Mercy sobbed.

The old man looked at her through a blinding mist in his hazy eyes. "Tell me, my little lassie, tell me," he said.

"Oh, it's nothing," said Mercy. She had brushed away the tears and was smiling.

The Laird Fisher shook his head.

"It's nothing, father—only—"

"Only—what?"

"Only—oh, it's nothing!"

"Mercy, my lass," said the Laird Fisher, and the tears stood now in his own dim eyes, "Mercy, remember if owt goes wrong with a girl, and her mother is under the grass, her father is the first she should come to and tell all."

The old man had seated himself on a stout block cut from a trunk, and was opening the basket, when there was a light, springy step on the road.

"So you fire to-night, Matthew?"

An elderly man leaned over the stile and smiled.

"Nay, Mr. Bonnithorne, there's ower much nastment in the weather yet."

The gentleman took off his silk hat and mopped his forehead. His hair was thin and of a pale yellow, and was smoothed flat on his brow.

"You surprise me! I thought the weather perfect. See how blue the sky is."

"That doesn't argy. It might be better with never a blenk of blue. It was rayder airy yesterday, and last night the moon got up as blake and yellow as May butter."

The smile was perpetual on the gentleman's face. It showed his teeth constantly.

"You dalesmen are so weather-wise."

The voice was soft and womanish. There was a little laugh at the end of each remark.

"We go by the moon in firing, sir," the charcoal-burner answered, "Last night it rose sou'-west, and that doesn't mean betterment, though it's quiet enough now. There'll be clashy weather before nightfall."

The girl strayed away into the thicket, and startled a woodcock out of a heap of dead oak leaves. The gentleman followed her with his eyes. They were very small and piercing eyes, and they blinked frequently.

"Your daughter does not look very well, Matthew."

"She's gayly, sir; she's gayly," said the charcoal-burner shortly, his mouth in his can of tea.

The gentleman smiled from the teeth out. After a pause, he said: "I suppose it isn't pleasant when one of your hurdles is blown down, and the charcoal burning," indicating the wooden hurdles which had been propped about the half-built charcoal stack.

"Ey, it's gay bad wark, to be sure—being dragged into the fire."

The dog had risen with a startled movement. Following the upward direction of the animal's nose, the gentleman said, "Whose sheep are those on the ghyll yonder?"

"Auld Mr. Ritson's, them herdwick's."

The sheep were on a ridge of shelving rock.

"Dangerous spot, eh?"

"Ey, it's a bent place. They're verra clammersome, the black-faced sorts."

"I'll bid you good-day, Matthew." The yellow-haired elderly gentleman was moving off. He walked with a jerk and a spring on his toes. "And mind you take your daughter to the new doctor at Keswick," he said at parting.

"It's not doctoring that'll mend Mercy," the charcoal-burner muttered, when the other had gone.

CHAPTER III.

Josiah Bonnithorne was quite without kinspeople or connections. His mother had been one of two sisters who lived by keeping a small confectioner's shop in Whitehaven, and were devoted Methodists. The sisters had formed views as to matrimony, and they enjoyed a curious similarity of choice. They were to be the wives of preachers. But the opportunity was long in coming, and they grew elderly. At length the younger sister died, and so solved the problem of her future. The elder sister was left for two years more alone with her confectionery. Then she married a stranger who had come to one of the pits as gangster. It was a sad falling off. But at all events the gangster was a local preacher, and so the poor soul who took him for husband had effected a compromise with her cherished ideal. It turned out that he was a scoundrel as well, and had a wife living elsewhere. This disclosure abridged his usefulness among the brethren, and he fled. Naturally, he left his second wife behind, having previously secured a bill of sale on her household effects. A few months elapsed, the woman was turned adrift by her husband's creditors, and then a child was born. It was a poor little thing—a boy. The good souls of the "connection" provided for it until it was two years old, and afterward placed it in a charity school. While the little fellow was there, his mother was struck down by a mortal complaint. Then for the first time the poor ruined woman asked to see her child. They brought the little one to her bedside, and it smiled down into her dying face. "Oh, that it may please the Lord to make him a preacher!" she said with a great effort. At a sign from the doctor the child was taken away. The face pinched by cruel suffering quivered slightly, the timid eyes worn by wasted hope softened and closed, and the mother bid farewell to everything.

The boy lived. They christened him Josiah, and he took for surname the maiden name of his mother, Bonnithorne. He was a weakling, and had no love of boyish sports; but he excelled in scholarship. In spite of these tendencies, he was apprenticed to a butcher when the time came to remove him from school. An accident transferred him to the office of a solicitor, and he was articled. Ten years later he succeeded to his master's practice, and then he sailed with all sail set.

He disappointed the "connection" by developing into a Churchman, but otherwise aroused no hostile feeling. It was obviously his cue to conciliate everybody. He was liked without being popular, trusted without being a favorite. Churchwarden, trustee for public funds, executor for private friends, he had a reputation for disinterested industry. And people said how well it was that one so unselfish as Josiah Bonnithorne should nevertheless prosper even as this world goes.

But there was a man in Cumberland who knew Mr. Bonnithorne from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. That man was Mr. Hugh Ritson. Never for an instant did either of these palter with the other.

When Mr. Bonnithorne left the charcoal pit, he followed the road that crossed the Newlands Beck, and returned on the breast of the Eel Crag. This led him close to the booth where the sports were proceeding. He heard, as he passed, the gurgling laugh with which the dalesfolk received the peddler's story of how he saw Paul Ritson at Hendon. A minute afterward he encountered Hugh Ritson on the road. There was only the most meagre pretense at greeting when these men came face to face.

"Your father sent for me," said Mr. Bonnithorne.

"On what business?" Hugh Ritson asked.

"I have yet to learn."

They walked some steps without speaking. Then the lawyer turned with his constant smile, and said in his soft voice:

"I have just seen your little friend. She looks pale, poor thing! Something must be done, and shortly."

Hugh Ritson's face flushed perceptibly. His eyes were on the ground.

"Let us go no further in this matter," he said, in a low tone. "I saw her yesterday. Then there is her father, poor, broken creature! Let it drop."

"I did not believe it of you!" Mr. Bonnithorne spoke calmly and went on smiling.

"Besides, I am ashamed. The thing is too mean," said Hugh Ritson. "In what turgid melodrama does not just such an episode occur?"

"So, so! Or is it the story of the cat in the adage? You would and you wouldn't?"

"My blood is not thick enough. I can't do it."

"Then why did you propose it? Was it your suggestion or mine? I thought to spare the girl her shame. Here her trouble must fall on her in battalions, poor little being. Send her away, and you decimate them."

"It is unnecessary. You know I am superior to prejudice." Hugh Ritson dropped his voice and said, as if speaking into his breast: "If the worst comes to the worst, I can marry her."

Mr. Bonnithorne laughed lightly.

"Ho! ho! And in what turgid melodrama does not just such an episode occur?"

Hugh Ritson drew up sharply.

"Why not? Is she poor? Then what am I? Uneducated? What is education likely to do for me? A simple creature, all heart and no head? God be praised for that!"

At this moment a girl's laugh came rippling through the air. It was one of those joyous peals that make the heart's own music. Hugh Ritson's pale face flushed a little, and he drew his breath hard.

Mr. Bonnithorne nodded his head in the direction of the voice, and said softly: "So our friend Greta is here to-day?"

"Yes," said Hugh Ritson very quietly.

Then the friends walked some distance in silence.

"It is scarcely worthy of you to talk in this brain-sick fashion," said Mr. Bonnithorne. There was a dull irritation in the tone. "You place yourself in the wrong point of view. You do not love the little being."

Hugh Ritson's forehead contracted, and he said: "If I have wrecked my life by one folly, one act of astounding unwisdom, what matter? There was but little to wreck. I am a disappointed man."

"Pardon me, you are a very young one," said Mr. Bonnithorne.

"What am I in my father's house? He gives no hint of helping me to an independence in life."

"There are the lands. Your father must be a rich man."

"And I am a second son."

"Indeed?"

Hugh Ritson glanced up quickly.

"What do you mean?"

"You say you are a second son."

"And what then?"

"Would it be so fearful a thing if you were not a second son?"

"In the name of truth, be plain. My brother Paul is living."

Mr. Bonnithorne nodded his head twice or thrice, and said calmly: "You know that your brother hopes to marry Greta?"

"I have heard it."

Again the flush came to Hugh Ritson's cheeks. His low voice had a tremor.

"Did I ever tell you of her father's strange legacy?"

"Never."

"My poor friend Robert Lowther left a legacy to a son of his own, who was Greta's half-brother."

"An illegitimate son?"

"Not strictly. Lowther married the son's mother," said Mr. Bonnithorne.

"Married her? Then his son was his heir?"

"No."

Hugh Ritson looked perplexed.

"The girl was a Catholic, Lowther a Protestant. A Catholic priest married them in Ireland. That was not a valid marriage by English law."

Hugh smiled grimly.

"And Lowther had the marriage annulled?"

"He had fallen in love," began Mr. Bonnithorne.

"This time with an heiress?" There was a caustic laugh.

Mr. Bonnithorne nodded. "Greta's mother. So he—"

"Abandoned the first wife," Hugh Ritson interrupted again.

Mr. Bonnithorne shook his head with an innocent expression.

"Wife? Well, he left her."

"You talk of a son. Had they one?"

"They had," said Mr. Bonnithorne, "and when the woman and child ... disappeared—"

"Exactly," said Hugh Ritson, and he smiled. "What did Lowther then?"

"Married again, and had a daughter—Greta."

"Then why the legacy?"

"Conscience-money," said Mr. Bonnithorne, pursing up his mouth.

Hugh Ritson laughed slightly.

"The sort of fools' pence the Chancellor of the Exchequer receives labeled 'Income Tax.'"

"Precisely—only Lowther had no address to send it to."

"He had behaved like a scoundrel," said Hugh Ritson.

"True, and he felt remorse. After the second marriage he set people to find the poor woman and child. They were never found. His last days were overshadowed by his early fault. I believe he died broken-hearted. In his will—I drew it for him—he left, as I say, a sum to be paid to this son of his first wife—when found."

Hugh Ritson laughed half mockingly.

"I thought he was a fool. A scoundrel is generally a fool as well."

"Generally; I've often observed it," said Mr. Bonnithorne.

"What possible interest of anybody's could it be to go hunting for the son of the fool's deserted wife?"

"The fool," answered Mr. Bonnithorne, "was shrewd enough to make an interest by ordering that if the son were not found before Greta came of age, a legacy of double the sum should be paid to an orphanage for boys."

Hugh Ritson's respect for the dead man's intelligence experienced a sensible elevation.

"So it is worth a legacy to the family to discover Greta's half-brother," he said, summing up the situation in an instant. "If alive—If not, then proof that he is dead."

The two men had walked some distance, and reached the turning of a lane which led to a house that could be seen among the trees at the foot of a ghyll. The younger man drew up on his infirm foot.

"But I fail to catch the relevance of all this. When I mentioned that I was a second son you—"

"I have had hardly any data to help me in my search," Mr. Bonnithorne continued. He was walking on. "Only a medallion-portrait of the first wife." Mr. Bonnithorne dived into a breast-pocket.

"My brother Paul is living. What possible—"

"Here it is," said Mr. Bonnithorne, and he held out a small picture.

Hugh Ritson took it with little interest.

"This is the portrait of the nun," he said, as his eyes first fell on it, and recognized the coif and cape.

"A novice—that's what she was when Lowther met her," said Mr. Bonnithorne.

Then Hugh Ritson stopped. He regarded the portrait attentively; looked up at the lawyer and back at the medallion. For an instant the strong calm which he had hitherto shown seemed to desert him. The picture trembled in his hand. Mr. Bonnithorne did not appear to see his agitation.

"Is it a fancy? Surely it must be fancy!" he muttered.

Then he asked aloud what the nun's name had been.

"Ormerod."

There was a start of recovered consciousness.

"Ormerod—that's strange!"

The exclamation seemed to escape inadvertently.

"Why strange?"

Hugh Ritson did not answer immediately.

"Her Christian name?"

"Grace."

"Grace Ormerod? Why, you must know that Grace Ormerod happened to be my own mother's maiden name!"

"You seem to recognize the portrait."

Hugh Ritson had regained his self-possession. He assumed an air of indifference.

"Well, yes—no, of course not—no," he said, emphatically, at last.

In his heart there was another answer. He thought for the moment when he set eyes on the picture that it looked like—a little like—his own mother's face.

They walked on. Mr. Bonnithorne's constant smile parted his lips. Lifting his voice rather unnecessarily, he said:

"By the way, another odd coincidence! Would you like to know the name of Grace Ormerod's child by Robert Lowther?"

Hugh Ritson's heart leaped within him, but he preserved an outward show of indifference, and drawled:

"Well, what was it?"

"Paul."

The name went through him like an arrow, then he said, rather languidly:

"So the half-brother of Greta Lowther, wherever he is, is named—"

"Paul Lowther," said Mr. Bonnithorne. "But," he added, with a quick glance, "he may—I say he may—be passing by another name—Paul something else, for example."

"Assuredly—certainly—yes—yes," Hugh Ritson mumbled. His all but impenetrable calm was gone.

They reached the front of the house, and stood in a paved court-yard. It was the home of the Ritsons, known as the Ghyll, a long Cumbrian homestead of gray stone and green slate. A lazy curl of smoke was winding up from one chimney through the clear air. A gossamer net of the tangled boughs of a slim brier-rose hung over the face of a broad porch, and at that moment a butterfly flitted through it. The chattering of geese came from behind.

"Robert Lowther was the father of Grace Ormerod's child?" said Hugh Ritson, vacantly.

"The father of her son Paul."

"And Greta is his daughter? Is that how it goes?"

"That is so—and half-sister to Paul."

Hugh Ritson raised his eyes to Mr. Bonnithorne's face.

"And of what age would Paul Lowther be now?"

"Well, older than you, certainly. Perhaps as old as—yes, perhaps as old—fully as old as your brother."

Hugh Ritson's infirm foot trailed heavily on the stones. His lips quivered. For a moment he seemed to be rapt. Then he swung about and muttered:

"Tut! it isn't within belief. Thrusted home, it might betray a man, Heaven only knows how deeply."

Mr. Bonnithorne looked up inquiringly.

"Pardon me; I fail, as you say, to catch the relevance."

"Mr. Bonnithorne," said Hugh Ritson, holding out his hand, "you and I have been good friends, have we not?"

"Oh, the best of friends."

"At your leisure, when I have had time to think of this, let us discuss it further."

Mr. Bonnithorne smiled assent.

"And meantime," he said, softly, "let the unhappy little being we spoke of be sent away."

Hugh Ritson's eyes fell, and his voice deepened.

"Poor little soul—I'm sorry—very."

"As for Greta and her lover—well—"

Mr. Bonnithorne nodded his head significantly, and left his words unfinished.

"My father is crossing the stack-yard," said Hugh Ritson. "You shall see him in good time. Come this way."

The shadows were lengthening in the valley. A purple belt was stretching across the distant hills, and a dark-blue tint was nestling under the eaves. A solitary crow flew across the sky, and cawed out its guttural note. Its shadow fell, as it passed, on two elderly people who were coming into the court-yard.

CHAPTER IV.

"It's time for that laal Mr. Bonnithorne to be here," said Allan Ritson.

"Why did you send for him?" asked Mrs. Ritson, in the low tone that was natural to her.

"To get that matter about the will off my mind. It'll be one thing less to think about, and it has boddert me sair and lang."

Allan spoke with the shuffling reserve of a man to whose secret communings a painful idea had been too long familiar. In the effort to cast off the unwelcome and secret associate, there was a show of emancipation which, as an acute observer might see, was more assumed than real.

Mrs. Ritson made no terms with the affectation of indifference. Her grave face became yet more grave, and her soft voice grew softer as she said:

"And if when it is settled and done the cloud would break that has hung over our lives, then all would be well. But that can never be."

Allan tossed his head aside, and made pretense to smile; but no gleam of sunshine on his cornfields was ever chased so closely by the line of dark shadow as his smile by the frown that followed.

"Come, worrit thysel' na' mair about it! When I've made my will, and put Paul on the same footing with t'other lad, who knows owt mair nor we choose to tell?"

Mrs. Ritson glanced into his face with a look of sad reproach.

"Heaven knows, Allan," she said; "and the dark cloud still gathers for us there."

The old man took a step or two on the gravel path, and dropped his gray head. His voice deepened:

"Tha says reet, mother," he said, "tha says reet. Ey, it saddens my auld days—and thine forby!" He took a step or two more, and added: "And na lawyer can shak' it off now. Nay, nay, never now. Weel, mother, our sky has been lang owerkessen; but, mind ye," lifting his face and voice together, "we've had gude crops if we tholed some thistles."

"Yes, we've had happy days, too," said Mrs. Ritson.

At that moment there came from across the vale the shouts of the merrymakers and the music of a fiddle. Allan Ritson lifted his head, nodded it aside jauntily, and smiled feebly through the mist that was gathering about his eyes.

"There they are—wrestling and jumping. I mind me when there was scarce a man in Cumberlan' could give me the cross-buttock. That's many a lang year ago, though. And now our Paul can manish most on 'em—that he can."

The fiddle was playing a country dance. The old man listened; his face broadened, he lifted a leg jauntily, and gave a sweep of one arm.

Just then there came through the air a peal of happy laughter. It was the same heart's music that Hugh Ritson and Mr. Bonnithorne had heard in the road. Allan's face brightened, and his voice had only the faintest crack in it as he said:

"That's Greta's laugh! It is for sure! What a heartsome lass yon is! I like a heartsome lassie—a merrie touch, and gone!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Ritson, soberly; "Greta is a winsome girl."

It was hardly spoken when a young girl bounded down upon them, almost breathless, yet laughing in gusts, turning her head over her shoulder and shouting:

"Hurrah! Beaten, sir! Hurrah!"

It was Greta Lowther; twenty years of age, with fair hair, quick brown eyes, a sunny face lighted up with youthful animation, a swift smile on her parted lips—an English wild white rose.

"I've beaten him," she said. "He challenged me to cross Windybrowe while he ran round the Bowder stone, but I got to the lonnin before he had crossed the bridge."

Then, running to the corner of the lane, she plucked off her straw hat, waved it about her head, and shouted again in an accent of triumph:

"Hurrah! hurrah! beaten, sir, beaten!"

Paul Ritson came running down the fell in strides of two yards apiece.

"Oh, you young rogue—you cheated!" he cried, coming to a stand and catching his breath.

"Cheated?" said Greta, in a tone of dire amazement.

"You bargained to touch the beacon on the top of Windybrowe, and you didn't go within a hundred yards of it."

"The beacon? On Windybrowe?" said the girl, and wondrous perplexity shone in her lovely eyes.

Paul wiped his brow, and shook his head and his finger with mock gravity at the beautiful cheat.

"Now, Greta, now—now—gently—"

Greta looked around with the bewildered gaze of a lost lambkin.

"Mother," said Paul, "she stole a march on me."

"He was the thief, Mrs. Ritson; you believe me, don't you?"

"Me! why I never stole anything in my life—save one thing."

"And what was that, pray?" said Greta, with another mighty innocent look.

Paul crept up to her side and whispered something over her shoulder, whereupon she eyed him largely, and said with a quick smile:

"You don't say so! But please don't be too certain of it. I'm sure I never heard of that theft."

"Then here's a theft you shall hear of," said Paul, throwing one arm about her neck and tipping up her chin.

There was a sudden gleam of rosy, roguish lips. Old Allan, with mischief dancing in his eyes, pretended to recover them from a more distant sight.

"Er—why, what's that?" he said; "the sneck of a gate, eh?"

Greta drew herself up.

"How can you—and all the people looking—they might really think that we were—we were—"

Paul came behind, put his head over one shoulder, and said:

"And we're not, are we?"

"They're weel matched, mother, eh?" said Allan, turning to his wife. "They're marra-to-bran, as folks say. Greta, he's a girt booby, isn't he?"

Greta stepped up to the old man, and with a familiar gesture laid a hand on his arm. At the same moment Paul came to his side. Allan tapped his son on the back.

"Thou girt lang booby," he said, and laughed heartily. All the shadows that had hung over him were gone. "And how's Parson Christian?" he asked in another tone.

"Well, quite well, and as dear an old soul as ever," said Greta.

"He's father and mother to thee baith, my lass. I never knew thy awn father. He was dead and gone before we coom't to these parts. And thy mother, too, God bless her! she's dead and gone now. But if this lad of mine, this Paul, this girt lang—Ah, and here's Mr. Bonnithorne, and Hughie, too."

The return of the lawyer and Hugh Ritson abridged the threat of punishment that seemed to hang on the old man's lips.

Hugh Ritson's lifted eyes had comprehended everything. The girl leaning over his father's arm; the pure, smooth cheeks close to the swarthy, weather-beaten, comfortable old face; the soft gaze upward full of feeling; the half-open lips and the teeth like pearls; then the glance round, half of mockery, half of protest, altogether of unconquerable love, to where Paul Ritson stood, his eyes just breaking into a smile; the head, the neck, the arms, the bosom still heaving gently after the race; the light loose costume—Hugh Ritson saw it all, and his heart beat fast. His pale face whitened at that moment, and his infirm foot trailed heavily on the gravel.

Allan shook hands with Mr. Bonnithorne, and then turned to his sons. "Come, you two lads have not been gude friends latterly, and that's a sair grief baith to your mother and me. You're not made in the same mold seemingly. But you must mak' up your fratch, my lads, for your auld folks' sake, if nowt else."

At this he stretched out both arms, as if with the intention of joining their hands. Hugh made a gesture of protestation.

"I have no quarrel to make up," he said, and turned aside.

Paul held out his hand. "Shake hands, Hugh," he said. Hugh took the proffered hand with unresponsive coldness.

Paul glanced into his brother's face a moment, and said:

"What's the use of breeding malice? It's a sort of live stock that's not worth its fodder, and it eats up everything."

There was a scarcely perceptible curl on Hugh Ritson's lip, but he turned silently away. With head on his breast, he walked toward the porch.

"Stop!"

It was old Allan's voice. The deep tone betrayed the anger that was choking him. His face was flushed, his eyes were stern, his lips trembled.

"Come back and shak' hands wi' thy brother reet."

Hugh Ritson faced about, leaning heavily on his infirm foot.

"Why to-day more than yesterday or to-morrow?" he said, calmly.

"Come back, I tell thee!" shouted the old man more hotly.

Hugh maintained his hold of himself, and said in a quiet and even voice, "I am no longer a child."

"Then bear thysel' like a man—not like a whipped hound."

The young man shuddered secretly from head to foot. His eyes flashed for an instant. Then, recovering his self-control, he said:

"Even a dog would resent such language, sir."

Greta had dropped aside from the painful scene, and for a moment Hugh Ritson's eyes followed her.

"I'll have no sec worriment in my house," shouted the old man in a broken voice. "Those that live here must live at peace. Those that want war must go."

Hugh Ritson could bear up no longer.

"And what is your house to me, sir? What has it done for me? The world is wide."

Old Allan was confounded. Silent, dumb, with great staring eyes, he looked round into the faces of those about him. Then in thick, choking tones he shouted:

"Shak' thy brother's hand, or thou'rt no brother of his."

"Perhaps not," said Hugh very quietly.

"Shak' hands, I tell thee." The old man's fists were clinched. His body quivered in every limb.

His son's lips were firmly set; he made no answer.

The old man snatched from Mr. Bonnithorne the stick he carried. At this Hugh lifted his eyes sharply until they met the eyes of his father. Allan was transfixed. The stick fell from his hand. Then Hugh Ritson halted into the house.

"Come back, come back ... my boy ... Hughie ... come back!" the old man sobbed out. But there was no reply.

"Allan, be patient, forgive him; he will ask your pardon," said Mrs. Ritson.

Paul and Greta had stolen away. The old man was now speechless, and his eyes, bent on the ground, swam with tears.

"All will be well, please God," said Mrs. Ritson. "Remember, he is sorely tried, poor boy. He expected you to do something for him."

"And I meant to, I meant to—that I did," the father answered in a broken cry.

"But you've put it off, and off, Allan— like everything else."

Allan lifted his hazy eyes from the ground, and looked into his wife's face. "If it had been t'other lad I could have borne it maybe," he said, feelingly.

Mr. Bonnithorne, standing aside, had been plowing the gravel with one foot. He now raised his eyes, and said: "And yet, Mr. Ritson, folk say that you have always shown most favor to your eldest son."

The old man's gaze rested on the lawyer for a moment, but he did not speak at once, and there was an awkward silence.

"I've summat to say to Mr. Bonnithorne, mother," said the statesman. He was quieter now. Mrs. Ritson stepped into the house.

Allan Ritson and the lawyer followed her, going into a little parlor to the right of the porch. It was a quaint room, full of the odor of a by-gone time. The floor was of polished black oak covered with skins; the ceiling was paneled oak and had a paneled beam. Bright oak cupboards, their fronts carved with rude figures, were set into the walls, which were whitened, and bore one illuminated text and three prints in black and white. The furniture was heavy and old. There was a spinning-wheel under the wide window-board. A bluebottle buzzed about the ceiling; a slant of sunlight crossed the floor. The men sat down.

"I sent for thee to mak' my will, Mr. Bonnithorne," said the old man.

The lawyer smiled.

"It is an old maxim that delay in affairs of law is a candle that burns in the daytime; when the night comes it is burned to the socket."

Old Allan took little heed of the sentiment.

"Ey," he said, "but there's mair nor common 'casion for it in my case."

Mr. Bonnithorne was instantly on the alert.

"And what is your especial reason?" he asked.

Allan's mind seemed to wander. He stood silent for a moment, and then said slowly, as if laboring with thought and phrase:

"Weel, tha must know ... I scarce know how to tell thee ... Weel, my eldest son, Paul, as they call him—"

The old man stopped, and his manner grew sullen. Mr. Bonnithorne came to his help.

"Yes, I am all attention—your eldest son—"

"He is—he is—"

The door opened and Mrs. Ritson entered the room, followed close by the Laird Fisher.

"Mr. Ritson, your sheep, them black-faced herdwick on Hindscarth, have broke the fences, and the red drift of 'em is down in the barrowmouth of the pass," said the charcoal-burner.

The statesman got on his feet.

"I must gang away at once," he said. "Mr. Bonnithorne, I must put thee off, or maybe I'll lose fifty head of sheep down in the ghyll."

"I made so bold as to tell ye, for I reckon we'll have all maks of weather yet."

"That's reet, Mattha; and reet neighborly forby. I'll slip away after thee in a thumb's snitting."

The Laird Fisher went out.

"Can ye bide here for me until eight o'clock to-neet, Mr. Bonnithorne?"

There was some vexation written on the lawyer's face, but he answered with meekness:

"I am always at your service, Mr. Ritson. I can return at eight."

"Verra good" Then, turning to Mrs. Ritson, "Give friend Bonnithorne a bite o' summat," said Allan, and he followed the charcoal-burner. Out in the court-yard he called the dogs. "Hey howe! hey howe! Bright! Laddie! Come boys; come, boys, te-lick, te-smack!"

He put his head in at the door of an out-house and shouted, "Reuben, wheriver ista? Come thy ways quick, and bring the lad!"

In another moment a young shepherd and a cowherd, surrounded by three or four sheep-dogs, joined Allan Ritson in the court-yard.

"Dusta gang back to the fell, Mattha?" said the statesman.

"Nay; I's done for the day. I'm away home."

"Good-neet, and thank."

Then the troop disappeared down the lonnin—the men calling, the dogs barking.

In walking through the hall Mr. Bonnithorne encountered Hugh Ritson, who was passing out of the house, his face very hard, his head much bent.

"Would you," said the lawyer, "like to know the business on which I have been called here?"

Hugh Ritson did not immediately raise his eyes.

"To make his will," added Mr. Bonnithorne, not waiting for an answer.

Then Hugh Ritson's eyes were lifted; there was one flash of intelligence; after that the young man went out without a word.

CHAPTER V.

Hugh Ritson was seven-and-twenty. His clean-shaven face was long, pale, and intellectual; his nose was wide at the bridge and full at the nostrils; he had firm-set lips, large vehement eyes, and a broad forehead, with hair of dark auburn parted down the middle and falling in thin waves on the temples. The expression of the physiognomy in repose was one of pain, and, in action, of power; the effect of the whole was not unlike that which is produced by the face of a high-bred horse, with its deep eyes and dilated nostrils. He was barely above medium height, and his figure was almost delicate. When he spoke his voice startled you—it was so low and deep to come from that slight frame. His lameness, which was slight, was due to a long-standing infirmity of the hip.

As second son of a Cumbrian statesman, whose estate consisted chiefly of land, he expected but little from his father, and had been trained in the profession of a mining engineer. After spending a few months at the iron mines of Cleator, he had removed to London at twenty-two, and enrolled himself as a student of the Mining College in Jermyn Street. There he had spent four years, sharing the chambers of a young barrister in the Temple Gardens. His London career was uneventful. Taciturn in manner, he made few friends. His mind had a tendency toward contemplative inactivity. Of physical energy he had very little, and this may have been partly due to his infirmity. Late at night he would walk alone in the Strand: the teeming life of the city, and the mystery of its silence after midnight, had a strong fascination for him. In these rambles he came to know some of the strangest and oddest of the rags and rinsings of humanity: among them a Persian nobleman of the late shah's household, who kept a small tobacco-shop at the corner of a by-street, and an old French exile, once of the court of Louis Phillippe, who sold the halfpenny papers. At other times he went out hardly at all, and was rarely invited.

Only the housemate, who saw him at all times and in many moods, seemed to suspect that beneath that cold exterior there lay an ardent nature. But he himself knew how strong was the tide of his passion. He could never look a beautiful woman in the face but his pulse beat high, and he felt almost faint. Yet strong as his passion was, his will was no less strong. He put a check on himself, and during his four years in London contrived successfully to dam up the flood that was secretly threatening him.

At six-and-twenty he returned to Cumberland, having some grounds for believing that his father intended to find him the means of mining for himself. A year had now passed, and nothing had been done. He was growing sick with hope deferred. His elder brother, Paul, had spent his life on the land, and it was always understood that in due course he would inherit it. That at least was the prospect which Hugh Ritson had in view, though no prospective arrangement had been made. Week followed week, and month followed month, and his heart grew bitter. He had almost decided to end this waiting. The day would come when he could bear it no longer, and then he would cut adrift.

An accidental circumstance was the cause of his irresolution. He used to walk frequently on the moss where the Laird Fisher sunk his shaft. In the beck that ran close to the disused headgear he would wade for an hour early in the summer morning. One day he saw the old laird's daughter washing linen at the beck-side. He remembered her as a pretty, prattling thing of ten or eleven. She was now a girl of eighteen, with a pure face, a timid manner, and an air that was neither that of a woman nor of a child. Her mother was lately dead, her father spent most of his days on the fell (some of his nights also when the charcoal was burning), and she was much alone. Hugh Ritson liked her gentle replies and her few simple questions. So it came about that he would look for her in the mornings, and be disappointed if he did not catch sight of her good young face. Himself a silent man, he liked to listen to the girl's modest, unconnected talk. His stern eyes would soften at such times to a sort of caressing expression. This went on for months, and in that solitude no idle tongue was set to wag. At length Hugh Ritson perceived that the girl's heart was touched. If he came late he found her leaning over the gate, her eyes bent down among the mountain grasses at her feet, and her cheeks colored by a red glow. It is unnecessary to go further. The girl gave herself up to him with her whole heart and soul, and he—well, he found the bulwarks with which he had surrounded himself were ruined and down.

Then the awakening came, and Hugh learned too late that he had not loved the simple child, by realizing that with all the ardor of his restrained but passionate nature he loved another woman.

So much for the first complication in the tragedy of this man's life.

The second complication was new to his consciousness, and it was at this moment conspiring with the first to lure him to consequences that are now to be related. The story which Mr. Bonnithorne had told of the legacy left by Greta's father to a son by one Grace Ormerod had come to him at a time when, owing to disappointment and chagrin, he was peculiarly liable to the temptation of any "honest trifle" that pointed the way he wished to go. If the Grace Ormerod who married Lowther had indeed been his own mother, then—a thousand to one—Paul was Lowther's son. If Paul was Lowther's son he was also half brother of Greta. If Paul was not the son of Allan Ritson, then he himself, Hugh Ritson, was his father's heir.

In the present whirlwind of feeling he did not inquire too closely into the pros and cons of probability. Enough that evidence seemed to be with him, and that it transformed the world in his view.

Perhaps the first result of this transformation was that he unconsciously assumed a different attitude toward the unhappy passage in his life wherein Mercy Fisher was chiefly concerned. What his feeling was before Mr. Bonnithorne's revelation, we have already seen. Now the sentiment that made much of such an "accident" was fit only for a "turgid melodrama," and the idea of "atonement" by "marriage" was the mock heroic of those "great lovers of noble histories," the spectators who applaud it from the pit.

When he passed Mr. Bonnithorne in the hall at the Ghyll he was on his way to the cottage of the Laird Fisher. He saw in the road ahead of him the group which included his father and the charcoal-burner, and to avoid them he cut across the breast of the Eel Crag. After a sharp walk of a mile he came to a little white-washed house that stood near the head of Newlands, almost under the bridge that crosses the fall. It was a sweet place in a great solitude, where the silence was broken only by the tumbling waters, the cooing of pigeons on the roof, and the twittering of ringouzels by the side of the torrent. The air was fresh with the smell of new peat. There was a wedge-shaped garden in front, and it was encompassed by chestnut-trees. As Hugh Ritson drew near he noticed that a squirrel crept from the fork of one of these trees. The little creature rocked itself on the thin end of a swaying branch, plucking sometimes at the drooping fan of the chestnut, and sometimes at the prickly shell of its pendulous nut. When he opened the little gate Hugh Ritson observed that a cat sat sedately behind the trunk of that tree, glancing up at intervals at the sporting squirrel in her moving seat.

As he entered the garden Mercy was crossing it with a pail of water just raised from the well. She had seen him, and now tried to pass into the house. He stepped before her and she set down the pail. Her head was held very low, and her cheeks were deeply flushed.

"Mercy," he said, "it is all arranged. Mr. Bonnithorne will see you into the train this evening, and when you get to your journey's end the person I spoke of will meet you."

The girl lifted her eyes beseechingly to his face.

"Not to-day, Hugh," she said in a broken whisper; "let me stay until to-morrow."

He regarded her for a moment with a steadfast look, and when he spoke again his voice fell on her ear like the clank of a chain.

"The journey has to be made. Every week's delay increases the danger."

The girl's eyes fell again, and the tears began to drop from them on to the brown arms that she had clasped in front.

"Come," he said in a softer tone, "the train starts in an hour. Your father is not yet home from the pit, and most of the dalespeople are at the sports. So much the better. Put on your cloak and hat and take the fell path to the Coledaie road-ends. There Mr. Bonnithorne will meet you."

The girl's tears were flowing fast, though she bit her lip and struggled to check them.

"Come, now, come; you know this was of your own choice."

There was a pause.

"I never thought it would be so hard to go," she said at length.

He smiled feebly, and tried a more rallying tone.

"You are not going for life. You will come back safe and happy."

The words thrilled her through and through. Her clasped hands trembled visibly, and her fingers clutched them with a convulsive movement. After awhile she was calmer, and said quietly:

"No, I'll never come back—I know that quite well." And her head dropped on her breast and she felt sick at heart. "I'll have to say good-bye to everything. There were Betsy Jackson's children—I kissed them all this morning, and never said why—little Willy, he seemed to know, dear little fellow, and cried so bitterly."

The memories of these incidents touched to overflowing the springs of love in the girl's simple soul, and the bubbling child-voice was drowned in sobs.

The man stood with a smile of pain on his face. He came close, and brushed away her tears, and touched her drooping head with a gesture of protestation.

Mercy regained her voice.

"And then there's your mother," she said, "and I can't say good-bye to her, and my poor father, and I daren't tell him—"

Hugh stamped on the path impatiently.

"Come, come, Mercy, don't be foolish."

The girl lifted to his the good young face that had once been bonny as the day and was now pale

with weeping and drawn down with grief. She took him by the coat, and then, by an impulse which she seemed unable to resist, threw one arm about his neck, and raised her face to his until their lips all but touched, and their eyes met in a steadfast gaze.

"Hugh," she said, passionately, "are you sure that you love me well enough to think of me when I am gone?—are you quite, quite sure?"

"Yes, yes; be sure of that," he said, gently.

He disengaged her arm.

"And will you come and fetch me after—after—"

She could not say the word. He smiled and answered, "Why, yes, yes."

Her fingers trembled and clung together; her head fell; her cheeks were aglow.

"Why, of course." He smiled again, as if in deprecation of so much child-like earnestness; then put his arm about the girl's shoulder, dropped his voice to a tone of mingled compassion and affection, and said, as he lifted the brightening face to his, "There, there—now go off and make ready."

The girl brushed her tears away vigorously, and looked half ashamed and half enchanted.

"I'm going."

"That's a good little girl."

How the sunshine came back at the sound of his words!

"Good-bye for the present, Mercy—only for the present, you know."

But how the shadow pursued the sunshine after all!

Hugh saw the tears gathering again in the lucent eyes, and came back a step.

"There—a smile—just one little smile!" She smiled through her tears. "There—there—that's a dear little Mercy. Good-day; good-bye."

Hugh turned on his heel and walked sharply away. As he passed out through the gate he could not help observing that the cat from the foot of the chestnut-tree was walking stealthily off, with something like a dawning smile on its whiskered face, and the brush of the squirrel between its teeth.

Hugh Ritson had gained his end, and yet he felt more crushed than at the darkest moment of defeat. He had conquered his own manhood; and now he crept away from the scene of his triumph with a sense of utter abasement. When he had talked with Mr. Bonnithorne it was with a feeling of the meanness of the folly in which he was involved; and if any sentiment touching the girl's situation was strong upon him it was closely bound up with a personal view of the degradation that might come of a man's humiliating unwisdom. The very conventionality of his folly had irked him. But its cowardice was now uppermost. That a man should enter into warfare with a woman on unequal terms, and win by cajolery and deceit, was more than cruel; it was brutal. He could have borne even this hard saying so far as it concerned the woman's suffering, but for the reflection that it made the man something worse than a coxcomb in his own eyes.

The day was now far spent; the brilliant sun had dipped behind Grisedale, and left a ridge of dark fells in the west. On the east the green sides of Cat Bells and the Eel Craggs were yellow at the summit, where the hills held their last commerce with the hidden sun. Not a breath of wind; not the rustle of a leaf; the valley lay still, save for the echoing voices of the merrymakers in the booth below. The sky overhead was blue, but a dark cloud, like the hulk of a ship, had anchored lately to the north.

Hugh Ritson took the valley road back to Ghyll. He was visibly perturbed; he walked with head much bent, stopped suddenly at times, then snatched impetuously at the trailing bushes, and passed on. When he was under Hindscarth, the sharp yap of dogs, followed by the bleat of unseen sheep, caused him to look up, and he saw a group of men, like emmets creeping on a dark boulder, moving over a ridge of shelving rock.

There was a slight spasm of his features at that moment, and his foot trailed more heavily as he went on. At a twist of the road he passed the Laird Fisher. The old man looked less melancholy than usual. It was as if the familiar sorrow sat a little more lightly to-night on the half-ruined creature.

"Good-neet to you, sir, and how fend ye?" he said almost cheerily.

Hugh Ritson responded briefly.

"So you're not sleeping on the fell to-night, Matthew?" and as he spoke his eyes wandered toward the fell road.

"Nay; I's not firing to-neet, for sure; my daughter is expecting me."

Hugh's eyes were now fixed intently on the road that crossed the foot of the fell to the west. The charcoal-burner was moving off, and, following at the same moment the upward direction of

Hugh Ritson's gaze, he said:

"It's a baddish place yon, where your father is with Reuben and the lad, and it's baddish weather that is coming, too—look at yon black cloud over Walna Scar."

Then for an instant there was embarrassment in Hugh Ritson's eyes, and he answered in a faltering commonplace.

"Ways me; but I must slip away home, sir; my laal lass will be weary waiting. Good-neet to you, sir; good-neet."

"Good-night, Matthew, and God help you," said Hugh in a tone of startling earnestness, his eyes turned away.

He had walked half a mile further, and reached the lonnin that led to the Ghyll, when he was almost overrun by Greta Lowther, who came tripping out of the gate of a meadow, her bonnet swinging over her arm, her soft, wavy hair floating over her white forehead, her cheeks colored with a warm glow, a roguish light in her eyes, and laughter on the point of bubbling out of her lips.

Greta had just given Paul Ritson the slip. There was a thicket in the field she had crossed, and it was covered with wild roses, white and red. Through the heart of it there rippled a tiny streak of water that was amber-tinted from the round shingle in its bed. The trunk of an old beech lay across it for ford or bridge. Underfoot were the sedge and moss; overhead the thick boughs and the roses; in the air, the odor of hay and the songs of birds. And Paul, the cunning rascal, would have tempted Greta into this solitude; but she was too shrewd, the wise little woman, to-be so easily trapped. Pretending to follow him in ignorance of his manifest design, she tripped back on tiptoe, and fled away like a lapwing over the noiseless grass.

When Greta met Hugh Ritson she was saying to herself, of Paul in particular, and of his sex in general: "What dear, simple, unsuspecting, trustful creatures they are!" Then she drew up sharply, "Ah, Hugh!"

"How happy you look, Greta!" he said, fixing his eyes upon her.

A new light brightened her sunny face. "Not happier than I feel," she answered. She swung the arm over which the bonnet hung; the heaving of her breast showed the mold of her early womanhood.

Hugh Ritson's mind had for the last half hour brooded over many a good purpose, but not one of them was now left.

"You witnessed a painful scene to-day," he said, with some hesitation. "Be sure it was no less painful to me because you were there to see it."

"Oh, I was so sorry," said Greta, impetuously. "You mean with your father?"

Hugh bent his head slightly. "It was inevitable—I know that full well—but for my share in it I ask your pardon."

"That is nothing," she said; "but you took your father too seriously."

"I took him at his word—that was all."

"But the dear old man meant nothing, and you meant very much. He only wanted to abuse you a little, and perhaps frighten you, and shake his stick at you, and then love you all the better for it."

"You may be right, Greta. Among the whims of nature there is that of making such human contradictions; but, as you say, I take things seriously—everything—life itself."

He paused, and there was a slight trembling of the lip.

"Besides," he went on in another tone, "it has been always so. Since our childhood—my brother's and mine—there has not been much paternal tenderness wasted on me. I can hardly expect it now."

"Surely that must be a morbid fancy," Greta said in a distressed tone. The light was dying out of her eyes. She made one quick glance downward to where Hugh Ritson's infirm foot trailed on the road, and then, in an instant of recovered consciousness, she glanced up, now confused and embarrassed, into his face.

She was too late; he had read her thought. A faint smile parted her lips; and the light of his own eyes was cold.

"No; not that," he said; "I ask no pity in that regard—and need none. Nature has given my brother a physique that would shame a Greek statue, but he and I are quits—perhaps more than quits."

He made a hard smile, and she flushed deep with shame of having her thought read.

"I am sorry if I conveyed that," she said, slowly. "It must have been quite unwittingly. I was thinking of your mother. She is so good and tender to everybody. Why, she is the angel of the country-side. Do you know what name they've given her?"

Hugh shook his head.

"Saint Grace! Parson Christian told me—it seems it was my own dear mother who christened her."

"Nevertheless, there has not been much to sweeten my life, Greta," he said.

His voice arrested her; it was charged with unusual feeling. She made no answer, and they began to walk toward the house.

After a few steps Greta remembered the trick that she had played on Paul, and craned her beautiful neck to see over the stone cobble-hedge into the field where she had left him.

Hugh observed her intently.

"I hear that you have decided. Is it so, Greta?" he said.

"Decided what?" she asked, coloring again.

He also colored slightly, and answered with a strained quietness.

"To marry my brother."

"If he wishes it—I suppose he does—he says so, you know."

Hugh looked earnestly into the girl's glowing face, and said with deliberation:

"Greta, perhaps there are reasons why you should not marry Paul."

"What reasons?"

He did not reply at once, and she repeated her question. Then he said in a strange tone:

"Just and lawful impediments, as they say."

Greta's eyes opened wide in undisguised amazement.

"Impossible—you cannot mean it," she said with her customary impetuosity. She glanced into Hugh's face, and misread what she saw there. Then she began to laugh; at first lightly, afterward rather boisterously, and said with head averted, and almost as if talking to herself, "No, no; he is nothing to me but the man I love."

"Do you then love him?"

Greta started.

"Do you ask?" she said. The amazement in the wide eyes had deepened to a look of rapture. "Love him?" she said; "better than all the world beside." The girl was lifted out of herself. "You are to be my brother, Hugh, and I need not fear to speak so."

She swung her bonnet on her arm, just to preserve composure by some distracting exercise.

Hugh Ritson stopped, and his face softened. It was a perplexing smile that sat on his features. While he had talked with Greta there had run through his mind, as a painful undertone, the thought of Mercy Fisher. He had now dismissed the last of his qualms respecting her. To be tied down for life to a mindless piece of physical prettiness—what man of brains could bear it? He had yielded to a natural impulse—true! That moment of temptation threatened painful consequences—still true! What then? Nothing! Was the dead fruit to hang about his neck forever? Tut!—all natural law was against it. Had he not said that he was above prejudice? So was he above the maudlin sentiment of the "great lovers of noble histories." The sophistry grew apace with Greta's beautiful countenance before him. Catching at her last word, he said:

"Your brother—yes. But did you never guess that I could have wished another name?"

The look of amazement returned to her eyes; he saw it and went on:

"Is it possible that you have not read my secret?"

"What secret?" she said in a half-smothered voice.

"Greta, if your love had been great love, you must have read my secret just as I have read yours." In a low tone he continued: "Long ago I knew that you loved, or thought you loved, my brother. I saw it before he had seen it—before you had realized it."

The red glow colored her cheeks more deeply than before. She had stopped, and he was tramping nervously backward and forward.

"Greta," he said again, and he fixed his eyes entreatingly upon her, "what is the love that scarcely knows itself?—that is the love with which you love my brother. And what is the tame, timid passion of a man of no mind?—that is the love which he offers you. What is your love for him, or his for you?—what is it, can it be? Love is not love unless it is the love of true minds. That was said long ago, Greta, and how true it is!" He went on quickly, in a tone of dull irritation: "All other love is no better than lust. Greta, I understand you. It is not for a rude man like my brother to do so." Then in an eager voice he said: "Dearest, I bring you a love undreamed of among these country boors."

"Country boors!" she repeated in a half-stifled whisper.

He did not hear her. His vehement eyes swam, and he was dizzy.

"Greta, dearest, I said there has been little in my life to sweeten it. Yet I am a man made to love and to be loved. My love for you has been mute for months; but it can be mute no longer. Perhaps I have had my own impediment, apart from our love for Paul. But that is all over now."

His cheeks quivered, his lips trembled, his voice swelled, his nervous fingers were riveted to his palm. He approached her and took her hand. She seemed to be benumbed by strong feeling. She had stood as one transfixed, a slow paralysis of surprise laying hold of her faculties. But at his touch her senses regained their mastery. She flung away his hand. Her breast heaved. In a voice charged with indignation, she said:

"So this is what you mean! I understand you at last!"

Hugh Ritson fell back a pace.

"Greta, hear me—hear me again!"

But she had found her voice indeed.

"Sir, you have outraged your brother's heart as surely as if at this moment I had been your brother's wife!"

"Greta, think before you speak—think, I implore you!"

"I have thought! I have thought of you as your sister might think, and spoken to you as my brother. Now I know how mean of soul you are!"

Hugh broke in passionately:

"For God's sake, stop! I am an unforgiving man."

His nostrils quivered, every nerve vibrated.

"Love? You never loved. If you knew what the word means you would die of shame where you stand this instant."

Hugh lost all control.

"I bid you beware!" he said in wrath and dismay.

"And I bid you be silent!" said Greta, with an eloquent uplifting of the hand. "You offer your love to a pledged woman. It is only base love that is basely offered. It is bad coin, sir, and goes back dishonored."

Hugh Ritson regained some self-command. The contractions were deep about his forehead, but he answered in an imperturbable voice:

"You shall never marry my brother!"

"I will—God willing!"

"Then you shall marry him to your lifelong horror and disgrace."

"That shall be as Heaven may order."

"A boor—a hulking brute—a bas—"

"Enough! I would rather marry a plowboy than such a gentleman as you!"

Face to face, eye to eye, with panting breath and scornful looks, there they stood for one moment. Then Greta swung about and walked down the lonnin.

Hugh Ritson's natural manner returned instantly. He looked after her without the change of a feature, and then turned quietly into the house.

CHAPTER VI.

There was a drowsy calm in the room where Mr. Bonnithorne sat at lunch. It was the little oak-bound parlor to the right, in which he had begun the conversation with old Allan Ritson that had been interrupted by the announcement of the Laird Fisher. Half of the window was thrown up, and the landscape framed by the sash lay still as a picture. The sun that had passed over Grisedale sent a deep glow from behind, and the woods beneath took a restful tone. Only the mountain-head was white where it towered into the sky and the silence.

Mrs. Ritson entered and sat down. Her manner was meek almost to abjectness. She was elderly, but her face bore traces of the beauty she had enjoyed in youth. The lines had grown deep in it since then, and now the sadness of its expression was permanent. She wore an old-fashioned lavender gown, and there was a white silk scarf about her neck. Her voice was low and tremulous, yet eager, as if it were always questioning.

With downcast head, and eyes bent on her lap, where her fingers twitched nervously as she knitted without cessation, she sat silent, or put meek questions to her guest.

Mr. Bonnithorne answered in smiles and speeches of six words apiece. Between each sparse reply he addressed himself afresh to his lunch with an appetite that was the reverse of sparse. All the while a subdued hum of many voices came up from the booth in the fields below.

At length Mrs. Ritson's anxiety overcame the restraint of her manner.

"Mr. Bonnithorne," she said, "do let the will be made to-night. Urge Mr. Ritson, when he returns, to admit of no further delay. He has many noble qualities, but procrastination is his fault. It has been ever so."

Mr. Bonnithorne paused with a glass half raised to his lips, and lifted his eyes instead.

"Pardon me, madame," he said, with the customary smile which failed to disarm his words; "this is for certain reasons a subject I can hardly discuss with—with— with a woman."

And just then a peacock strutted through the court-yard, startling the still air with its empty scream.

Mrs. Ritson colored deeply. Even modesty like hers had been put to a severe strain. But she dropped her eyes again, finished a row of stitches, rested the steel needle on her lip, and answered quietly:

"Surely a woman may talk of what concerns her husband and her children."

The great man had resumed his knife and fork.

"Not necessarily," he said. "It is a strange and curious fact that there is one condition in which the law does not recognize the right of a woman to call her son her own."

During this prolonged speech, Hugh Ritson, fresh from his interview with Greta Lowther, entered the room, and stretched himself on the couch.

Mrs. Ritson, without shifting the determination of her gaze from the nervous fingers in her lap, said:

"What condition?"

Mr. Bonnithorne twisted slightly, and glanced significantly at Hugh as he answered:

"The condition of illegitimacy."

Something supercilious in the tone jarred on Mrs. Ritson's ear. She looked up from her knitting, and said:

"What do you mean?"

Bonnithorne placed his knife and fork with precision over his empty plate, used his napkin with deliberation, coughed slightly, and said: "I mean that the law denies the name of son to offspring that has been bastardized."

Mrs. Ritson's face grew crimson, and she rose to her feet.

"If so, the law is cruel and wicked," she said in a voice more tremulous with emotion.

Mr. Bonnithorne leaned languidly back in his chair, ejected a long "hem" from his overburdened chest, inserted his fingers in the armpits of his waistcoat, looked up, and said: "Odd, isn't it?"

Unluckily for the full effect of Mr. Bonnithorne's subtle witticism, Paul Ritson, with Greta at his side, appeared in the door-way at the moment of its delivery. The manner more than the words had awakened his anger, and the significance of both he interpreted by his mother's agitated face. In two strides he stepped up to where the great man sat, even now all smiles and white teeth, and laid a powerful hand on his arm.

"My friend," said Paul, lustily, "it might not be safe for you to speak to my mother again like that!"

Mr. Bonnithorne rose stiffly, and his shifty eyes looked into Paul's wrathful face.

"Safe?" he echoed with emphasis.

Paul, his lips compressed, bent his head, and at the same instant brought the other hand down on the table.

Without speaking, Mr. Bonnithorne shuffled back into his seat. Mrs. Ritson, letting fall her knitting into her lap, sat and dropped her face into her hands. Paul took her by the arm, raised her up, and led her out of the room. As he did so, he passed the couch on which Hugh Ritson lay, and looked down with mingled anger and contempt into his brother's indifferent eyes.

When the door closed behind them, Hugh Ritson and Mr. Bonnithorne rose together. There was a momentary gleam of mutual consciousness. Then instantly, suddenly, by one impulse, the two men joined hands across the table.

CHAPTER VII.

The cloud that had hung over Walna Scar broke above the valley, and a heavy rain-storm, with low mutterings of distant thunder, drove the pleasure-people from the meadow to the booth. It was a long canvas tent with a drinking-bar at one end, and stalls in the corners for the sale of gingerbreads and gimcracks. The grass under it was trodden flat, and in patches the earth was bare and wet beneath the trapesing feet of the people. They were a mixed and curious company. In a ring that was cleared by an athletic plowman the fiddler-postman of Newlands, Tom o' Dint, was seated on a tub turned bottom up. He was a little man with bowed legs and feet a foot long.

"Now, lasses, step forret! Dunnot be blate. Come along with ye, any as have springiness in them!"

The rough invitation was accepted without too much timidity by several damsels dressed in gorgeous gowns and bonnets. Then up and down, one, two, three, cut and shuffle, cross, under, and up and down again.

"I'll be mounting my best nag and comin' ower to Scara Crag and tappin' at your window some neet soon," whispered a young fellow to the girl he had just danced with.

She laughed a little mockingly.

"Your best nag, Willy?"

"Weel—the maister's."

She laughed again, and a sneer curled her lip. "You Colebank chaps are famous sweethearts, I hear. Fare-te-weel, Willy."

And she twisted on her heel. He followed her up.

"Dunnet gowl, Aggy. Mappen I'll be maister man mysel' soon."

Aggy pushed her way through the crowd and disappeared.

"She's packed him off wi' a flea in his ear," said an elderly man standing near.

"Just like all the lave of them," said another, "snurling up her neb at a man for lack of gear. Why didna he brag of some rich uncle in Austrilly?"

"Ey, and stuff her with all sorts of flaitchment and lies. Then all the lasses wad be glyming at him."

The dance spun on.

"Why, it's a regular upshot, as good as Carel fair," said one of the girls.

"Bessie, you're reet clipt and heeled for sure," responded her companion.

Bessie's eyes sparkled with delight at the lusty compliment paid to her dancing, and she opened her cloak to cool herself, and also to show the glittering locket that hung about her neck.

"It's famish, this fashion," muttered the elderly cynic. "It must tak' a brave canny fortune."

"Shaf, man, the country's puzzen'd round with pride," answered his gossip. "Lasses worked in the old days. Now they never do a hand's turn but washin' and bleachin' and starchin' and curlin' their polls."

"Ey, ey, there's been na luck in the country since the women-folk began to think shame of their wark."

The fiddler made a squeak on two notes that sounded like kiss-her, and from a corner of the booth there came a clamorous smack of lips.

"I saw you sweetheartin' laal Bessie," said one of the fellows to another.

"And I saw you last night cutteran sa soft in the meadow. Nay, dunnot look sa strange. I never say nowt, not I. Only yon mother of Aggy's, she's a famous fratcher, and dunnot you let her get wind. She brays the lasses, and mappen she'll bray somebody forby."

While the dancing proceeded there was a noisy clatter of glasses and a mutter of voices in the neighborhood of the bar.

"The varra crony one's fidgin to see! Gie us a shak' of thy daddle!" shouted a fellow with a face like a russet apple.

"Come, Dick, let's bottom a quart together. Deil tak' the expense."

"Why, man, and wherever hasta been since Whissen Monday?"

"Weel, you see, I went to the fair and stood with a straw in my mouth, and the wives all came round, and one of them said, 'What wage do you ask, canny lad?' 'Five pounds ten,' I says. 'And what can you do?' she says. 'Do?' I says, 'anything from plowing to threshing and nicking a nag's tail,' I says. 'Come, be my man,' she says. But she was like to clem me, so I packed up my bits of

duds and got my wage in my reet-hand breek pocket, and here I am."

The dancing had finished, and a little group was gathered around the fiddler's tub.

"Come thy ways; here's Tom o' Dint conjuring, and telling folk what they are thinking."

"That's mair nor he could do for the numskulls as never think."

"He bangs all the player-folk, does Tom."

"Who's yon tatterdemalion flinging by the newspaper and bawling, 'The country's going to the dogs?'"

"That's Grey Graham, setting folk by the lug with his blusteration."

"Mess, lads, but he'd be a reet good Parli'ment man to threep about the nation."

"Weel, I's na pollytishun, but if it's tearin' and snappin' same as a terrier that mak's a reet good Parli'ment man, I reckon not all England could bang him."

"And that's not saying nowt, Sim. I've heard Grey Graham on the ballot till it's wet him through to the waistcoat."

"Is that Mister Paul Ritson and Mistress Lowther just run in for shelter?"

"Surely; and a reet bonny lass she is."

"And he's got larnin' and manners too."

"Ey, he's of the bettermer sort, is Paul."

"Does she live at the parson's—Parson Christian's?"

"Why, yes, man; it's only naturable—he's her guardian."

"And what a man he is, to be sure."

"Ey, we'll never see his like again when he's gone."

"Nay, not till the water runs up bank and trees grow down bank."

"And what a scholar, and no pride neither, and what's mair in a parson, no greed. Why, the leal fellow values the world and the world's gear not a flea."

"Contentment's a kingdom, as folk say, and religion is no worse for a bit o' charity."

There was a momentary pressure of the company toward the mouth of the booth, where Gubblum Oglethorpe reappeared with his pack swung from his neck in front of him. The girls gathered eagerly around.

"What have you to-day, Gubblum?"

"Nay, nowt for you, my dear. You're one of them that allus looks best with nothing on."

"Oh, Gubblum!"

The compliment was certainly a dubious one.

"Only your bits of shabby duds—that's all that pretty faces like yours wants."

"Oh, Gubblum!"

The peddler was evidently a dear, simple soul.

"Lord bless you, yes; what's in here," slapping his pack contemptuously, "it's only for them wizzent old creatures up in London—them 'at have faces like the map of England when it shows all the lines of the railways—just to make them a bit presentable, you know. And there is no knowing what some of these things won't do to mak' a body smart—what with brooches and handkerchers and collars, and I don't know what."

Gubblum's air of indifference had the extraordinary effect of bringing a dozen pairs of gloating eyes on the strapped pack. The face of the peddler wore an expression of bland innocence as he continued:

"But bless you, I'm such a straightforward chap, or I'd make my fortune with the like of what's here."

"Open your pack, Gubblum," said one of the fellows, Geordie Moore, prompted by sundry prods from the elbow of a little damsel by his side.

The "straightforward chap" made a deprecatory gesture, and then yielded obligingly. While loosening the straps he resumed his discourse on his own general ignorance of business tactics, his ruinous honesty, and demoralizing sense of honor.

"I'm not cute enough, that's my fault. I know the way to my mouth with a spoonful of poddish, and that's all. If I go further in the dark, I'm lost."

Gubblum opened his pack and drew forth a red and green shawl of a hideous pattern.

"Now, just to give you a sample. Here's a nice neat shawl that I never had no more nor two of. Well, I actually sold the fellow of that shawl for seven-and-sixpence."

The look of amazement at his own shortcomings which sat on the child-like face of the peddler was answered by the expression of mock surprise in the face of Paul Ritson, who came up at the moment, took the shawl from Gubblum's outstretched arms, and said in a hushed whisper:

"No, did you now?"

Geordie Moore thereupon dived into his pocket, and brought out three half-crowns.

"Here's for you, Gubblum; let's have it."

"'Od bless me!" cried the elderly cynic, "but that Gubblum will never mak' his plack a bawbee."

And Grey Graham, having disposed of the affairs of the nation and witnessed Geordie snap at the peddler's bait, cried out in a bitter laugh:

"There's little wit within his powe
That lights a candle at the lowe."

Just then a tumult arose in the vicinity of the bar. The two cronies were at open war.

"Deuce take it! I had fifteen white shillin' in my reet-hand breek pocket, and where are they now?"

"'Od dang thee! what should I know about your brass? You're kicking up a stour to waken a corp!"

"I had fifteen white shillin' in my reet-hand breek pocket, I tell thee!"

"What's that to me, thou poor shaffles? You're as drunk as muck. Do you think I've taken your brass? You've got a wrong pig by the lug if you reckon to come ower me!"

"They were in my reet-hand breek pocket, I'll swear on it!"

"What a fratchin'—try your left-hand breek pocket."

The russet-faced plowman thrust his hand where directed and instantly a comical smile of mingled joy and shame overspread his countenance. There was a gurgling laugh, through which the voice of the peddler could be heard saying:

"We'll mak' thee king ower the cockers, my canny lad."

The canny lad was slinking away amid a derisive titter, when a great silence fell on the booth. Those in front fell back, and those behind craned their necks to see over the heads of the people before them.

At the mouth of the booth stood the old Laird Fisher, his face ghastly pale, his eyes big and restless, the rain dripping from his long hair and beard.

"They've telt me," he began in a strange voice, "they've telt me that my Mercy has gone off in the London train. I reckon they're mistook as to the lass, but I've come to see for mysel'. Is she here?"

None answered. Only the heavy rain-drops that pattered on the canvas overhead broke the silence. Paul Ritson pushed his way through the crowd.

"Mercy?—London? Wait, Matthew; I'll see if she's here."

The Laird Fisher looked from face to face of the people about him.

"Any on you know owt about her?" he asked in a low voice. "Why don't you speak, some on you? You shake your heads—what does that mean?"

The old man was struggling to control the emotion that was surging in his throat.

"No, Matthew, she's not here," said Paul Ritson.

"Then maybe it's true," said Matthew, with a strange quiet.

There was a pause. Paul was the first to shake off his surprise.

"She might be at Little Town—in Keswick—twenty places."

"She might be, Master Paul, but she's nowt o' the sort. She's on her way to London, Mercy is."

It was Natt, the stableman at the Ghyll, who spoke.

At that the old man's trance seemed to break.

"Gone! Mercy gone! Gone without a word! Why? Where?"

"She'd her little red bundle aside her; and she cried a gay bit to hersel' in the corner. I saw her mysel'."

Paul's face became rigid with anger.

"There's villainy in this—be sure of that!" he said, hotly.

The laird rocked his head backward and forward, and his eyes swam with tears; but he stood in the middle as quiet as a child.

"My laal Mercy," he said, faintly, "gone from her old father."

Paul stepped to the old man's side, and put a great hand on his shoulder as softly as a woman might have soothed her babe. Then turning about, and glancing wrathfully in the faces around them, he said:

"Some waistrel has been at work here. Who is he? Speak out. Anybody know?"

No one spoke. Only the laird moaned feebly, and reeled like a drunken man. Then, with the first shock over, the old man began to laugh. What a laugh it was!

"No matter," he said; "no matter. Now I've nowt left, I've nowt to lose. There's comfort in that, anyways. Ha! ha! ha! But my heart is like to choke for all. You say reet, Mr. Ritson, there's villainy in it."

The old man's eyes wandered vacantly.

"Her own father," he mumbled; "her lone old father—broken-hearted—him 'at loved her—no matter, I've nowt left to—Ha! ha! ha!"

He tried to walk away jauntily, and with a ghastly smile on his battered face, but he stumbled and fell insensible into Paul's outstretched arms. They loosened his neckerchief and bathed his forehead.

Just then Hugh Ritson strode into the tent, stepped up to the group, and looked down over the bent heads at the stricken father lying in his brother's arms.

Paul's lips trembled and his powerful frame quivered.

"Who knows but the scoundrel is here now?" he said; and his eyes traversed the men about him. "If he is, let him look at his pitiless work; and may the sight follow him to his death!"

At that moment Hugh Ritson's face underwent an awful change. Then the old man opened his eyes in consciousness, and Hugh knelt before him and put a glass of water to his lips.

CHAPTER VIII.

In the homestead of the Ritsons the wide old ingle was aglow with a cheerful fire, and Mrs. Ritson stood before it baking oaten cake on a "griddle." The table was laid for supper with beef and beer and milk and barley-bread. In the seat of a recessed window, Paul Ritson and Greta Lowther sat together.

At intervals that grew shorter, and with a grave face that became more anxious, Mrs. Ritson walked to the door and looked out into the thickening sky. The young people had been too much absorbed to notice her increasing perturbation, until she opened a clothes-chest and took out dry flannels and spread them on the hearth to air.

"Don't worrit yourself, mother," said Paul. "He'll be here soon. He had to cross the Coledale Pass, and that's a long stroke of the ground, you know."

"It's an hour past supper-time," said Mrs. Ritson, glancing aside at the old clock that ticked audibly from behind the great arm-chair. "The rain is coming again—listen!" There was a light patter of rain-drops against the window-panes. "If he's on the fells now he'll be wet to the skin."

"I wish I'd gone in place of him," said Paul, turning to Greta. "A bad wetting troubles him nowadays. Not same as of old, when he'd follow the fells all day long knee-deep in water and soaked to the skin with rain or snow."

The thunder-clap shook the house. The windows rattled, and the lamp that had been newly lighted and put on the table flickered slightly and burned red.

"Mercy, me, what a night! Was that a flash of lightning?" said Mrs. Ritson, and she walked to the door once more and opened it.

"Don't worrit, mother," repeated Paul. "Do come in. Father will be here soon, and if he gets a wetting there's no help for it now."

Paul had turned aside from an animated conversation with Greta to interpolate this remonstrance against his mother's anxiety. Resuming the narrative of his wrestling match, he described its incidents as much by gesture as by words.

"John Proudfoot took me—so—and tried to give me the cross-buttock, but I caught his eye and twisted him on my hip—so—and down he went in a bash!"

A hurried knock came to the outer door. In an instant it was opened, and a white face looked in.

"What's now, Reuben?" said Paul, rising to his feet.

"Come along with me—leave the women-folk behind—master's down—the lightning has struck him—I'm afeart he's dead!"

"My father!" said Paul, and stood for a moment with a bewildered look. "Go on, Reuben, I'll follow." Paul picked up his hat and was gone in an instant.

Mrs. Ritson had been stooping over the griddle when Reuben entered. She heard what he said, and rose up with a face of death-like pallor. But she said nothing, and sunk helplessly into a chair. Then Greta stepped up to her and kissed her.

"Mother—dear mother!" she said, and Mrs. Ritson dropped her head on the girl's breast.

Hugh had been sitting over some papers in his own room off the first landing. He overheard the announcement, and came into the hall.

"Your father has been struck by the lightning," said Greta.

"They will fetch him home," said Hugh.

At the next moment there was the sound from without of burdened footsteps. They were bearing the injured man. Through the back of the house they carried him to his room.

"That is for my sake," said Mrs. Ritson, raising her tear-stained face to listen.

Paul entered. His ruddy cheeks had grown ashy white. His eyes, that had blinked with pleasure a minute ago, now stared wide with fear.

"Is he alive?"

"Yes."

"Thank God! oh, thank God forever and ever! Let me go in to him."

"He is unconscious—he breathes—but no more."

Mrs. Ritson, with Paul and Greta, went into the room in which they had placed the stricken man. He lay across the bed in his clothes, just as he had fallen. They bathed his forehead and applied leeches to his temples. He breathed heavily, but gave no sign of consciousness.

Paul sat at his father's side with his face buried in his hands. He was recalling his boyish days, when his father would lift him in his arms and throw him on the bare back of the pony that he gave him on his thirteenth birthday. Could it be possible that the end was at hand!

He got up and led Greta out of the room.

"This house of mourning is no place for you," he said; "the storm is over: you must leave us; Natt can put the mare into the trap and drive you home."

"I will not go," said Greta; "this shall be my home to-night. Don't send me away from you, Paul. You are in trouble, and my place is here."

"You could do no good, and might take some harm."

Mrs. Ritson came out.

"Where is Mr. Bonnithorne?" she asked. "He was to be here at eight. Your father might recover consciousness."

"The lawyer could do nothing to help him."

"If he is to leave us, may it please God to give him one little hour of consciousness."

"Yes, knowing us again—giving us a farewell word."

"There is another reason—a more terrible reason!"

"You are thinking of the will. Let that go by. Come, mother—and Greta, too— come, let us go back."

Half an hour later the house was as still as the chamber of death. With hushed voices and noiseless steps the women-servants moved to and from the room where lay the dying man. The farming men sat together in an outer kitchen, and talked in whispers.

The storm had passed away; the stars struggled one by one through a rack of flying cloud, and a silver fringe of moonlight sometimes fretted the black patches of the sky.

Hugh Ritson sat alone in the old hall, that was now desolate enough. His face rested on his hand, and his elbow on his knee. There was a strange light in his eyes. It was not sorrow, and it was not pain; it was anxiety, uncertainty, perturbation. Again and again he started up from a deep reverie, and then a half-smothered cry escaped him. He walked a few paces to and fro, and sat down once more.

A servant crossed the hall on tiptoe. Hugh raised his head.

"How is your patient now?" he said, quietly.

"Just breathing, sir; still quite unconscious."

Hugh got up uneasily. A mirror hung on the wall in front of him, and he stood and looked vacantly into it. His thoughts wandered, and when a gleam of consciousness returned the first object that he saw was the reflection of his own face. It was full of light and expression. Perhaps it wore a ghostly smile. He turned away from the sight impatiently.

Sitting down again he tried to compose himself. Point by point he revolved the situation. He thought of what the lawyer had said of his deserted wife and lost son of Lowther. Then, taking out of an inner pocket the medallion that Mr. Bonnithorne had lent him, he looked at it long and earnestly.

The inspection seemed to afford a grim satisfaction. There could be no doubt now of the ghostly smile that played upon his face.

There was a tall antique clock in the corner of the hall. It struck eight. The slow beats of the bell echoed chillily in the hushed apartment. The hour awakened the consciousness of the brooding man. At eight o'clock Mr. Bonnithorne was appointed to be there to make the will.

Hugh Ritson touched gently a hand-bell that stood on the table. A servant entered.

"Send Natt to me," said Hugh.

A moment later the stableman shambled into the hall. He was a thick-set young fellow with a short neck and a full face, and eyelids that hung deep over a pair of cunning eyes. At first sight one would have said that the rascal was only half awake; at the second glance, that he was never asleep.

Hugh received him with a show of cordiality.

"Ah, Natt, come here—closer."

The man walked across. Hugh dropped his voice.

"Go down to Little Town and find Mr. Bonnithorne. You may meet him on the way. If not, he will be at the Flying Horse. Tell him I sent you to say that Adam Fallow lies dying at Bigrigg, and must see him at once. You understand?"

The man lifted his slumberous eyelids. A suspicious twinkle lurked beneath them. He glanced around, then down at his big, grimy boots, measured with one uplifted hand the altitude of the bump on the top of his bullet head, and muttered, "I understand."

Hugh's face darkened.

"Silence!" he said, sternly; and then he met Natt's upward glance with a faint smile. "When you come back, get yourself out of the way—do you hear?"

The heavy eyelids went up once more. "I hear."

"Then be off!"

The fellow was shuffling away.

"Natt," said Hugh, following him a step, "you fancied that new whip of mine; take it. You'll find it in the porch."

A smile crossed Natt's face from ear to ear. He stumbled out.

Hugh Ritson returned to the hearth. That haunting mirror caught the light of his eyes again and showed that he too was smiling. At the same instant there came from the inner room the dull, dead sound of a deep sob. It banished the smile and made him pause. He looked at the reflection of his face—could it be the face of a scoundrel? Was he playing a base part? No, he was merely asserting his rights; his plain legal rights—nothing more.

He opened a cupboard in the wall and took down a bunch of keys. Selecting one key, he stepped up to a cabinet and opened it. In a compartment were many loose papers. Now to see if by chance there existed a will already. He glanced at the papers one by one and threw them aside. When he had finished his inspection he took a hasty turn about the room. No trace—he had been sure of it!

Again the deep sob came from within. Hugh Ritson walked noiselessly to the inner door, opened it slightly, bent his head, and listened. He turned away with an expression of pain, picked up his hat, and went out.

The night was very dark. He strode a few paces down the lonn and then back to the porch. Uncovering his head, he let the night wind cool his hot temples. His breath came audibly and hard. He was turning again into the house when his eye was arrested by a light near the turning of the high-road. The light was approaching; he walked toward it, and met Josiah Bonnithorne. The lawyer was jouncing along toward the house with a lantern in his hand.

"Didn't you meet the stableman?" said Hugh in an eager whisper.

"No."

"The blockhead must have taken the old pack-horse road on the fell-side. One would be safe in that fool's stupidity. You have heard what has happened?"

"I have."

"There is no will already."

"And your father is insensible?"

"Yes."

"Then none shall be made."

There was a pause, in which the darkness itself seemed full of speech. The lantern cast its light only on an open cart-shed in the lane.

"If your mother is the Grace Ormerod who married Robert Lowther and had a son by him, then Paul was that son—the heir to Lowther's conscience-money."

"Bonnithorne," said Hugh Ritson—his voice trembled and broke—"if it is so, then it is so, and we need do nothing. Remember, he is my father. It is not within belief that he wants to disinherit his own son for the son of another man."

Mr. Bonnithorne broke into a half-smothered laugh, and stepped close into the cobble-hedge, keeping the lantern down.

"Your father—yes. But you have seen to-day what that may come to. He has always held you under his hand. Paul has been the old man's favorite."

"No doubt of that." Hugh crept close to the lawyer. He was wrestling in the coil of a tragic temptation.

"If he recovers consciousness, he may be tempted to recognize as his own his wife's illegitimate son. That"—the low tone was one of withering irony—"will keep her from dishonor, and you from the estates."

"At least he is my brother—my mother's son. If my father wishes to provide for him, God forbid that we should prevent."

Once more the half-smothered laugh came through the darkness.

"You have missed your vocation, Mr. Ritson. Believe me, the Gospel has lost a fervent advocate. Perhaps you would like to pray for this good brother; perhaps you would consider it safe to drop on your knee and say, 'My good brother that should be, who has ever loved me, whom I have ever loved, take here my fortune, and leave me until death a penniless dependent on the lands that are mine by right of birth.'"

Hugh Ritson's breath came in gusts through his quivering, unseen lips.

"Bonnithorne, it cannot be—it is mere coincidence, seductive, damning coincidence. My mother knows all. If it were true that Paul was the son of Lowther, she would know that Paul and Greta must be half-brother and half-sister. She would stop their unnatural union."

"And do you think I have waited until now to sound that shoal water with a cautious plummet? Your mother is as ignorant of the propinquity as Greta herself. Lowther was dead before your family settled in Newlands. The families never once came together while the widow lived. And now not a relative survives who can tell the story."

"Parson Christian?" said Hugh Ritson.

"A great child just out of swaddling-clothes!"

"Then the secret rests with you and me, Bonnithorne?"

"Who else? The marriage must not come off. Greta is Paul's half-sister, but she is no relative of yours—"

"You are right, Bonnithorne," Hugh Ritson broke in; "the marriage is against nature."

"And the first step toward stopping it is to stop the will."

"Then why are you here?"

"To make sure that there is no will already. You have satisfied me, and now I go."

There was a pause.

"Who shall say that I am acting a base part?" said Hugh, in an eager tone.

"Who indeed?"

"Nature itself is on my side."

The man was conquered. He was in the grip of his temptation.

"I am off, Mr. Ritson. Get back into the house. It is not safe for you to be out of sight and sound."

Mr. Bonnithorne was moving off in the darkness, the lamp before his breast; its light fell that instant on Hugh Ritson's haggard face.

"Wait; put out your lamp."

"It's done."

All was now dark.

"Good-night."

"Good-night."

With slow whispers the two men parted.

The springy step of Josiah Bonnithorne was soon lost in the road below.

Hugh Ritson stood for awhile where the lawyer left him, and then turned back into the house. He found the cabinet open. In the turmoil of emotion he had forgotten to close it. He returned to it, and shuffled with the papers to put them back in their place. At that moment the door opened, and a heavy footstep fell on the floor. Hugh glanced up startled. It was Paul. His face was plowed deep with lines of pain. But the cloud of sorrow that it wore was not so black as the cloud of anger when he saw what his brother was doing and guessed his purpose.

"What are you about?" Paul asked, mastering his wrath.

There was no response.

"Shut up that cabinet!"

Hugh turned about with a flushed face.

"I shall do as I please!"

Paul took two strides toward him.

"Shut it up!"

The cabinet was closed. At the same moment Mrs. Ritson came from the inner room. Paul turned on his heel.

"He is thinking of the will," said the elder brother. "Perhaps it is natural that he should distrust me; but when the time comes he is welcome to the half of everything, and ten thousand wills would hardly give him more."

Mrs. Ritson was strongly agitated. Her eyes, red with weeping, were aflame with expression.

"Paul, he is conscious," she cried in a voice that her anxiety could not subdue. "He is trying to speak. Where is the lawyer?"

Hugh had been moving toward the outer door.

"Conscious!" he repeated, and returned to the hearth.

"Send for Mr. Bonnithorne at once!" said Mrs. Ritson, addressing Hugh.

Her manner was feverish. Hugh touched the bell. When the servant appeared, he said:

"Tell Natt to run to the village for Mr. Bonnithorne."

Paul had walked to the door of the inner room. His hand was on the handle, when the door opened and Greta came out. She stepped up to Mrs. Ritson and tried to quiet her agitation.

The servant returned.

"I can't find Natt," she said. "He is not in the house."

"You'll find him in the stable," said Hugh, composedly.

The servant went out hurriedly.

Paul returned to the middle of the room.

"I'll go myself," he said, and plucked his hat from the settle, but Mrs. Ritson rose to prevent him.

"No, no, Paul," she said in a tremulous voice, "you must never leave his side."

Paul glanced at his brother with a perplexed look. The calmness of Hugh's manner disturbed him.

The servant reappeared.

"Natt is not in the stable, sir."

Paul's face was growing crimson. Mrs. Ritson turned to Hugh.

"Hugh, my dear son, do you go for the lawyer."

A faint smile that lurked at the corners of Hugh's mouth gave way to a look of injury.

"Mother, my place, also, is here. How can you ask me to leave my father's side at a moment like this?"

Greta had been looking fixedly at Hugh.

"I'll go," she said, resolutely.

"Impossible," said Paul. "It is now dark—the roads are wet and lonely."

"I'll go, nevertheless," said Greta, firmly.

"God bless you, my darling, and love you and keep you forever!" said Paul. Wrapping a cloak about her shoulders, he whispered: "My brave girl—that's the stuff of which an English woman may be made."

He opened the door and walked out with her across the court-yard. The night was now clear and calm; the stars burned; the trees whispered; the distant ghylls, swollen by the rain, roared loud through the thin air; a bird on the bough of a fir-tree whistled and chirped. The storm was gone; only its wreckage lay in the still room within.

"A safe journey to you, dear girl, and a speedy return," whispered Paul, and in another moment Greta had vanished in the dark.

When he returned to the hall, his brother was passing into the room where the sick man lay. Paul was about to follow when his mother, who was walking aimlessly to and fro in yet more violent agitation than before, called on him to remain. He turned about and stepped up to her, observing as he did so that Hugh had paused on the threshold, and was regarding them with a steadfast look.

Mrs. Ritson took Paul's hand with a nervous grasp. Her eyes, that bore the marks of recent tears, had the light of wild excitement.

"God be praised that he is conscious at last!" she said.

Paul shook his head as if in censure of his mother's feelings.

"Let him die in peace," he said; "let his soul pass quietly to its rest. Don't vex it now with thoughts of the cares it leaves behind."

Mrs. Ritson let go his hand, and dropped into a chair. A slight shudder passed over her. Paul looked down with a puzzled expression. Then there was a low sobbing. He leaned over his mother and smoothed her hair tenderly.

"Come, let us go in," he said in a broken voice.

Mrs. Ritson rose from her seat and went down on her knees. Her eyes, still wet, but no longer weeping, were raised to heaven.

"Almighty Father, give me strength!" she said beneath her breath, and then more quietly she rose to her feet.

Paul regarded her with increasing perturbation. Something even more serious than he yet knew of was amiss. Hardly knowing why, his heart sunk still deeper.

"What are we doing?" he said, scarcely realizing his own words.

Mrs. Ritson threw herself on his neck.

"Did I not say there was a terrible reason why your father should make a will?"

Paul's voice seemed to die within him.

"What is it, mother?" he asked feebly, not yet gathering the meaning of his fears.

"God knows, I never dreamed it would be my lips that must tell you," said Mrs. Ritson. "Paul, my son, my darling son, you think me a good mother and a pure woman. I am neither. I must confess all—now—and to you. Oh, how your love will turn from me!"

Paul's face turned pale. His eyes gazed into his mother's eyes with a fixed look. The clock ticked audibly. Not another sound broke the silence. At last Paul spoke.

"Speak, mother," he said; "is it something about my father?"

Mrs. Ritson's face fell on to her son's breast. A strong shudder ran over her shoulders, and she sobbed aloud.

"You are not your father's heir," she said; "you were born before we married.... But you will try not to hate me, ... your own mother.... You will try, will you not?"

Paul's great frame shook visibly. He tried to speak. His tongue cleaved to his mouth.

"Do you mean that I am—a bastard?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

The word seemed to sting his mother like a poisoned arrow. She clung yet closer about his neck.

"Pity me and love me still, though I have wronged you before God and man. I whom the world thought so pure—I am but a whited sepulcher—a dishonored woman dishonoring her dearest son!"

The door opened gently, and Hugh Ritson stood in the door-way. Neither his brother nor his mother realized his presence. He remained a moment, and then withdrew, leaving the door ajar.

Beneath the two whom he left behind, the world at that moment reeled.

Paul stood with great, wide eyes, that had never tear to soften them, gazing vacantly into the weeping eyes before him. His lips quivered, but he did not speak.

"Paul, speak to me—speak to me—only speak—only let me hear your voice! See, I am at your feet—your mother kneels to you—forgive her as God has forgiven her!"

And loosing her grasp, she flung herself on the ground before him, and covered her face with her hands.

Paul seemed not at first to know what was happening. Then he stooped and raised his mother to her feet.

"Mother, rise up," he said in a strange, hollow tone. "Who am I that I should presume to pardon you? I am your son—you are my mother!"

His vacant eyes gathered a startled expression. He glanced quickly around the room, and said in a deep whisper:

"How many know of this?"

"None besides ourselves."

The frightened look disappeared. In its place came a look of overwhelming agony.

"But I know of it; oh, my God!" he cried; and into the chair from which his mother had risen he fell like a wounded man.

Mrs. Ritson dried her eyes. A strange quiet was coming upon her now. Her voice gathered strength. She laid a hand on the head of her son, who sat before her with buried face.

"Paul," she said, "it is not until now that the day of reckoning has waited for me. When you were a babe, and knew nothing of your mother's grief, I sorrowed over the shame that might yet be yours; and when you grew to be a prattling child, I thought if God would look into your innocent eyes they would purchase grace for both of us."

Paul lifted his head. At that moment of distress God had sent him the gracious gift of tears. His eyes were wet, and looked tenderly at his mother.

"Paul," she continued, quite calmly now, "promise me one thing."

"What is it?" he asked, softly.

"That if your father should not live to make the will that must recognize you as his son, you will never reveal this secret."

Paul rose to his feet. "That is impossible. I cannot promise it," he said.

"Why?"

"Honor and justice require that my brother Hugh, and not I, should be my father's heir—he, at least, must know."

"What honor, and what justice?"

"The honor of a true man—the justice of the law of England."

Mrs. Ritson dropped her head. "So much for your honor," she said. "But what of mine?"

"Mother, what do you mean?"

"That if you allow your younger brother to inherit, the world by that act will be told all—your father's sin, your mother's shame."

Mrs. Ritson raised her hands to her face, and turned aside. Paul stepped up to her and kissed her forehead reverently.

"You are right," he said. "Forgive me—I thought only of myself. The world that loves to tarnish a pure name would like to gloat over your sorrow. That it shall never! Man's law may have been outraged, but God's law is still inviolate. Whatever my birth, I am as much your son in the light of Heaven as Jacob was the son of Isaac, or David of Jesse. Come, let us go to him—he may yet live to acknowledge me."

It had been a terrible moment, but it was past. To live to manhood in ignorance of the dishonor of his birth, and then to learn the truth under the shadow of death—this had been a tragic experience. The love he had borne his father—the reverence he had learned at his mother's knee

—to what bitter test had they been put! Had all the past been but as the marble image of a happy life! Was all the future shattered before him! Pshaw! he was the unconscious slave of a superstition—a phantasm, a gingerbread superstition!

And a mightier touch awoke his sensibilities—the touch of nature. Before God at that moment he was his father's son. If the world, or the world's law, said otherwise, then they were of the devil, and deserving to be damned. What rite, what jabbering ceremony, what priestly ordinance, what legal mummerly, stood between him and his claim to his father's name?

Paul took in love the hand of his mother. "Let us go in to him," he repeated, and together they walked across the room.

The outer door was flung open, and Greta entered, flushed and with wide-open eyes. At the same instant the inner door swung noiselessly back, and Hugh Ritson stood on the threshold. Greta was about to speak, but Hugh motioned her to silence. His face was pale, his hand trembled. "Too late," he said, huskily; "he is dead!"

Greta sunk on to the settle in the window recess. Hugh walked to the hearth and paused with rigid features before the haunting mirror.

Paul stood for a moment hand in hand with his mother, motionless, speechless, cold at his heart. Then he hurried into the inner room. Mrs. Ritson followed him, closing the door behind him.

The little oak-bound room was dusky; the lamp that burned low was shaded. Across the bed lay Allan Ritson, in his habit as he lived. But his lips were white and cold.

Paul stood and looked down. There lay his father—his father still! His father by right of nature—of love—of honor—let the world say what it would.

And he knew the truth at last: too late to look into those glassy eyes and read the secret of their long years of suffering love.

"Father," Paul whispered, and fell to his knees by the deaf ear.

Mrs. Ritson, strangely quiet, strangely calm, stepped to the opposite side of the bed, and placed one hand on the dead man's breast.

"Paul," she said, "come here."

He rose to his feet and walked to her side.

"Lay your hand with mine, and pledge to me your solemn word never to speak of what you have heard to-night until that great day when we three shall stand together before the great white throne."

Paul placed his hand side by side with hers, and lifted his eyes to heaven.

"On my father's body, by my mother's honor—never to reveal to any human soul, by word or deed, his act or her shame—always to bear myself as their lawful son before man, even as I am their rightful son before God—I swear it! I swear it!"

His voice was cold and clear, but the words were scarcely uttered when he fell to his knees again, with a subdued cry of overwrought feeling.

Mrs. Ritson staggered back, caught the curtains of the bed, and covered her face. All was still.

Then a shuffling footfall was heard on the floor. Hugh Ritson was in the darkened room. He lifted the shaded lamp from the table, approached the bedside, and held the lamp with one hand above his head. The light fell on the outstretched body of his father and the bowed head of his brother.

BOOK II.

THE COIL OF THE TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER I.

It was late in November, and the day was dark and drear. Hoar-frost lay on the ground. The atmosphere was pallid with haze and dense with mystery. Gaunt specters of white mist swept across the valley and gathered at the sides of every open door. The mountains were gone. Only a fibrous vagueness was visible.

In an old pasture field by the bridge a man was plowing. He was an elderly man, sturdy and stolid of figure, and clad in blue homespun. There was nothing clerical in his garb or manner, yet he was the vicar and school-master of the parish. His low-crowned hat was drawn deep over his slumberous gray eyes. The mobile mouth beneath completed the expression of gentleness and

easy good-nature. It was a fine old face, with the beauty of simplicity and the sweetness of content.

A boy in front led the horses, and whistled. The parson hummed a tune as he turned his furrows. Sometimes he sung in a drawling tone—

"Bonny lass, canny lass, wilta be mine?
Thou's nowder wesh dishes nor sarra the swine."

At the turn-rows he paused, and rested on his plow handles. He rested longest at the turn-rows on the roadside of the field. Like the shivering mists that grouped about the open doors, he was held there by light and warmth.

The smithy stood at the opposite side of the road, cut into the rock of the fell on three sides, and having a roof of thatch. The glare of the fire, now rising, now falling, streamed through the open door. It sent a long vista of light through the blank and pulsating haze. The vibrations of the anvil were all but the only sounds on the air; the alternate thin clink of the smith's hand-hammer and the thick thud of the striker's sledge echoed in unseen recesses of the hills beyond.

This smithy of Newlands filled the function which under a higher propitiousness of circumstance is answered by a club. Girded with his leather apron, his sleeves rolled tightly over his knotty arms, the smith, John Proudfoot, stood waiting for his heat. His striker, Geordie Moore, had fallen to at the bellows. On the tool chest sat Gubblum Oglethorpe, leisurely smoking. His pony was tied to the hasp of the gate. The miller, Dick of the Syke, sat on a pile of iron rods. Tom o' Dint, the little bow-legged fiddler and postman, was sharpening at the grindstone a penknife already worn obliquely to a point by many similar applications.

"Nay, I can make nowt of him. He's a changed man for sure," said the blacksmith.

Gubblum removed his pipe and muttered sententiously:

"It's die-spensy, I tell thee."

"Dandering and wandering about at all hours of the day and night," continued the blacksmith.

"It's all die-spensy," repeated the peddler.

"And as widdereful and wizzent as a polecat nailed up on a barn door," said Tom o' Dint, lifting his grating knife from the grindstone and speaking with a voice as hoarse.

"Eh, and as weak as watter with it," added the blacksmith.

"His as was as strong as rum punch," rejoined the fiddler.

"It's die-spensy, John—nowt else," said Gubblum.

The miller broke in testily.

"What's die-spensy?"

"What ails Paul Ritson?" answered Gubblum.

"Shaf on your balderdash," said Dick of the Syke; "die-spensying and die-spensying. You've no' but your die-spensy for everything. Tommy's rusty throat, and John's big toe, and lang Geordie's broken nose, as Giles Raisley gave him a' Saturday neet at the Pack Horse—it's all die-spensy."

The miller was a blustering fellow, who could swear in lusty anger and laugh in boisterous sport in a single breath.

Gubblum puffed placidly.

"It is die-spensy. I know it by exper'ence," he observed, persistently.

The blacksmith's little eyes twinkled mischievously.

"To be sure you do, Gubblum. You had it bad the day you crossed in the packet from Whitehebben. That was die-spensy—a cute bout too."

"I've heard as it were amazing rough on the watter that day," said Tom, in a pause of the wheel, glancing up knowingly at the blacksmith.

"Heard, had you? Must have been tolerable deaf else. Rough? Why, them do say as the packet were wrecked, and only two planks saved. Gubblum was washed ashore cross-legged on one of them, and his pack on the other."

The long, labored breathings of the bellows ended, the iron was thrown white hot out of the glowing coals on to the anvil, and the clank of the hand-hammer and thud of the sledge were all that could be heard. Then the iron cooled, and was lifted back into the palpitating blaze. The blacksmith stepped to the door, wiped his streaming forehead with one hand and waved the other to the parson plowing in the opposite field.

"A canny morning, Mr. Christian," he shouted. "Bad luck for the parson's young lady, anyhow—her sweetheart is none to keen for the wedding," he said, turning again to the fire.

"She's a fine like lass, yon," said Tom o' Dint.

An old man, iron gray, with a pair of mason's mallets swung front and back across his shoulders, stepped into the smithy.

"How fend ye, John?" he said.

"Middling weel, Job," answered the blacksmith; "and what's your errand now?"

"A chisel or two for tempering."

"Cutting in the church-yard to-day, Job? Cold wark, eh?"

"Ey, auld Ritson's stone as they've putten over him."

The blacksmith tapped the peddler on the arm.

"Gubblum, shall I tell you what's a-matter with Paul?"

"Never you bother, John, it's die-spensy."

"It's fretting—that's it—fretting for his father."

"Fretting for his fiddlesticks!" shouted Dick, the miller; "Allan's dead this half a year."

"John's reet," said Job, the stone-cutter; "it is fretting."

Dick of the Syke got up off the iron rods.

"Because a young fellow has given you a job of wark to cut his father's headstone and tell a lie or two in letters half an inch deep and two shillings a dozen—does that show 'at he's fretting?"

"He didn't do nowt of the sort," said Job, hotly.

"Dusta mean as it were the other one—Hugh?" inquired the miller.

"Maybe that's reet," said Job.

Dick of the Syke was not to be beaten for lack of the logic of circumlocution.

"Then what for do you say as Paul is weeping his insides out about his father, when he leaves it to other folks to put a bit of stone over him and a few scrats on it?"

"Because I do say so," said Job, conclusively.

"And maybe you've got your reasons, Job," said the blacksmith with insinuating suavity.

"Maybe I have," said the mason. Then softening, he added, "I don't mind telling you, neither. Yesterday morning when I went to wark I found Paul Ritson lying full length across his father's grave. His clothes were soaking with dew, and his face was as white as a Feb'uary mist, and stiff and set like, and his hair was frosted over same as a pane in the church window."

"Never!"

"He was like to take no note of me, but I gave him a shake, and called out, 'What, Mr. Paul! why, what, man! what's this?'"

"And what ever did he say?"

"Say! Nowt. He get hissel' up—and gay stiff in the limbs he looked, to be sure—and walked off without a word."

Gubblum on the tool chest had removed his pipe from between his lips during the mason's narrative, and listened with a face of blank amazement.

"Weel, that is a stiffener," he said, drawing a long breath.

"What's a stiffener?" said Job, sharply.

"That 'at you're telling for gospel truth." Then, turning to the blacksmith, the peddler pointed the shank of his pipe at the mason, and said: "What morning was it as he found Paul Ritson taking a bath to hissel' in the kirk-yard?"

"Why, yesterday morning," said the smith.

"Well, he bangs them all at lying!" said Gubblum.

"What dusta say?" shouted Job, with sudden fury.

"As you've telt us a lie," answered Gubblum.

"Sista, Gubblum, if you don't take that word back I'll—I'll throw you into the water-buttl!"

"And what would I do while you were thrang at that laal job?" asked the peddler.

The blacksmith interposed.

"Sec a rumpus!" he said; "you're too sudden in your temper, Job."

"Some folks are ower much like their namesakes in the Bible," said Gubblum, resuming his pipe.

"Then what for did he say it warn't true as I found young Ritson yesterday morning wet to the skin in the church-yard?" said Job, ignoring the peddler.

"Because he warn't there," said Gubblum.

Job lost all patience.

"Look here," he said, "if you're not hankering for a cold bath on a frosty morning, laal man, I don't know as you've got any call to say that again!"

"He warn't there," the "laal man" muttered doggedly.

The blacksmith had plunged his last heat into the water trough to cool, and a cloud of vapor filled the smithy.

"Lord A'mighty!" he said, laughing, "that's the way some folks go off—all of a hiss and a smoke."

"He warn't there," mumbled the peddler again, impervious to the homely similitude.

"How are you so certain sure?" said Dick of the Syke. "You warn't there yourself, I reckon."

"No; but I was somewhere else, and so was Paul Ritson. I slept at the Pack House in Kezzick night afore last, and he did the same."

"Did you see him there?" said the blacksmith.

"No; but Giles Raisley saw him, and he warn't astir when Giles went on his morning shift at eight o'clock."

The blacksmith broke into a loud guffaw.

"Tell us how he was at the Hawk and Heron in London at midsummer."

"And so he was," said Gubblum, unabashed.

"Willy-nilly, ey?" said the blacksmith, pausing over the anvil with uplifted hammer, the lurid reflection of the hot iron on his face.

"Maybe he had his reasons for denying hisself," said Gubblum.

The blacksmith laughed again, tapped the iron with the hand-hammer, down came the sledge, and the flakes flew.

Two miners entered the smithy.

"Good-morning, John; are ye gayly?" said one of them.

"Gayly, gayly! Why, it's Giles hissel'!"

"Giles," said the peddler, "where was Paul Ritson night afore last?"

"Abed, I reckon," chuckled one of the new-comers.

"Where abed?"

"Nay, don't ax me. Wait—night afore last? That was the night he slept at Janet's, wasn't it?"

Gubblum's eyes twinkled with triumph.

"What, did I tell you?"

"What call had he to sleep at Keswick?" said the blacksmith; "it's no'but four miles from his own bed at the Ghyll."

"Nay, now, when ye ax the like o' that—"

Tom, the postman, stopped his grindstone and snuckered huskily:

"Maybe he's had a fratch with yon brother—yon Hugh."

"I'm on the morning shift this week, and Mother Janet she said: 'Giles,' she said, 'the brother of your young master came late last night for a bed.'"

"Job, what do you say to that?" shouted the blacksmith above the pulsating of the bellows, and with the sharp white lights of the leaping flames on his laughing face.

"Say! That they're a pack of liars!" said the mason, catching up his untempered chisels and flinging out of the smithy.

When he had gone, Gubblum removed his pipe and said calmly: "He's ower much like his Bible namesake in temper—that's the on'y fault of Job."

The parson, in the field outside, had stood in the turn-rows, resting on his plow-handles. He had been drawling "Bonny lass, canny lass;" but, catching the sound of angry words, he had paused and listened. When Job, the mason, flung away, he returned to his plowing, and disappeared down the furrow, the boy whistling at his horse's head.

"Why, Mattha, it is thee?" said the blacksmith, observing for the first time the second of the new-

comers; "and how fend ye?"

"Middling weel, John, middling weel," said Matthew, in a low voice, resting on the edge of the trough.

It was Laird Fisher, more bent than of old, with deeper lines in his grave face and with yet more listless eyes. He had brought two picks for sharpening.

"Got your smelting-house at wark down at the pit, Mattha?" asked the blacksmith.

"Ey, John, it's at wark—it's at wark."

The miller had turned to go, but he faced about with ready anger.

"Lord, yes, and a pretty pickle you and your gaffer's like to make of me. Wad ye credit it, John? they've built their smelting-house within half a rod of my mill. Half a rod; not a yard mair. When your red-hot rubbish is shot down your bank, where's it going to go, ey? That's what I want to know—where's it going to go?"

"Why, into your mill, of course," said Gubblum, with a wink, from the tool-chest. "That'll maybe help you to go by fire when you can't raise the wind."

"Verra good for thee, Gubblum," laughed the blacksmith.

"I'll have the law on them safe enough," said the miller.

"And where's your damages to come from?"

"From the same spot as all the rest of the brass—that's good enough for me."

Matthew's voice followed the insinuating guffaw.

"I spoke to Master Hugh yesterday. I telt him all you said about a wall."

"Well?"

"He won't build it."

"Of course not. Why didsta not speak to Paul?"

"No use in that," said Matthew, faintly.

"Nay, young Hugh is a gaffer," exclaimed the blacksmith.

"And Paul has no say in it except finding the brass, ey?"

"I mak' no doubt as you're reet, Dick," said Matthew, meekly.

"It's been just so since the day auld Allan died," said the blacksmith. "He hadn't been a week in his grave before Hugh bought up Mattha's royalty in the Hammer Hole, and began to sink for iron. He's never found much ore, as I've heard tell on, but he goes ahead laying down his pumping engines, and putting up his cranes, and boring his mill-races, just as if he was properietor of a royal mine."

"Hugh is the chain-horse, and Paul's no'but the mare in the shafts," said Gubblum.

"And the money comes somehow," said Tom o' Dint, who had finished the knife and was testing its edge in whittling a stick.

Matthew got up from his seat.

"I'll come again for the picks, John," he said quietly; and the old man stepped out of the bright glow into the chill haze.

"Mattha has never been the same since laal Mercy left him," said the blacksmith.

"Any news of her?" asked the peddler.

"Ax Tom o' Dint; he's the postman, and like to know if anybody in Newlands gets the scribe of a line from the wench," said the miller.

Tom shakes his head. "You could tell summat, an' you would, ey, Tom?" said the blacksmith, showing his teeth.

"Don't you misliken me," said the rural messenger in his husky tones; "I'm none of your Peeping Toms." And the postman drew up his head with as much pride of office as could be assumed by a gentleman of bowed legs and curtailed stature.

"It baffles me as Mattha hisself could make nowt of his royalty in the Hammer Hole, if there was owt to make out of it," said the miller from the gate, buttoning his coat up to his ears.

"I've heard as he had a mind to try his luck again," said Giles Raisley.

"Nay, nay, nowt of the sort," said the blacksmith. "When the laal lass cut away and left the auld chap he lost heart and couldn't bear the sight of the spot where she used to bide. So he started back to his bit place on Coledale Moss. But Hugh Ritson followed him and bought up his royalty—for nowt, as they say—and set him to wark for wage in his own sinking—the same that ruined the

auld man lang ago."

"And he's like to see a fortun' come out of it yet," said Giles.

"It won't be Mattha's fortun', then."

"Nay, never fear," said the miner.

Gubblum shook the ashes out of his pipe, and said meditatively, "Mattha's like me and the cuckoo."

"Why, man, how's that?" said the blacksmith, girding his leather apron in a band about his waist. A fresh heat was in the fire; the bellows were belching; the palpitating flames were licking the smoky hood. A twinkle lurked in the blacksmith's eye. "How's that?" he repeated.

"He's allus stopping short too soon," said Gubblum. "My missis, she said to me last back end, 'Gubblum,' she said, 'dusta mind as it's allus summer when the cuckoo is in the garden?' 'That's what is is,' I said. 'Well,' she said, 'dusta not think it wad allus be summer if the cuckoo could allus be kept here?' 'Maybe so,' I says; 'but easier said nor done.' 'Shaf on you for a clothead!' says she; 'nowt so simple. When you get the cuckoo into the garden, build a wall round and keep it in.' And that's what I did; and I built it middling high, too, but it warn't high enough, for, wad ye think it, one day I saw the cuckoo setting off, and it just skimmed the top of that wall by a bare inch. Now, if I'd no'but put another stone—"

A loud peal of laughter was Gubblum's swift abridgment. The peddler tapped the mouth of his pipe on his thumb-nail, and smiled under his shaggy brows.

CHAPTER II.

When Parson Christian finished his plowing, the day was far spent. He gave the boy a shilling as day's wage for leading the horses, drove the team back to their owner, Robert Atkinson, paid five shillings for the day's hire of them, and set out for home. On the way thither he called at Henry Walmsley's, the grocery store in the village, and bought half a pound of tea, a can of coffee, and a stone of sugar; then at Randal Alston's, the shoemaker's, and paid for the repairing of a pair of boots, and put them under his arm; finally, he looked in at the Flying Horse and called for a pot of ale, and drank it, and smoked a pipe and had a crack with Tommy Lowthwaite, the publican.

The mist had risen as the day wore on, and now that the twilight was creeping down the valley, the lane to the vicarage could be plainly seen in its yellow carpeting of fallen leaves. An outer door of the house stood open, and a rosy glow streamed from the fire into the porch. Not less bright was the face within that was waiting to welcome the old vicar home.

"Back again, Greta, back again!" shouted the parson, rolling into the cozy room with his ballast under either arm. "There—wait—fair play, girl!—ah, you rogue!—now that's what I call a mean advantage!"

There was a smack of lips, a little laugh in a silvery voice with a merry lilt in it, and then a deep-toned mutter of affected protestation breaking down into silence and a broad smile.

At arms-length Greta glanced at the parson's burdens, and summoned an austere look.

"Now, didn't I tell you never to do it again?" she said, with an uplifted finger and an air of stern reproof.

"Did you now?" said the parson, with an expression of bland innocence—adding, in an accent of wonderment: "What a memory I have, to be sure!"

"Leave such domestic duties to your domestic superiors," said the girl, keeping a countenance of amazing severity. "Do you hear me, you dear old darling?"

"I hear, I hear," said the old man, throwing his purchases on the floor one by one. "Why, bless me, and here's Mr. Bonnithorne," he added, lifting his eyes to the chimney-corner, where the lawyer sat toasting his toes. "Welcome, welcome."

"Peter, Peter!" cried Greta, opening an inner door.

A gaunt old fellow, with only one arm, shambled into the room.

"Peter, take away these things to the kitchen," said Greta.

The old man glanced down at the parson's purchases with a look of undisguised contempt.

"He's been at it again, mistress," he said.

The parson had thrown off his coat, and was pushing away his long boots with the boot-jack.

"And how's Mr. Bonnithorne this rusty weather? Wait, Peter, give me the slippers out of the big parcel. I got Randal Alston to cut down my old boots into clock sides, and make me slippers out of the feet. Only sixpence, and see what a cozy pair. Thank you, Peter. So you're well, Mr. Bonnithorne. Odd, you say? Well, it is, considering the world of folk who are badly these murky

days."

Peter lifted the boots and fixed them dexterously under the stump of his abridged member. The tea and coffee he deposited in his trousers' pockets, and the sugar he carried in his hand.

"There'll be never no living with him," he muttered in Greta's ear as he passed out. "Don't know as I mind his going to plow—that's a job for a man with two hands—but the like o' this isn't no master's wark."

"Dear me!" exclaimed the parson, who was examining his easy-chair preparatory to sitting in it, "a new cushion—and a bag on the wall for my specs—and a shelf for my pipes—and a—a—what do you call this?"

"An antimacassar, Mr. Christian," the lawyer said.

"I wondered was he ever going to see any difference," said Greta, with dancing eyes.

"Dear me, and red curtains on the windows, and a clean print counterpane on the settle—"

"A chintz—a chintz," interposed Greta, with a mock whimper.

"And the old rosewood clock in the corner as bright as a looking-glass, and the big oak cabinet all shiny with oil—"

"Varnish, sir, varnish."

"And all the carvings on it as fresh as a new pin—St. Peter with his great key, and the rich man with his money-bag trying to defy the fiery furnace."

"Didn't I say you would scarcely know your own house when you came home again?" said Greta.

She was busying herself at spreading the cloth on the round table and laying the parson's supper.

Parson Christian was revolving on his slippered toes, his eyes full of child-like amazement, and a maturer twinkle of knowingness lurking in that corner of his aged orbs that was not directly under the fire of the girl's sharp, delighted gaze.

"Deary me, have you a young lady at home, Mr. Bonnithorne?"

"You know I am a bachelor, Mr. Christian," said the lawyer, demurely.

"So am I—so am I. I never knew any better—not until our old friend Mrs. Lowther died and left me to take charge of her daughter."

"Mother should have asked me to take charge of Mr. Christian, shouldn't she, Mr. Bonnithorne?" said Greta, with roguish eyes.

"Well, there's something in that," said the parson, with a laugh. "Peter was getting old and a bit rusty in the hinges, you know, and we were likely to turn out a pair of old crows fit for nothing but to scare good Christians from the district. But Greta came to the musty old house, with its dust and its cobwebs, and its two old human spiders, like a slant of sunlight on a muggy day. Here's supper—draw up your chair, Mr. Bonnithorne, and welcome. It's my favorite dish—she knows it—barley broth and a sheep's head, with boiled potatoes and mashed turnips. Draw up your chair—but where's the pot of ale, Greta?"

"Peter! Peter!"

The other spider presently appeared, carrying a quart jug with a little mountain of froth—a crater bubbling over and down the sides.

"Been delving for potatoes to-day, Peter?" said the parson.

Peter answered with a grumpy nod of his big head.

"How many bushels?"

"Maybe a matter of twelve," muttered Peter, shambling out.

Then the parson and his guest fell to.

"You're a happy man, Mr. Christian," said Mr. Bonnithorne, as Greta left the room on some domestic errand.

Parson Christian shook his head.

"No call for grace," he said, "with all the luxuries of life thrown into one's lap—that's the worst of living such a happy life. No trials, no cross—nothing to say but 'Soul, take thine ease'—and that's bad when you think of it.... Have some sheep's head, Mr. Bonnithorne; you've not got any tongue—here's a nice sweet bit."

"Thank you, Mr. Christian. I came round to pay the ten shillings for Joseph Parkinson's funeral sermon last Sunday sennight, and the one pound two half-yearly allowance from the James Bolton charity for poor clergy-men."

"Well, well! they may well say it never rains but it pours," said the parson. "I called at Henry Walmsley's and Robert Atkinson's on my way home from the crossroads, and they both paid me

their Martinmas quarterage—Henry five shillings, and Robert seven shillings—and when I dropped in on Randal Alston to pay for the welting and soling of my shoes he said they would come to one and sixpence, but that he owed me one and seven-pence for veal that Peter sold him, so he paid me a penny, and we are clear from the beginning of the world to this day."

"I also wanted to speak about our young friend Greta," said Mr. Bonnithorne, softly. "I suppose you are reconciled to losing her?"

"Losing her?—Greta!" said the parson, laying down his knife. Then smiling, "Oh, you mean when Paul takes her—of course, of course—only the marriage will not be yet awhile—he said so himself."

"Marriage with Paul—no," said Mr. Bonnithorne, clearing his throat and looking grave.

Parson Christian glanced into the lawyer's face uneasily and lapsed into silence.

"Mr. Christian, you were left guardian of Greta Lowther by our dear friend, her mother. It becomes your duty to see that she does the best for her future welfare and happiness."

"Surely, surely!" said the parson.

"You are an old man, Mr. Christian, and she is a young girl. When you and I are gone, Greta Lowther will still have the battle of life before her."

"Please God—please God!" said the parson, faintly.

"Isn't it well that you should see that she shall have a husband that can fight it with her side by side?"

"So she shall, so she shall—Paul is a manly fellow, and as fond of her as of his own soul—nay, as I tell him, it's idolatry and a sin before God, his love of the girl."

"You're wrong, Mr. Christian. Paul Ritson is no fit husband for Greta. He is a ruined man. Since his father's death he has allowed the Ghyll to go to wreck. It is mortgaged to the last blade of grass. I know it."

Parson Christian shifted his chair from the table and gazed into the fire with bewildered eyes.

"I knew he was in trouble," he said, "but I didn't guess that things wore so grave a look."

"Don't you see that he is shattered in mind as well as purse?" said the lawyer.

"No, no; I can't say that I do see that. He's a little absent sometimes, but that's all. When I talk of Matthew Henry and discuss his commentaries, or recite the story of dear Adam Clarke, he is a little—just a little forgetful—that's all—yes, that is all."

"Compared with his brother—what a difference!" said Mr. Bonnithorne.

"Well, there is a difference," said the parson.

"Such spirit, such intelligence—he'll be the richest man in Cumberland one of these days. He has bought up a royalty that is sweating ore, and now he is laying down pumping engines and putting up smelting-houses, and he is getting standing orders to fix a line of railway for the ore he is fetching up."

"And where did the money come from?" asked the parson; "the money to begin?"

Mr. Bonnithorne glanced up sharply.

"It was his share of his father's personalty."

"A big tree from such a little acorn," said the parson, meditatively, "and quick growth, too."

"There's no saying what intelligence and enterprise will not do in this world, Mr. Christian," said the lawyer, who seemed less certain of the next. "Hugh Ritson is a man of spirit and brains. Now, that's the husband for Greta—that is, if you can get him—and I don't know that you can—but if it were only possible—"

Parson Christian faced about.

"Mr. Bonnithorne," he said, gravely, "the girl is not up for sale, and the richest man in Cumberland can't buy her. The thirty pieces of silver for which Judas sold his master may have been smelted and coined afresh, but not a piece of that money shall touch fingers of mine!"

"You mistake me, Mr. Christian, believe me, you do," protested the lawyer, with an aggrieved expression. "I was speaking in our young friend's interests. Whatever occurs, I beg of you, as a friend and well-wisher of the daughter of Robert Lowther, now in his grave, never to allow her to marry Paul Ritson."

"That shall be as God wills it," said the parson quietly.

The lawyer had risen and drawn on his great-coat.

"She can stay here with me," continued the parson.

"No, she should marry now," said Mr. Bonnithorne, stepping to the door. "She's all but of age. It

is hardly fair to keep her."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked the parson, a puzzled look on his face.

"She is rich and she is young. Her wealth can buy comforts, and her youth win pleasures."

The good old Christian opened wide his great gray eyes with a blank expression. He glanced vacantly about the simple room, rose to his feet, and sat down again.

"I never thought of that before," he said, faintly, and staring long into the fire.

There was a heavy foot on the path outside. The latch was lifted, and Paul Ritson stepped into the room. At the sound of his step Greta tripped through the inner door, all joy and eagerness, to welcome him. The parson got up and held out both hands, the clouds gone from his beaming face.

"Well, good-night," said the lawyer, opening the door. "I've four long miles before me. And how dark! how very dark!"

Paul Ritson was in truth a changed man.

His face was pale and haggard, and his eyes were bleared and heavy. He dropped with a listless weariness into the chair that Greta drew up to the fire. When he smiled the lips lagged back to a gloomy repose, and when he laughed the note of merriment rang hollow and fell short.

"Just in time for a game with me, my lad!" said the parson. "Greta, fetch the chessboard and box."

The board was brought, the pieces fixed; the parson settled himself at his ease, with slippers on the hearth-rug and a handkerchief across his knee.

"Do you know, Paul, I heard a great parl about you to-day?"

"About me! Where?" asked Paul, without much curiosity in his tone.

"At Mr. Proudfoot's smithy, while I was turning the fallows in the meadow down at the crossroads. Little Mr. Oglethorpe was saying that you slept at the Pack Horse, in Keswick, the night before last; but Mr. Job Sheepshanks, the letter-cutter, said nay, and they had high words indeed, wherein Job called Mr. Oglethorpe all but his proper name, and flung away in high dudgeon."

Paul moved his pawn and said, "I never slept at the Pack Horse in my life, Mr. Christian."

Greta sat knitting at one side of the ingle. The kitten, with a bell attached to a ribbon about its neck, sported with the bows of her dainty slippers. Only the click of the needles, and the tinkle of the bell, and the hollow tick of the great clock in the corner broke the silence.

At last Parson Christian drew himself up in his chair.

"Well, Paul, man, Paul—deary me, what a sad move! You're going back, back, back; once you could beat me five games to four. Now I can run away with you."

The game soon finished, amid a chuckle from the parson, a bantering word from Greta, and a loud, forced laugh from Paul.

Parson Christian lifted from a shelf a ponderous tome bound in leather and incased in green cloth.

"I must make my day's entry," he said, "and get off to bed. I was astir before day-break this morning."

Greta crept up behind the old man, and looked over his shoulder as he wrote:

"Nov. 21.—Retired to my lodging-room last night, and commended my all to God, and lay down, and fell asleep; but Peter minded the heifer that was near to calving; so he came and wakened me, and we went down and sealed her, and foddered her, and milked her. Spent all day plowing the low meadow, Peter delving potatoes. Called at the Flying Horse, and sat while I drank one pot of ale and no more, and paid for it. Received ten shillings from Lawyer Bonnithorne for funeral sermon, and one pound two from Bolton charity; also five shillings quarterage from Henry Walmsley, and seven from Robert Atkinson, and a penny to square accounts from Randal Alston, and so retired to my closet at peace with all the world. Blessed be God."

The parson returned to its shelf the ponderous diary "made to view his life and actions in," and called through the inner door for his bedroom candle. A morose voice answered "Coming," and presently came.

"Thank you, Peter; and how's the meeting-house, and who preaches there next Sunday, Peter?"

Peter grumbled out:

"I don't know as it's not yourself. I passed them my word as you'd exhort 'em a' Sunday afternoon."

"But nobody has ever asked me. You should have mentioned the matter to me first, Peter, before promising. But never mind, I'm willing, though it's a poor discourse they can get from me."

Turning to Paul, who sat silent before the fire:

"Peter has left us and turned Methodist," said the parson; "he is now Brother Peter Ward, and wants me to preach at the meeting-house. Well, I won't say nay. Many a good ordained clergyman has been dissenting minister as well. Good-night to you.... Peter, I wish you to get some whipcord and tie up the reel of my fishing-rod—there it is, on the rafters of the ceiling; and a bit more cord to go round the handle of my whip—it leans against the leads of the neuk window; and, Peter, I'm going to go to the mill with the oats to-morrow, and Robin Atkinson has loaned me his shandry and mare. Robin always puts a bushel of grain into the box, but it's light and only small feeding. I wish you to get a bushel of better to mix with it, and make it more worth the mare's labor to eat it. Good-night all; good night."

Peter grumbled something beneath his breath and shambled out.

"God bless him!" said Greta presently; and Paul, without lifting his eyes from the fire, said quietly:

"Christe's lore, and His apostles twelve
He taught; but first he followed it himselfe."

Then there was silence in the little vicarage. Paul sat without animation until Greta set herself to bewitch him out of his moodiness. Her bright eyes, dancing in the rosy fire-light that flickered in the room; her high spirits bubbling over with delicious teasing and joyous sprightliness; her tenderness, her rippling laughter, her wit, her badinage—all were brought to the defeat and banishment of Paul's heaviness of soul. It was to no purpose. The gloom of the grave face would not be conquered. Paul smiled slightly into the gleaming eyes, and laughed faintly at the pouting lips, and stroked tenderly the soft hair that was glorified into gold in the glint of the fire-light; but the old sad look came back once and again.

Greta gave it up at last. She rose from the hassock at his feet.

"Sweetheart," she said, "I will go to bed. You are not well to-night, or you are angry, or out of humor."

She waited a moment, but he did not speak. Then she made a feeble feint of leaving the room.

At last Paul said:

"Greta, I have something to say."

She was back at her hassock in an instant. The laughter had gone from her eyes, and left a dewy wistfulness.

"You are unhappy. You have been unhappy a long, long time, and have never told me the cause. Tell me now."

The heavy face relaxed.

"What ever put that in your head, little one?" he asked, in a playful tone, patting the golden hair.

"Tell me now," she said more eagerly. "Think of me as a woman fit to share your sorrows, not as a child to be pampered and played with, and never to be burdened with a man's sterner cares. If I am not fit to know your troubles, I am not fit to be your wife. Tell me, Paul, what it is that has taken the sunshine out of your life."

"The sunshine has not been taken out of my life yet, little woman—here it is," said Paul, lightly, and he drew his fingers through the glistening hair.

The girl's lucent eyes fell.

"You are playing with me," she said gravely; "you are always playing with me. Am I so much a child? Are you angry with me?"

"Angry with you, little one? Hardly that, I think," said Paul, and his voice sunk.

"Then tell me, sweetheart. You have something to say—what is it?"

"I have come to ask—"

"Yes?"

He hesitated. His heart was too full to speak. He began again.

"Do you think it would be too great a sacrifice to give up—"

"What?" she gasped.

"Do you remember all you told me about my brother Hugh—that he said he loved you?"

"Well?" said Greta, with a puzzled glance.

"I think he spoke truly," said Paul, and his voice trembled.

She drew back with agony in every line of her face.

"Would it be ... do you think ... supposing I went away, far away, and we were not to meet for a time, a long time—never to meet again—could you bring yourself to love him and marry him?"

Greta rose to her feet in agitation.

"Him—love him!—you ask me that—you!"

The girl's voice broke down into sobs that seemed to shake her to the heart's core.

"Greta, darling, forgive me; I was blind—I am ashamed."

"Oh, I could cry my eyes out!" she said, wiping away her tears. "Say you were only playing with me, then; say you were only playing; do say so, do!"

"I will say anything—anything but the same words again—and they nearly killed me to say them."

"And was this what you came to say?" Greta inquired.

"No, no," he said, lifted out of his gloom by the excitement; "but another thing, and it is easier now—ten times easier now—to say it. Greta, do you think if I were to leave Cumberland and settle in another country—Australia or Canada, or somewhere far enough away—that you could give up home, and kindred, and friends, and old associations, and all the dear past, and face a new life in a new world with me? Could you do it?"

Her eyes sparkled. He opened his arms, and she flew to his embrace.

"Is this your answer, little one?" he said, with choking delight. And a pair of streaming eyes looked up for a brief instant into his face. "Then we'll say no more now. I'm to go to London to-morrow night, and shall be away four days. When I return we'll talk again, and tell the good soul who lies in yonder. Peace be with him, and sweet sleep, the dear old friend!"

Paul lifted up his hat and opened the door. His gloom was gone; his eyes were alive with animation. The worn cheeks were aflame. He stood erect, and walked with the step of a strong man.

Greta followed him into the porch. The rosy fire-light followed her. It flickered over her golden hair, and bathed her beauty in a ruddy glow.

"Oh, how free the air will breathe over there," he said, "when all this slavery is left behind forever! You don't understand, little woman, but some day you shall. What matter if it is a land of rain, and snow, and tempest? It will be a land of freedom—freedom, and life, and love. And now, Master Hugh, we shall soon be quits—very soon!"

His excitement carried him away, and Greta was too greedy of his joy to check it with questions.

They stood together at the door. The night was still and dark; the trees were noiseless, their prattling leaves were gone. Silent and empty as a vacant street was the unseen road.

Paul held forth his hand to feel if it rained. A withered leaf floated down from the eaves into his palm.

Then a footstep echoed on the path. It went on toward the village. Presently the postman came trudging along from the other direction.

"Good-night, Tom o' Dint!" cried Paul, cheerily.

Tom stopped and hesitated.

"Who was it I hailed on the road?" he asked.

"When?"

"Just now."

"Nay, who was it?"

"I thought it was yourself."

The little man trundled on in the dark.

"My brother, no doubt," said Paul, and he pulled the door after him.

CHAPTER III.

The next morning a bright sun shone on the frosty landscape. The sky was blue and the air was clear.

Hugh Ritson sat in his room at the back of the Ghyll, with its window looking out on the fell-side and on the river under the leafless trees beneath. The apartment had hardly the appearance of a room in a Cumbrian homestead. It was all but luxurious in its appointments. The character of its contents gave it something of the odor of a by-gone age. Besides books on many shelves, prints,

pictures in water and oil, and mirrors of various shapes, there was tapestry on the inside of the door, a bust of Dante above a cabinet of black oak, a piece of bas-relief in soapstone, a gargoyle in wood, a brass censer, a mediaeval lamp with open mouth, and a small ivory crucifix nailed to the wall above the fire.

Hugh himself sat at an organ, his fingers wandering aimlessly over the keys, his eyes gazing vacantly out at the window. There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said the player. Mr. Bonnithorne entered and walked to a table in the middle of the floor. Hugh Ritson finished the movement he was playing, and then arose from the organ and drew an easy-chair to the fire.

"Brought the deed?" he asked, quietly, Mr. Bonnithorne still standing.

"I have, my dear friend, and something yet more important."

Hugh glanced up: through his constant smile Mr. Bonnithorne was obviously agitated. Dropping his voice, the lawyer added, "Copies of the three certificates."

Hugh smiled faintly. "Good; we will discuss the certificates first," he said, and drew his dressing-gown leisurely about him.

Mr. Bonnithorne began to unfold some documents. He paused; his eye was keen and bright; he seemed to survey his dear friend with some perplexity; his glance was shadowed by a certain look of distrust; but his words were cordial and submissive, and his voice was, as usual, low and meek. "What a wonderful man you are. And how changed! It is only a few months since I had to whip up your lagging spirits at a great crisis. And now you leave me far behind. Not the least anxious! How different I am, to be sure. It was this very morning my correspondent sent me the copies, and yet I am here, five miles from home. And when the post arrived I declare to you that such was my eagerness to know if our surmises were right that—"

Hugh interrupted in a quick, cold voice: "That you were too nervous to open his letter, and fumbled it back and front for an hour—precisely."

Saying this, Hugh lifted his eyes quickly enough to encounter Mr. Bonnithorne's glance, and when they fell again a curious expression was playing about his mouth.

"Give me the papers," said Hugh, and he stretched forward his hand without shifting in his seat.

"Well, really, you are—really—"

Hugh raised his eyes again. Mr. Bonnithorne paused, handed the documents, and shuffled uneasily into a seat.

One by one Hugh glanced hastily over three slips of paper. "This is well," he said, quietly.

"Well? I should say so, indeed. What could be better? I confess to you that until to-day I had some doubts. Now I have none."

"Doubts? So you had doubts?" said Hugh, dryly "They disturbed your sleep, perhaps?"

The lurking distrust in Mr. Bonnithorne's eyes openly displayed itself, and he gazed full into the face of Hugh Ritson with a searching look that made little parley with his smile. "Then one may take a man's inheritance without qualm or conviction?"

Hugh pretended not to hear, and began to read aloud the certificates in his hand. "Let me see, this is first—Registration of Birth."

Mr. Bonnithorne interrupted. "Luckily, very luckily, the registration of birth is first."

Hugh read:

"Name, Paul. Date of birth, August 14, 1845. Place of birth, Russell Square, London. Father's name, Robert Lowther. Mother's name, Grace Lowther; maiden name, Ormerod."

"Then this comes second—Registration of Marriage."

Mr. Bonnithorne rose in his eagerness and rubbed his hands together at the fire. "Yes, second," he said, with evident relish.

Hugh read calmly:

"Allan Ritson—Grace Ormerod—Register's office, Bow Street, Strand, London—June 12, 1847."

"What do you say to that?" asked Mr. Bonnithorne, in an eager whisper.

Hugh continued without comment. "And this comes last—Registration of Birth."

"Name, Hugh—March 25, 1848—Holme, Ravenglass, Cumberland—Allan Ritson—Grace Ritson (Ormerod)."

"There you have the case in a nutshell," said Mr. Bonnithorne, dropping his voice. "Paul is your half-brother, and the son of Lowther. You are Allan Ritson's heir, born within a year of your father's marriage. Can anything be clearer?"

Hugh remained silently intent on the documents. "Were these copies made at Somerset House?" he asked.

Mr. Bonnithorne nodded.

"And your correspondent can be relied upon?"

"Assuredly. A solicitor in excellent practice."

"Was he told what items he had to find, or did he make a general search?"

"He was told to find the marriage or marriages of Grace Ormerod and to trace her offspring."

"And these were the only entries?"

Mr. Bonnithorne nodded again.

Hugh twirled the papers in his fingers, and then placed two of them side by side. His face wore a look of perplexity. "I am puzzled," he said.

"What puzzles you?" said Mr. Bonnithorne. "Can anything be plainer?"

"Yes. By these certificates I am two and a half years younger than Paul. I was always taught that there was only a year between us."

Mr. Bonnithorne smiled, and said in a superior tone:

"An obvious ruse."

"You think a child is easily deceived—true!"

Mr. Bonnithorne preserved a smiling face.

"Now, I will proceed to the payment of the legacy, and you, no doubt, to the institution of your claim."

"No," said Hugh Ritson, with emphasis, rising to his feet.

"You know that if a bastard dies seized of an estate, the law justifies his title. He is then the bastard eigne. You must eject this man."

"No," said Hugh Ritson again. The lawyer glanced up inquiringly, and Hugh added: "That shall come later. Meantime the marriage must be brought about."

"Your own marriage with Greta?"

"Paul's."

"Paul's?" said Mr. Bonnithorne, the very suppression of his tone giving it additional emphasis.

"Paul's," repeated Hugh with grim composure. "He shall marry her."

The lawyer had risen once more, and was now face to face with Hugh Ritson, glancing into his eyes with eager scrutiny.

"You cannot mean it?" he said at length.

"And why not?" said Hugh, placidly.

"Because Paul is her brother—at least, her half-brother."

"They don't know that."

Mr. Bonnithorne's breath seemed to be arrested.

"But we know it, and we can't stand by and witness their marriage!" he said at length.

Hugh Ritson leaned with his back to the fire. "We can, and shall," he said, and not a muscle of his face moved.

Mr. Bonnithorne surveyed his friend from head to foot, and then his own countenance relaxed.

"You are trifling; but it will be no trifle to them when they learn that their billing and cooing must end. And from such a cause, too. It will be a terrible shock. The only question is, whether it would not be more humane to say nothing of the impediment until we have brought about another match. Last night, at Parson Christian's, I did what I could for you."

Hugh smiled in return; a close observer might have seen that his was a cold mockery of the lawyer's own smile.

"Yes, you were always humane, Bonnithorne, and now your sensibilities are shocked. But when I spoke of marriage I meant the ceremony. Nothing more."

Mr. Bonnithorne's eyes twinkled.

"I think I understand. You intend to separate them at the church door—perhaps at the altar rail. It is a shocking revenge. My very skin creeps!"

Hugh laughed lightly, and walked to the window. A slant of sunshine fell on his upturned face. When he turned his head and broke silence he spoke in a deep, harsh voice.

"I was humane, too. When she spoke of marriage with Paul, I hinted at an impediment. She ridiculed the idea; scoffed at it." Another light laugh, and then a stern solemnity. "She insulted me—palpably, grossly, brutally. What did she say? Didn't I tell you before? Why, she said—ha! ha! would you believe it?—she said she'd rather marry a plowboy than such a gentleman as me. That was her very word."

Hugh Ritson's face was now dark with passion, while laughter was on his lips.

"She shall marry her plowboy, to her lifelong horror and disgrace. I promised her as much, and I will keep my word!"

"A terrible revenge!" muttered the lawyer, twitching uneasily at his finger-nails.

"Tut! You don't know to what lengths love may go. Even the feeble infant hearts of men whose minds are a blank can carry them any length in the devotion or the revenge of love!" He paused, and then added in a low tone, "She has outraged my love!"

"Surely not past forgiveness?" interrupted Mr. Bonnithorne, nervously. "It would be a lifelong injury. And she is a woman, too."

Hugh faced about.

"But he is a man; and I have my reckoning with him also." Hugh Ritson strode across the room, and then stopped suddenly. "Look you, Bonnithorne, you said that with all your confidence on the night of my father's death, you had your doubts until to-day. But I had never a moment's doubt. Why? Because I had assurance from my mother's own lips. To me? No, but worse; to him. He knows well he is not my father's heir. He has known it since the hour of my father's death. He knows that I know it. Yet he has kept the lands to this day." Another uneasy perambulation. "Do you think of that when you talk of revenge? Manliness? He has none. He is a pitiful, truculent, groveling coward, ready to buy profit at any price. He has robbed me of my inheritance. He stands in my place. He is a living lie. Revenge? It will be retribution!"

Hugh Ritson's composure was gone. Mr. Bonnithorne, not easily cowed, dropped his eyes before him. "Terrible, terrible!" he muttered again, and added with more assurance: "But you know I have always urged you to assert your right to the inheritance."

Hugh was striding about the room, his infirm foot trailing heavily after him.

"Bonnithorne," he said, pausing, "when a woman has outraged the poor weak heart of one of the waifs whom fate flings into the gutter, he sometimes throws a cup of vitriol into her face, saying, 'If she is not for me, she is not for another;' or 'Where she has sinned, there let her suffer.' That is revenge; it is the feeble device of a man who thinks in his simple soul that when beauty is gone loathing is at hand." Another light trill of laughter.

"But the cup of retribution is not to be measured by the cup of vitriol."

Mr. Bonnithorne fumbled his papers nervously, and repeated beneath his breath, "Terrible, terrible!"

"She has wronged me, Bonnithorne, and he has wronged me. They shall marry and they shall separate; and henceforward they shall walk together and yet apart, a gulf dividing them from each other, yet a wider gulf dividing both from the world; and so on until the end, and he and I and she and I are quits."

"Terrible, terrible!" Mr. Bonnithorne mumbled again. "All nature rises against it."

"Is it so? Then be it so," said Hugh, the flame subsiding from his cheek, and a cold smile creeping afresh about his lips. "Your sense of justice would have been answered, perhaps, if I had turned this bastard adrift penniless and a beggar, stopped the marriage, and taken by strategy the woman I could not win by love." The smile faded away. "That would have been better than the cup of vitriol, but not much better. You are a man of the world."

"It is a terrible revenge," the lawyer muttered again—this time with a different intonation.

"I repeat, they shall marry. No more than that," said Hugh. "I would outrage nature as little as I would shock the world."

The sun had crept round to where the organ stood in one corner of the room. Hugh's passion had gradually subsided. He sidled on to the stool and began to play softly. A knock came to the door, and old Laird Fisher entered.

"The gentleman frae Crewe is down at the pit about t' engine in the smelting-mill," said the old man.

"Say I shall be with him in half an hour," said Hugh, and Laird Fisher left the room. Then Hugh put the papers in his pocket.

"We have wasted too much time over the certificates—they can wait—where's the deed of mortgage?—I must have the money to pay for the new engine."

"It is here," said the lawyer, and he spread a parchment on the table.

Hugh glanced hastily over it, and touched a hand-bell. When the maid appeared he told her to go to Mr. Paul, who was thatching in the stack-yard, and say he wished to see him at once. Then he returned to the organ and played a tender air. His touch was both light and strenuous.

"Any news of his daughter?" said Mr. Bonnithorne, sinking his voice to a whisper.

"Whose daughter?" said Hugh, pausing and looking over his shoulder.

"The old man's—Laird Fisher's."

"Strangely enough—yes. A letter came this morning."

Hugh Ritson stopped playing and thrust his hand into an inner pocket. But Mr. Bonnithorne hastened to show that he had no desire to pry into another man's secrets.

"Pray don't trouble. Perhaps you'd rather not—just tell me in a word how things are shaping."

Hugh laughed a little, unfolded a sheet of scented writing-paper, with ornamented border, and began to read:

"I am writing to thank you very much—' Here," tossing the letter to the lawyer, "read it for yourself." Then he resumed his playing.

Mr. Bonnithorne fixed his nose-glasses, and read:

"I am writing to thank you very much for your kind remembrance of me, it was almost like having your company, I live in hopes of seeing you soon, when are you coming to me? Sometimes I think you will never, never come, and then I can't help crying though I try not to, and I don't cry much. I don't go out very often London is far away, six miles, there are nice people here and nice children. Only think when my trouble is over and you come and take me home. How is poor father, does he look much older does he fret for me now? I wonder will he know me. I am quite well, only there is something the matter in my eyes. Sometimes when I wake up I can't see plain. Don't be long writing. My eyes are very sore and red to-day, and it is oh so lonely in this strange place. Mrs. Drayton is kind to me. Good-bye. She has a son, but he is always at meets, that is races, and I have never seen him. Write soon to your loving Mercy. The time is near."

Hugh played on while Mr. Bonnithorne read. The lawyer, when he came to the end, handed the letter back with the simple comment:

"Came this morning, you say? It was written last Tuesday—nearly a week ago."

Hugh nodded his head over his shoulder, and continued to play. He swayed to and fro with an easy grace to the long sweeps of the music until the door opened sharply, and Paul entered with a firm step. Then he rose, picked a pen from the inkstand, and dipped it in the ink.

Paul wore a suit of rough, light cloth, with leggins, and a fur cap, which he did not remove. His face was pale; decision sat on every line of it.

"Excuse me, Mr. Bonnithorne, if I don't shake hands," he said in his deep voice; "I'm at work, and none too clean."

"This," said Hugh Ritson, twiddling the pen in his fingers, "this is the deed I spoke of yesterday. You sign there," pointing to a blank space in front of a little wafer.

Then he placed one hand firmly on the upper part of the parchment, as if to steady it, and held out the pen.

Paul made no approach to accepting it. He stretched forward, took hold of the document, and lifted it, casting Hugh's hand aside.

Hugh watched him closely.

"The usual formality," he said, lightly; "nothing more."

Paul passed his eye rapidly over the deed. Then he turned to the lawyer.

"Is this the fourth or fifth mortgage that has been drawn?" he inquired, still holding the parchment before him.

"Really, I can't say—I presume it is the—really, I hardly remember—"

Mr. Bonnithorne's suavity of tone and customary smile broke down into silence and a look of lowering anxiety.

Paul glanced steadfastly into his face.

"But I remember," he said, with composure more embarrassing than violence. "It is the fifth. The Holme farm was first, and then came Goldscope. Hindscarth was mortgaged to the last ear of corn, and then it was the turn for Coledale. Now, it's the Ghyll itself, I see, house and buildings."

Hugh Ritson's face underwent a change, but his tone was unruffled as he said:

"If you please, we will come to business." Then with a sinister smile, "You resemble the French counsel—you begin every speech at the Creation. 'Let us go on to the Deluge,' said the judge."

"To the Deluge!" said Paul; and he turned his head slowly to where Hugh stood, holding the pen in one hand and rapping the table with the knuckles of the other. "Rather unnecessary. We're already under water."

The passion in Hugh Ritson's face dropped to a look of sullen anger. But he mastered his voice, and said quietly:

"The engineer from Crewe is waiting for me at the pit. I have wasted the whole morning over these formalities. Come, come, let us have done. Mr. Bonnithorne will witness the signature."

Paul had not shifted his steadfast gaze from his brother's face. Hugh dodged his glance at first, and then met it with an expression of audacity.

Still holding the parchment before him, Paul said quietly:

"To-night I leave home for London, and shall be absent four days. Can this business wait until my return?"

"No, it can't," said Hugh with emphasis.

Paul dropped his voice.

"Don't take that tone with me, I warn you. Can this business wait?"

"I mean what I say—it can not."

"On my return I may have something to tell you that will affect this and the other deeds. Once more, can it wait?"

"Will you sign—yes or no?" said Hugh.

Paul looked steady and straight into his brother's eyes.

"You are draining away my inheritance—you are—"

At this word Hugh's smoldering temper was afire.

"Your inheritance?" he broke out in his bitterest tones. "It is late in the day to talk of that. Your inheritance—"

But he stopped. The expression of audacity gave place to a look of blank bewilderment. Paul had torn the parchment from top to bottom, and flung it on the table, and in an instant was walking out of the room.

CHAPTER IV.

Paul Ritson returned to the stack-yard, and worked vigorously three hours longer. A stack had been stripped by a recent storm, and he thatched it afresh with the help of a laborer and a boy. Then he stepped indoors, changed his clothes, and filled a traveling-bag. When this was done he went in search of the stableman. Natt was in his stable, whistling as he polished his harness.

"Bring the trap round to the front at seven," he said, "and put my bag in at the back; you'll find it in the hall."

By this time the night had closed in, and the young moon showed faintly over the head of Hindscarth. The wind was rising.

Paul returned to the house, ate, drank, and smoked. Then he rose and walked upstairs and knocked at the door of his mother's room.

Mrs. Ritson was alone. A lamp burned on the table and cast a sharp white light on her face. The face was worn and very pale. Lines were plowed deep on it. She was kneeling, but she rose as Paul entered. He bent his head and kissed her forehead. There was a book before her; a rosary was in her hand. The room was without fire. It was chill and cheerless, and only sparsely furnished—sheep-skin rugs on the floor, texts on the walls, a carved oak clothes-chest in one corner, two square high-backed chairs and a small table, a bed, and no more.

"I'm going off, mother," said Paul; "the train leaves in an hour."

"When do you return?" said Mrs. Ritson.

"Let me see—this is Saturday; I shall be back on Wednesday evening."

"God be with you!" she said in a fervent voice.

"Mother, I spoke to Greta last night, and she promised. We shall soon be free of this tyranny. Already the first link of the chain is broken. He called me into his room this morning to sign a mortgage on the Ghyll, and I refused."

"And yet you are about to go away and leave everything in his hands!"

Mrs. Ritson sat down and Paul put his hand tenderly on her head.

"Better that than to have it wrested from me inch by inch—to hold the shadow of an inheritance while he grasps the substance. He knows all. His dark hints are not needed to tell me that."

"Yet he is silent," said Mrs. Ritson, and her eyes fell on to her book. "And surely it is for my sake that he is so—if in truth he knows all. Is he not my son? And is not my honor his honor?"

Paul shook his head.

"If the honor of twenty mothers, as true and dear as you, were the stepping-stones to his interest, over those stones he would go. No, no; it is not honor, whether yours or his, that keeps him silent."

Mrs. Ritson glanced up.

"Are you not too hard on him? He is guiltless in the eye of the world, and that at least should plead for him. Forgive him. Do not leave your brother in anger!"

"I have nothing to forgive," said Paul. "Even if he knew nothing, I should still go away and leave everything. I could not live any longer under the shadow of this secret, bound by an oath. I would go, as I go now, with sealed lips, but a free heart. He should have his own before man—and I mine, before God."

Mrs. Ritson sat in silence; her lips trembled perceptibly, and her eyelids quivered.

"I shall soon leave you, my dear son," she said in a tremulous voice.

"Nay, nay, you shall not," he answered in an altered tone, half of raillery, half of tenderness; "you are coming with us—with Greta and me—and over there the roses will bloom again in your white cheeks."

Mrs. Ritson shook her head.

"I shall soon leave you, dearest," she repeated, and told her beads.

He tried to dispel her sadness; he laughed, and she smiled feebly; he patted her head playfully. But she came back to the same words: "I shall soon leave you."

The moon was shining at the full when he lifted his hat to go. It was sailing through a sky of fibrous cloud. The wind was high, and rattled the empty boughs of the tree against the window. Keen frost was in the air.

"I shall see my father's old friend in London on Monday, and be back on Wednesday. Good-bye. Keep a good heart. Good-bye."

She wept on his breast and clung to him.

"Good-bye, good-bye!" he repeated, and tried to disengage himself from her embrace.

But she clung closer. It was as if she was to see him no more.

"Good-bye!" she sobbed, and with the tears in his own eyes he laughed at her idle fears.

"Ha! ha! ha! one would think I was going for life—ha! ha—"

There was a scream on the frosty air without. His laugh died on his lips.

"What was that?" he said, and drew a sharp breath.

She lifted her face, whiter now than ever, and with tearless eyes.

"It was the cry of the bird that foretells death," she said in a whisper.

He laughed a little—boisterously.

"Nay, nay; you will be well and happy yet." Then he broke away.

Natt was sitting in the trap, and it was drawn up in the court-yard to the door. He was looking through the darkness at some object in the distance, and when Paul came up he was not at first conscious of his master's presence.

"What were you looking at, Natt?" said Paul, pulling on his gloves.

"I war wond'rin' whether lang Dick o' the Syke had kindled a fire to-night, or whether yon lowe on the side of the Causey were frae the new smelting-house."

Paul glanced over the horse's head. A deep glow stood out against the fell. All around was darkness.

"The smelting-house, I should say," said Paul, and jumped to his seat beside Natt.

By one of the lamps that the trap carried, he looked at his watch.

"A quarter past seven. It will be smart driving, but you can give the mare her own time coming back."

Then he took the reins, and in another moment they were gone.

CHAPTER V.

At eight o'clock that night the sky was brilliantly lighted up, and the sound of many voices was borne on the night wind. The red flare came from the Syke; the mill was afire. Showers of sparks and sheets of flame were leaping and streaming into the sky. Men and women were hurrying to and fro, and the women's shrill cries mingled with the men's shouts. At intervals the brightness of the glare faded, and then a column of choking smoke poured out and was borne away on the wind. Dick, the miller, was there, with the scorching heat reddening his wrathful face. John Proudfoot had raised a ladder against the mill, and, hatchet in hand, was going to cut away the cross-trees; but the heat drove him back. The sharp snap of the flames told of timbers being ripped away.

"No use—it's gone," said the blacksmith, dragging the ladder behind him.

"I telt them afore what their damned smelting-house would do for me!" said the miller, striding about in his impotent rage.

Parson Christian was standing by the gate on the windward side of the mill-yard, with Laird Fisher beside him, looking on in silence at the leaping flames.

"The wind is from the south," he said, "and a spark of the hot refuse shot down the bank has been blown into the mill."

The mill was a wooden structure, and the fire held it like a serpent in its grip. People were coming and going from the darkness into the red glare, and out of the glare into the darkness. Among them was one stalwart figure that none noticed in the general confusion.

"Have you a tarpaulin?" said this man, addressing those about him.

"There's a big one on the stack at Coledale," answered another.

"Run for it!"

"It's of no use."

"Damme, run for it!"

The tone of authority was not to be ignored. In three minutes a huge tarpaulin was being dragged behind a dozen men.

"Lay hold of the ropes and let us dip it into the river," shouted the same voice above the prevailing clangor. It was done. Dripping wet, the tarpaulin was pulled into the mill-yard.

"Where's your ladder? Quick!"

The ladder was raised against the scorching wooden walls.

"Be ready to throw me the ropes," shouted the deep voice.

A firm step was set on the lowest rung. There was a crackle of glass, and then a cloud of smoke streamed out of a broken window. For an instant the bright glare was obscured. But it burst forth afresh, and leaped with great white tongues into the sky.

"The sheets are caught!" shouted the miller.

They were flying around with the wind. A line of flame seemed to be pursuing them.

"Who's the man on the ladder—dusta know?" cried John Proudfoot.

"I dunnot," answered the miller.

At that instant Hugh Ritson came up. The smoke was gone, and now a dark figure could be dimly seen high up on the mill-side. He seized the cross-trees with both hands and swung himself on to the raking roof.

"Now for the ropes!" he shouted.

The flames burst out again and illumined the whole sky; the dark mass of the fells could be seen far overhead, and the waters of the river in the bed of the valley glowed like amber. The stalwart figure stood out in the white light against the red glare, holding on to the cross-trees on the top of the mill, and with a wheel of crackling fire careering beside him.

There could be no doubt of his identity, with the light on his strong face and tawny hair.

"It's Paul Ritson!" shouted many a voice.

"Damme, the ropes—quick!"

The ropes were thrown and caught, and thrown again to the other side. Then the dripping tarpaulin was drawn over the mill until it covered the top and half the sides. The wheel burned out, and the iron axle came to the ground with a plunge.

The fire was conquered; the night sky grew black; the night wind became voiceless. Then the busy throng had time for talk.

"Where's Paul?" asked Parson Christian.

"Ay, where is he?" said the miller.

"He's a stunner, for sure—where is he?" said the blacksmith.

None knew. When the flames began to fade he was missed. He had gone—none knew where.

"Nine o'clock," said Parson Christian, turning his face toward home. "Sharp work, while it lasted, my lads!"

Then there was the sound of wheels, and Natt drove his trap to the gate of the mill-yard.

"You've just missed it, Natt," said John Proudfoot; "where have you been?"

"Driving the master to the train."

Hugh Ritson was standing by. Every one glanced from him to Natt.

"The train?—master? What do you mean? Who?"

"Who? Why, Master Paul," said Natt, with a curl of the lip. "I reckon it could scarce be Master Hugh."

"When? What train?" said Parson Christian.

"The eight o'clock to London."

"Eight o'clock? London?"

"Don't I speak plain?"

"And has he gone?"

"I's warrant he's gone."

Consternation sat on every face but Natt's.

CHAPTER VI.

Next day was Sunday, and after morning service a group of men gathered about the church porch to discuss the events of the night before. In the evening the parlor of the Flying Horse was full of dalespeople, and many a sapient theory was then and there put forth to account for the extraordinary coincidence of the presence of Paul Ritson at the fire and his alleged departure by the London train.

Hugh Ritson was not seen abroad that day. But early on Monday morning he hastened to the stable, called on Natt to saddle a horse, sprung on its back and galloped away toward the town.

The morning was bitterly cold, and the rider was buttoned up to the throat. The air was damp; a dense veil of vapor lay on the valley and hid half the fells; the wintery dawn, with its sunless sky, had not the strength to rend it asunder; the wind had veered to the north, and was now dank and icy. A snow-storm was coming.

The face of Hugh Ritson was wan and jaded. He leaned heavily forward in the saddle; the biting wind was in his eyes; he had a fixed look, and seemed not to see the people whom he passed on the road.

Dick o' the Syke was grubbing among the fallen wreck of the charred and dismantled mill. When Hugh rode past him he lifted his eyes and muttered an oath beneath his breath. Old Laird Fisher was trundling a wheelbarrow on the bank of the smelting-house. The headgear of the pit-shaft was working. As Hugh passed the smithy, John Proudfoot was standing, hammer in hand, by the side of a wheelless wagon upheld by poles. John was saying, "Wonder what sec a place Mister Paul slept a' Saturday neet—I reckon that wad settle all;" and a voice from inside the smithy answered: "Nowt of the sort, John; it's a fate, I tell, tha." The peddler's pony was standing by the hasp of the gate.

Never once lifting his eyes, with head bent and compressed lips, Hugh Ritson rode on in the teeth of the coming storm. There was another storm within that was uprooting every emotion of his soul. When he came to the vicarage he drew up sharply and rapped heavily on the gate. Brother

Peter came shambling out at the speed of six steps a minute.

"Mr. Christian at home?" asked Hugh.

"Don't know as he is," said Peter.

"Where is he?"

"Don't know as I've heard."

"Tell him I'll call as I come back, in two hours."

"Don't know as I'll see him."

"Then go and look for him!" shouted Hugh, impatiently bringing down the whip on the flank of the horse.

Brother Peter Ward turned about sulkily.

"Don't know as I will," he grumbled, and trudged back into the house.

Then Hugh Ritson rode on. A thin sleet began to fall, and it drove hard into his face. The roads were crisp, and the horse sometimes stumbled; but the rider pressed on.

In less than half an hour he was riding into the town. The people who were standing in groups in the market-place parted and made space for him. They hailed him with respectful salutations. He responded curtly or not at all. Notwithstanding his long ride, his face was still pale, and his lips were bloodless. He stopped at the court-yard leading to the front of the Pack Horse. Old Willie Calvert, the innkeeper, stood there, and touched his cap when Hugh approached him.

"My brother Paul slept here a few nights ago, I hear?" said Hugh.

"So he did," said the innkeeper.

"What night was it?"

"What night? Let me see—it were a week come Wednesday."

"Did you see him yourself?"

"Nay; I were lang abed."

"Who did—Mistress Calvert?"

"Ey—she did for sure—Janet" (calling up the court). "She'll tell ye all the ins and oots."

A comfortable-looking elderly body in a white cap and print apron came to the door.

"You saw my brother—Paul, you know—when he slept at your house last Wednesday night?"

"Yes, surely," said Janet.

"What did he say?"

"Nay, nowt. It was verra late—maybe twelve o'clock—and I was bolting up and had the cannel in my hand to get me to bed, and a rap came, and when I opened the door who should it be but Mister Paul. He said he wanted a bed, but he seem't to be in the doldrums and noways keen for a crack, so I ax't na questions, but just took him to the little green room over the snug and bid him good-night."

"And next morning—did you see him then?" said Hugh.

"No, but a morning when he paid for his bed for he had nowther bite nor sup in the house."

"Did he look changed?—anything different about him?"

"Nay, nowt but in low feckle someways, and maybe summat different dressed."

"How different? What did he wear that night?"

Pale as Hugh Ritson's face had been before, it was now white as a face in moonlight.

"Maybe a pepper and salt tweed coat, but I can't rightly call to mind at the minute."

Hugh's great eyes stared out of his head. His tongue cleaved to his mouth, and for the moment denied him speech.

"Thank you, Mistress Calvert. Here, Willie, my man, drink my health with the missis."

So saying, he tossed a silver coin to the innkeeper, wheeled about, and rode off.

"I can not mak' nowther head nor tail o' this," said the old man.

"Of what—the brass?" said Janet.

"Nay, but that's soond enough, for sure, auld lass."

"Then just thoo leave other folks's business to theirselves, and come thy ways in with thee. Thoo wert allus thrang a-meddlin'."

The innkeeper had gone indoors and drawn himself a draught of ale.

"I allus like to see the ins and oots o' things," he observed, with a twinkle in his eye, and the pot to his mouth.

"Mind as you're not ower keen at seein' the ins and oots o' that pewter."

"I'll be keerful, auld lass."

Hugh Ritson's horse went clattering over the stones of the streets until it came to the house of Mr. Bonnithorne. Then Hugh drew up sharply, jumped from the saddle, tied the reins to the loop in the gate-pier, and rang the bell. In another minute he was standing in the breakfast-room, which was made comfortable by a glowing fire. Mr. Bonnithorne, in dressing-gown and slippers, rose from his easy-chair with a look of surprise.

"Did you hear of the fire at the mill on Saturday night?" asked Hugh in a faltering voice.

Mr. Bonnithorne nodded his head.

"Very unlucky, very," said the lawyer. "The man will want recompense, and the law will support him."

"Tut!—a bagatelle!" said Hugh, with a gesture of impatience.

"Of course, if you say so—"

"You've heard nothing about Paul?"

Mr. Bonnithorne answered with a shake of his yellow head, and a look of inquiry.

Then Hugh told him of the man at the fire, and of Natt's story when he drove up in the trap. He spoke with visible embarrassment, and in a voice that could scarcely support itself. But the deep fear that had come over him had not yet taken hold of the lawyer. Mr. Bonnithorne listened with a bland smile of amused incredulity. Hugh stopped with a shudder.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, nervously.

"That Natt lied."

"As well say that the people at the fire lied."

"No; you yourself saw Paul there."

"Bonnithorne, like all keen-eyed men, you are short-sighted. I have something more to tell you. The people at the Pack Horse say that Paul slept at their house last Wednesday night. Now I know that he slept at home."

Mr. Bonnithorne smiled again.

"A mistake as to the night," he said; "what can be plainer?"

"Don't wriggle; look the facts in the face."

"Facts?—a coincidence in evidence—a common error."

"Would to God it were!" Hugh strode about the room in obvious perturbation, his eyes bent on the ground. "Bonnithorne, what is the place where the girl Mercy lives?"

"An inn at Hendon."

"Do they call it the Hawk and Heron?"

"They do. The old woman Drayton keeps it."

Hugh Ritson's step faltered. He listened with a look of stupid consternation.

"Did I never tell you that the peddler, Oglethorpe, said he saw Paul at the Hawk and Heron in Hendon?"

Mr. Bonnithorne dropped back into his seat without a word. Conviction was taking hold of him.

"What do the folks say?" he asked at length.

"Say? That it was a ghost, a wraith, twenty things—the idiots!"

"What do you say, Mr. Ritson?"

"That it was another man."

The lawyer remained sitting, his eyes fixed and vacant.

"What then? What if it is another man? Resemblances are common. We are all brothers. For example, there are numbers of persons like myself in the world. Odd, isn't it?"

"Very," said Hugh, with a hard laugh.

"And what if there exists a man resembling your half-brother, Paul, so closely that on three several occasions he has been mistaken for him by competent witnesses—what does it come to?"

Hugh paused.

"Come to. God knows! I want to find out. Who is this man? What is he? Where does he come from? What is his business here? Why, of all places on this wide earth, does he, of all men alive, haunt my house like a shadow?"

Hugh Ritson was still visibly perturbed.

"There's more in this matter than either of us knows," he said.

Mr. Bonnithorne watched him for a moment in silence.

"I think you draw a painful inference—what is it?" he asked.

"What?" repeated Hugh, and added, absently, "who can tell?"

Up and down the room he walked restlessly, his eyes bent on the floor, his face drawn down into lines. At length he stood and picked up the hat he had thrown on the couch.

"Bonnithorne," he said, "you and I thought we saw into the heart of a mystery. Heaven pity us for blind moles! I fear we saw nothing."

"Why—what—how so—when—" Mr. Bonnithorne stammered, and then stopped short.

Hugh had walked out of the room and out of the house. He leaped into the saddle and rode away.

The wind had risen yet higher; it blew an icy blast from behind him as he cantered home. Through the hazy atmosphere a cloud of dun, vaporish red could be seen trailing over the dim fells. It poised above the ball crown of the Eel Craggs like a huge supernatural bird with outstretched wings.

Hugh held the reins with half-frozen hands. He barely felt the biting cold. His soul was in a tumult, and he was driven on by fears that were all but insupportable. For months a thick veil had overspread his conscience, and now, in an instant, and by an accident, it was being rent asunder. He had lulled his soul to sleep. But no opiate of sophistry could keep the soul from waking. His soul was waking now. He began to suspect that he had been acting like a scoundrel.

At the vicarage he stopped, dismounted, and entered. Standing in the hall, he overheard voices in the kitchen. They were those of Brother Peter and little Jacob Berry, the tailor, who had been hired to sew by the day, and was seated on the dresser.

"I've heard of such sights afore," the little tailor was saying. "When auld Mother Langdale's son was killed at wrustlin' down Borrowdale way, and Mother Langdale was abed with rheumatis, she saw him come to the bed-head a-dripping wet with blood, as plain as plain could be, and in less nor an hour after they brought him home to the auld body on a shutter—they did, for sure."

"Shaf on sec stories! I don't know as some folks aren't as daft as Mother Langdale herself!" Peter muttered in reply.

Hugh Ritson beat the door heavily with his riding-whip.

"Parson Christian at home now?" he asked, when Peter opened it.

"Been and gone," said Peter.

"Did you tell him I meant to come back?"

"Don't know as I did."

Hugh's whip came down impatiently on his leggins.

"Do you know anything?" he asked. "Do you know that you are now talking to a gentleman?"

"Don't know as I do," mumbled Peter, backing in again.

"If Miss Greta is at home tell her I should be glad to speak with her—do you hear?" Peter disappeared.

Hugh was left alone in the hall. He waited some minutes, thinking that Peter was carrying his message. Presently he overheard that worthy reopening the discussion on Mother Langdale's sanity with little Jacob in the kitchen. The deep damnation he desired just then for Brother Peter was about to be indicated by another lusty rap on the kitchen door, when the door of the parlor opened, and Greta herself stood on the threshold with a smile and an outstretched hand.

"I thought it was your voice," she said, and led the way in.

"Your cordial welcome heaps coals of fire on my head, Greta. I cannot forget in what spirit we last talked and parted."

"Let us think no more about it," said Greta, and she drew a chair for him to the fire.

He remained standing, and as if benumbed by strong feeling.

"I have come to speak of it—to ask pardon for it—I was in the wrong," he said, falteringly.

She did not respond, but sat down with drooping eyes. He paused, and there was an ominous

silence.

"You don't know what I suffered, or what I suffer still. You are very happy. I am a miserable man. Greta, do you know what it is to love without being loved? How can you know? It is torture beyond the gift of words—misery beyond the relief of tears. It is not jealousy; that is no more than a vulgar kind of envy. It is a nameless, measureless torment."

He paused again. She did not speak. His voice grew tremulous.

"I'm not one of the fools who think that the souls that are created for each other must needs come together—that destiny draws them from the uttermost parts of the earth—that, trifle as they will with their best hopes, fate is stronger than they are, and true to the pole-star of ultimate happiness. I know the world too well to believe nonsense like that. I know that every day, every hour, men and women are casting themselves away—men on the wrong women, women on the wrong men—and that all this is a tangle that will never, never be undone."

He stepped up to where she sat and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Greta—permit me to say it—I loved you dearly. Would to Heaven I had not! My love was not of yesterday. It was you and I, I and you. That was the only true marriage possible to either of us from world's end to world's end. But Paul came between us; and when I saw you give yourself to the wrong man—"

Greta had risen to her feet.

"You say you come to ask pardon for what you said, but you really come to repeat it." So saying, she made a show of leaving the room.

Hugh stood awhile in silence. Then he threw off his faltering tone and drew himself up.

"I have come," he said, "to warn you before it is too late. I have come to say, while it is yet time, never marry my brother, for as sure as God is above us, you will repent it with unquenchable tears if you do."

Greta's eyes flashed with an expression of disdain.

"No," she said; "you have come to threaten me—a sure sign that you yourself have some secret cause for fear."

It was a home-thrust, and Hugh was hit.

"Greta, I repeat it, you are marrying the wrong man."

"What right have you to say so?"

"The right of one who could part you forever with a word."

Greta was sore perplexed. Like a true woman, she would have given half her fortune at that moment to probe this mystery. But her indignation got the better of her curiosity.

"It is false!" she said.

"It is true!" he answered. "I could speak the word that would part you wider than the poles asunder."

"Then I challenge you to speak it," she exclaimed.

They faced each other, pale, and with quivering lips.

"It is not my purpose. I have warned you," he said.

"You do not believe your own warning," she answered.

He winced, but said not a word.

"You have come to me with an idle threat, and fear is written on your own face."

He drew his breath sharply, and did not reply.

"Whatever it is, you do not believe it."

He was making for the door. He came back a step.

"Shall I speak the word?" he said. "Can you bear it?"

"Leave me," she said, "and carry your falsehood with you!"

He was gone in an instant. Then her anger cooled directly, and her woman's curiosity came back with a hundred-fold rebound.

"Gracious Heaven! what did he mean?" she thought, and the hot flush mounted to her eyes. She had half a mind to call him back. "Could it be true?" The tears were now rolling down her cheeks. "He has a secret power over Paul—what is it?" She ran to the door. "Hugh! Hugh!" He was gone. The galloping feet of his horse were heard faint in the distance. She went back into the house and sat down, and wept galling tears of pride and vexation.

CHAPTER VII.

At midday Parson Christian came home from the fields to dinner.

"I've been away leading turf," he said, "from Cole Moss, for Robin Atkinson, to pay him for loaning me his gray mare on Saturday when I fetched my grain to the mill. Happen most of it is burned up, though—but that's no fault of Robin's. So now we neither owe t'other anything, and we're straight from the beginning of the world."

Greta was bustling about with the very efficient hindrance of Brother Peter's assistance, to get the dinner on the table. She smiled, and sometimes tossed her fair head mightily jauntily, and laughed out loud with a touch of rattling gayety. But there were rims of red around her bleared eyes, and her voice, beneath all its noisy merriment, had a tearful lilt.

The parson observed this, but said nothing about it.

"Coming round by Harras End I met John Lowthwaite," he said, "and John would have me go into his house and return thanks for his wife's recovery from childbed. So I went in, and warmed me, and drank a pot of ale with them, and assisted the wife and family to return praise to God."

Dinner was laid, little Jacob Berry came in from the kitchen, and all sat down together—Parson Christian and Greta, Brother Peter, and the tailor hired to sew.

"Dear me! I'm Jack-of-all-trades, Greta, my lass," said the parson, after grace. "Old Jonathan Truesdale came running after me at the bridge, to say that Mistress Truesdale wanted me to go and taste the medicine that the doctor sent her from Keswick, and see if it hadn't opium in it, because it made her sleep. I sent word that I had business to take me the other way, but would send Miss Greta if she would go. Jonathan said his missus would be very thankful, for she was lonesome at whiles."

"I'll go, and welcome," said Greta. The rims about her eyes were growing deeper; the parson chattered on, to banish the tempest of tears that he saw was coming.

"Well, Peter, and how did the brethren at the meeting house like the discourse yesterday afternoon?"

"Don't know as they thought you were varra soond on the point of 'lection," muttered Peter from the inside of his bowl of soup.

"Well, you're right homely folk down there, and I'd have no fault to find if you were not a little too disputatious. What's the use of wrangling over doctrine? Right or wrong, it will matter very little to any of us in a hundred years. We're on our way to heaven, and, please God, there'll be no doctrine there."

Greta could not eat. She had no appetite for food. Another appetite—the appetite of curiosity—was eating at her heart. She laid down her knife. The parson could hide his concern no longer.

"Dear me, my lass, you and that braw lad of yours are like David and Jonathan, and" (with a stern wag of his white head) "I'm not so sure that I won't turn myself into Saul and fling my javelin at him for envy."

The parson certainly did not look too revengeful at that moment, with the mist gathering in his eyes.

"Talking of Saul," said little Jacob, "there's that story of the witch of Endor, and Saul seein' Sam'el when he was dead. I reckon as that's no'but another version of what happened at the fire a' Saturday neet."

Parson Christian glanced furtively at Greta's drooping head, and then meeting the tailor's eye, he put his finger to his lips.

When dinner was over the parson lifted from the shelf the huge tome, "made to view his life and actions in." He drew his chair to the fire and began to turn over the earliest leaves. Greta had thrown on her cloak and was fixing her hat.

"I'm going to see poor Mrs. Truesdale," she said. Then, coming behind the old man, and glancing over his shoulder at the book on his knees, "What are you looking for?" she asked, and smiled; "a prescription for envy?"

The parson shook his old head gravely. "You must know I met young Mr. Ritson this morning?"

"Hugh?"

"Yes; he was riding home from his iron pits, but stopped and asked me if I could tell him when his father, who is dead and gone, poor fellow, came first to these parts, and how old his brother Paul might be at that time."

"Why did he ask?" said Greta, eagerly.

"Nay, I scarce can say. I told him I could not tell without looking at my book. Let me see; it must

be a matter of seven-and-twenty years ago. How old is your sweetheart, Greta?"

"Paul is twenty-eight."

"And this is the year seventy-five. Twenty-eight from seventy-five—that's forty-seven. Paul was a wee toddle, I remember. I'll look for forty-seven. Eighteen forty-four, forty-five, forty-six—here it is—forty-seven. And, bless me, the very page! Look, here we have it."

Then the parson read this entry in his diary:

"Nov. 18th.—Being promised to preach at John Skerton's church, at Ravenglass, I got ready to go thither. I took my mare and set forward and went direct to Thomas Storsacre's, where I was to lodge. It rained sore all the day, and I was wet, and took off my coat and let it run an hour. Then we supped and sat discoursing by the fire till near ten o'clock of one thing and another, and, among the rest, of one Allan Ritson, who had newly settled at Ravenglass. Thomas said Allan was fresh from Scotland, being Scottish born, and that his wife was Irish, and that they had a child, called Paul, only a few months old, and not yet walking.'

"The very thing! Wait, here's something more:

"Nov. 19th (Lord's day).—Went to church, and many people came to worship. Parson Skerton read the prayers and Thomas Storsacre the lessons. I prayed, and preached from Matt. vii. 23, 24; then ceased, and dismissed the people. After service, Thomas brought his new neighbor, Allan Ritson, who asked me to visit him that day and dine. So I went with him, and saw his wife and child—an infant in arms. Mrs. Ritson is a woman of some education and much piety. Her husband is a rough, blunt dalesman, of the good old type.'

"The very thing," the parson repeated, and he put a pipe spill in the page.

"I wonder why he wants it?" said Greta.

She left Parson Christian still looking at his book, and went out on her errand.

She was more than an hour gone, and when she returned, the winter's day had all but closed in. Only a little yellow light still lingered in the sky.

"Greta, they have sent for you from the Ghyll," said the parson, as she entered. "Mrs. Ritson wants to see you to-night. Natt, the stableman, came with the trap. But he has gone again."

"I will follow him at once," said Greta.

"Nay, my lass; the day is not young enough," said the parson.

"I was never afraid of the dark," said Greta.

She took down a lantern and lighted it, drew her cloak more closely about her, and prepared to go.

"Then take this paper to young Mr. Hugh. It's a copy of what is written in my book."

Greta hesitated. But she could not tell Parson Christian what had passed between Hugh and herself. She took the paper and hastened away.

The parson sat for a while before the fire. Then he rose, walked to the door and opened it. "Heaven bless the girl, it's snowing! What a night for the child to be abroad!" He returned in disturbed humor to the fireside.

CHAPTER VIII.

When Greta set out, the atmosphere was yellow and vaporish. The sky grew rapidly darker. As she reached the village, thin flakes of snow began to fall. She could feel them driven by the wind against her face, and when she came by the inn she could see them in the dull, yellow light.

The laborers were leaving the fields, and, with their breakfast cans swung on their fork handles, they were drifting in twos and threes into the Flying Horse. It looked warm and snug within.

She passed the little cluster of old houses, and scarcely saw them in the deepening night. As she went by the mill she could just descry its ruined roof standing out like a dark pyramid against the dun sky. The snow fell faster. It was now lying thick on her cloak in front, and on the windward face of the lantern in her hand.

The road was heavier than before, and she had still fully a quarter of a mile to go. She hastened on. Passing the little church—Parson Christian's church—she met Job Sheepshanks, the letter-cutter, coming out of the shed in the church-yard. "Bad night for a young lady to be from home, begging your pardon, miss," said Job, and went on toward the village, his bunch of chisels clanking over his shoulder.

The wind soughed in the leafless trees that grew around the old roofless barn at the corner of the road that led to the fells. The gurgle of a half-frozen waterfall came from the distant Ghyll. Save for these sounds and the dull thud of Greta's step on the snow-covered road, all around was still.

How fast the snow fell now. Yet Greta heeded it not at all. Her mind was busy with many thoughts. She was thinking of Paul as Parson Christian's great book had pictured him—Paul as a child, a little, darling babe, not yet able to walk. Could it be possible that Paul, her Paul, had once been that? Of course, to think like this was foolishness. Every one must have been young at some time. Only it seemed so strange. It was a sort of mystery.

Then she thought of Paul the man—Paul as he had been, gay and heartsome; Paul as he was, harassed by many cares. She thought of her love for him—of his love for her—of how they were soon, very soon, to join hands and face the unknown future in an unknown land. She had promised. Yes, and she would go.

She thought of Paul in London, and how soon he would be back in Newlands. This was Monday, and Paul had promised to come home on Wednesday. Only two days more! Yet how long it would be, after all!

Greta had reached the lonnin that went up to the Ghyll. She would soon be there. How thick the trees were in the lane! They shut out the last glimmer of light from the sky. The lantern burned yellow amidst the snow that lay on it like a crust.

Then Greta thought of Mrs. Ritson. It was strange that Paul's mother had sent for her. They were friends, but there had never been much intimacy between them. Mrs. Ritson was a grave and earnest woman, a saintly soul, and Greta's lightsome spirit had always felt rebuked in her presence. Paul loved his mother, and she herself must needs love as well as reverence the mother of Paul. It was Paul first and Paul last. Paul was the center of her world. She was a woman, and love was her whole existence.

Here in the lonnin she was in pitch darkness. She stumbled once into the dike; then laughed and went on again. At one moment she thought she heard a noise not far away. She stood and listened. No, it was nothing. Only a hundred yards more! Bravely!

Then, by a swift rebound—she knew not why—her mind went back to the events of the morning. She thought of Hugh Ritson and his mysterious threat. What did he mean? What harm could he do them? Oh! that she had been calmer, and asked. Her heart fluttered. It flashed upon her that perhaps it was he and not his mother who had sent for her to-night. Her pulse quickened.

At that instant the curlew shot over her head with its deep, mournful cry. At the same moment she heard a step approaching her. It came on quickly. She stopped. "Who is it?" she asked.

There was no answer. The sound of the footstep ceased.

"Who are you?" she called again.

Then with heavy thuds in the darkness and on the snow, some one approached. She trembled from head to foot, but advanced a step and stopped again. The footstep was passing her. She brought the light of the lantern full on the retreating figure.

It was the figure of a man. Going by hastily, he turned his head over his shoulder and she saw his face. It was the face of Paul, colorless, agitated, with flashing eyes.

Every drop of Greta's blood stood still.

"Paul!" she cried, thrilled and immovable.

There was an instant of unconsciousness. The earth reeled beneath her. When she came to herself she was standing alone in the lane, the lantern half buried in the snow at her feet.

Had it been all a dream?

She was but twenty yards from the house. The door of the porch stood open. Chilled with fear to the heart's core, she rushed in. No one was in the hall. Not a sound, but the faint mutter of voices in the kitchen.

She ran through the passage and threw open the kitchen door. The farm laborers were at supper, chatting, laughing, eating, smoking.

"Didn't you hear somebody in the house?" she cried.

The men got up and turned about. There was dead silence in a moment.

"When?"

"Now."

"No. What body?"

She flew off without waiting to explain. The kitchen was too far away. Hugh Ritson's room opened from the first landing of the stairs. The stairs went up almost from the porch. Darting up, she threw open the door of Hugh's room. Hugh was sitting at the table, examining papers by a lamp.

"Have you seen Paul?" she cried, in an agonized whisper, and with a panic-stricken look.

Hugh dropped the papers and rose stiffly to his feet.

"Great God! Where?"

"Here—this moment!"

Their eyes met. He did not answer. He was very pale. Had she dreamed? She looked down at the snow-crueted lantern in her hand. It must have been all a dream.

She stepped back on to the landing, and stood in silence. The serving people had come out of the kitchen, and, huddled together, they looked at her in amazement. Then a low moan reached her ear. She ran to Mrs. Ritson's room. The door to it stood wide open; a fire burned in the grate, a candle on the table.

Outstretched on the floor lay the mother of Paul, cold, still, and insensible.

When Mrs. Ritson regained consciousness she looked about with the empty gaze of one who is bending bewildered eyes on vacancy. Greta was kneeling beside her, and she helped to lift her into the bed. Mrs. Ritson did not speak, but she grasped Greta's hand with a nervous twitch, when the girl whispered something in her ear. From time to time she trembled visibly, and glanced with a startled look toward the door. But not a word did she utter.

Thus hour after hour wore on, and the night was growing apace. A painful silence brooded over the house. Only in the kitchen was any voice raised above a whisper. There the servants quaked and clucked—every tongue among them let loose in conjecture and the accents of surprise.

Hugh Ritson passed again and again from his own room to his mother's. He looked down from time to time at the weary, pale, and quiet face. But he said little. He put no questions.

Greta sat beside the bed, only less weary, only less pale and quiet, only less disturbed by horrible imaginings than the sufferer who lay upon it. Toward midnight Hugh came to say that Peter had been sent for her from the vicarage. Greta rose, put on her cloak and hat, kissed the silent lips, and followed Hugh out of the room.

As they passed down the stairs Greta stopped at the door of Hugh Ritson's room, and beckoned him to enter it with her. They went in together, and she closed the door.

"Now tell me," she said, "what this means."

Hugh's face was very pale. His eyes had a wandering look, and when he spoke his voice was muffled. But by an effort of his unquenchable energy he shook off this show of concern.

"It means," he said, "that you have been the victim of a delusion."

Greta's pale face flushed. "And your mother—has she also been the victim of a delusion?"

Hugh shrugged his shoulders, showed his teeth slightly, but made no reply.

"Answer me—tell me the truth—be frank for once—tell me, can you explain this mystery?"

"If I could explain it, how would it be a mystery?"

Greta felt the blood tingle to her finger-tips.

"Do you believe I have told you the truth?" she asked.

"I am sure you have."

"Do you believe I saw Paul in the lane?"

"I am sure you think you saw him."

"Do you know for certain that he went away?"

Hugh nodded his head.

"Are you sure he has not got back?"

"Quite sure."

"In short, you think what I saw was merely the result of woman's hysteria?"

Hugh smiled through his white lips, and his staring eyes assumed a momentary look of amused composure. He stepped to the table and fumbled some papers.

This reminded Greta of the paper the parson had asked her to deliver. "I ought to have given you this before," she said. "Mr. Christian sent it."

He took it without much apparent interest, put it on the table unread, and went to the door with Greta.

The trap was standing in the court-yard, with Natt in the driver's seat, and Brother Peter in the seat behind. The snow had ceased to fall, but it lay several inches deep on the ground. There was the snow's dumb silence on the earth and in the air.

Hugh helped Greta to her place, and then lifted the lamp from the trap, and looked on the ground a few yards ahead of the horse. "There are no footprints in the snow," he said, with a poor pretence at a smile—"none, at least, that go from the house."

Greta herself had begun to doubt. She lacked presence of mind to ask if there were any footprints at all except Peter's. The thing was done and gone. It all happened three hours ago, and it was easy to suspect the evidence of the senses.

Hugh returned the lamp to its loop. "Did you scream," he asked, "when you saw—when you saw—it?"

Greta was beginning to feel ashamed. "I might have done. I can not positively say—"

"Ah, that explains everything. No doubt mother heard you and was frightened. I see it all now. Natt, drive on—cold journey—good-night."

Greta felt her face burn in the darkness. Before she had time or impulse to reply, they were rolling away toward home.

At intervals her ear caught the sound of suppressed titters from the driver's seat. Natt was chuckling to himself with great apparent satisfaction. Since the fire at the mill he had been putting two and two together, and he was now perfectly confident as to the accuracy of his computation. When folks said that Paul had been at the fire he laughed derisively, because he knew that an hour before he had left him at the station. But an idea works in a brain like Natt's pretty much as the hop ferments. When it goes to the bottom it leaves froth and bubbles at the top. Natt knew that there was some grave quarrel between the brothers. He also knew that there were two ways to the station and two ways back to Newlands—one through the town, the other under Latrigger. Mr. Paul might have his own reasons for pretending to go to London, and also his own reasons for not going. Natt had left him stepping into the station at the town entrance. But what was to prevent him from going out again at the entrance from Latrigger? Of course that was what he had done. And he had never been out of the county. Deary me, how blind folks were, to be sure! Thus Natt's wise head chuckled and clucked.

At one moment Natt twisted his sapient and facetious noddle over his shoulder to where Brother Peter sat huddled into a hump and in gloomy silence. "Mercy me, Peter!" he cried, in an affrighted whisper, and with a mighty tragical start, "and is that thee? Dusta know I thowt it were thy ghost?"

"Don't know as it's not—dragging a body frae bed a cold neet like this," mumbled Peter, numbed up to his tongue, but still warm enough there.

CHAPTER IX.

Hugh Ritson was content that Greta should think she had been the victim of a delusion. He was not unwilling that she should be tortured by suggestions of the supernatural. If she concluded that Paul had deceived her as to his departure from Newlands, he would not be unlikely to foster the delusion. The one thing of all others which Hugh Ritson was anxious to prevent was that Greta should be led to draw the purely matter-of-fact inference that when she thought she saw Paul she had really seen another man.

But that was his own conviction. He was now sure beyond the hope of doubt that there was a man alive who resembled Paul Ritson so closely that he had thrice before, and now once again, been mistaken for him by unsuspecting persons. That other man was to be the living power in his own life, in his brother's life, in his mother's life, in Greta's life. Who was he?

Left alone in the court-yard when the trap drove away, Hugh Ritson shuddered and looked round. He had laughed with the easy grace of a man no longer puzzled as he bid Greta good-night, but suspense was gnawing at his heart. He returned hastily to his room, sat down at the table, picked up the paper which Parson Christian had sent him, and read it with eager eyes.

He read it and reread it; he seemed to devour it line by line, word by word. When he would have set it down his fingers so trembled that he let it fall, and he rose from his chair with rigid limbs.

What he had dreaded he now knew for certainty. He had stumbled into an empty grave. He opened a drawer and took out three copies of certificates that Mr. Bonnithorne had brought him. Selecting the earliest of these in order of date, he set it side by side with the copy of the extract from Parson Christian's diary.

By the one—Paul, the son of Grace Ormerod, by her husband Robert Lowther, was born August 14, 1845.

By the other—Paul, the reputed son of Grace Ormerod by her husband, Allan Ritson, was an infant still in arms on November 19, 1847.

Paul Ritson could not be Paul Lowther.

Paul Ritson could not be the half-brother of Greta Lowther.

Hugh Ritson fell back as one who had been dealt a blow. For months he had been idly hatching an addled villainy. The revenge that he had promised himself for spurned and outraged love—the revenge that he had named retribution—was but an impotent mockery.

For an hour he strode up and down the room with flushed face and limbs that shook beneath him. Natt came home from the vicarage, put in his horse, and turned into the kitchen—now long deserted for the night. He heard the restless footstep backward and forward, and began to wonder if anything further had gone wrong. At last he ventured upstairs, opened noiselessly the door, and found his master with a face aflame and a look of frenzy. But the curious young rascal with the sleepy eyes had not time to proffer his disinterested services before he was hunted out with an oath. He returned to the kitchen with a settled conviction that somewhere in that mysterious chamber his master kept a capacious cupboard for strong drink.

Like master, like man: Natt brewed himself an ample pint of hot ale, pulled off his great boots, and drew up to warm himself before the remains of a huge fire.

Hugh Ritson's bedroom opened off his sitting-room. He went to bed; he tried to sleep, but no sleep came near him; he tossed about for an hour, rose, walked the room again, then went to bed once more.

He was feeling the first pangs of honest remorse. A worse man would have accommodated himself more speedily to the altered conditions when he found that he had pursued a phantasm. To do this erring man justice, he writhed under it. A better man would have fled from it. If, at the outset, if when the first step in the descent had been taken, he had seen clearly that villainy lay that way, he would not have gone further. But now he had gone too far. To go on were as easy as to go back; and go on he must.

While he honestly believed that Greta was half-sister to the man known to the world as Paul Ritson and his brother, he could have stood aside and witnessed without flinching the ceremony that was to hold them forever together and apart. Then without remorse he could have come down and separated them, and seen that woman die of heart's hunger who had starved to death the great love he bore her. There would have been a stern retribution in that, and the voice of nature would have whispered him that he did well.

But when it was no longer possible to believe that Greta and Paul were anything to each other, the power of sophistry collapsed, and retribution sunk to revenge.

He might go on, but there could be no self-deception. The blind earthworms of malice might delude themselves if they liked, but he could see, and he must face the truth. If ever he did what he had proposed to do, then he was a scoundrel, and a conscious scoundrel!

Hugh Ritson leaped out of his bed. The perspiration rolled in big beads from his forehead. His tongue grew thick and stiff in his mouth. The great veins in his neck swelled.

Without knowing whither he went, he walked out of his own into his mother's room. A candle still burned on the table. The fire had smoldered out. A servant-maid sat by the bedside with head aslant, sleeping the innocent sleep. He approached the bed. His mother was breathing softly. She had fallen into a doze; the pale face was very quiet; the weary look of the worn cheeks was smoothed out; the absent eyes were lightly closed. Closed, too, on the rough world was the poor soul that was vexed by it.

Hugh Ritson was touched. Somewhere deep down in that frozen nature the angel of love troubled the still waters.

Bending his head, he would have touched the cold forehead with his feverish lips. But he drew back. No, no, no! Tenderness was not for him. The good God gave it to some as manna from heaven. But here and there a man, stretched on the rack of life, had not the drop of water that would cool his tongue.

With stealthy steps, as of one who had violated the chamber of chastity, Hugh Ritson crept back to his own room. He took brandy from a cupboard and drank a glass of it. Then he lay down and composed himself afresh to sleep. Thoughts of Greta came back to him. Even his love for her was without tenderness. It was a fiery passion. It made him weep, nevertheless. Galling tears, hot, bitter, smarting tears, rolled from his eyes. And down in that deep and hidden well of feeling, where he, too, was a man like other men, Hugh Ritson's strong heart bled. He would have thought that love like his must have subdued the whole world to its will; that when a woman could reject it the very stones must cry out. Pshaw!

Would sleep never come? He leaped up, and laughed mockingly, drank another glass of brandy, and laughed again. His door was open, and the hollow voice echoed through the house.

He put on a dressing-gown, took his lamp in his hand, and walked down-stairs and into the hall. The wind had risen. It moaned around the house, then licked it with hissing tongues. Hugh Ritson walked to the ingle, where no fire burned. There he stood, scarcely knowing why. The lamp in his hand cast its reflection into the mirror on the wall. Behind it was a flushed face, haggard, with hollow eyes and parted lips.

The sight recalled another scene. He stepped into the little room at the back. It was in that room his father died. Now it was empty; a bare mattress, a chair, a table—no more.

Hugh Ritson lifted the lamp above his head and looked down. He was enacting the whole terrible tragedy afresh. He crept noiselessly to the door, opened it slightly, and looked cautiously out. Then, leaving it ajar, he stood behind it with bent head and inclining ear. His face wore a ghastly smile.

The wind souged and wept without.

Hugh Ritson threw the door open and stepped back into the hall. There he stood some minutes with eyes riveted on one spot. Then he hurried away to his room. As he went up the stairs he laughed again.

Back at his bedside he poured himself another glass of brandy, and once more lay down to sleep. He certainly slept this time, and his sleep was deep.

Natt's dreamy ear heard a voice in the hall. He had drunk his hot ale, and from the same potent cause as his master, he also had slept, but with somewhat less struggle. Awakened in his chair by the unaccustomed sound, he stole on tiptoe to the kitchen door. He was in time to see from behind the figure of a man ascending the stairs carrying a lamp before him. Natt's eyes were a shade hazy at the moment, but he was cock-sure of what he saw. Of course it was Mister Paul, sneaking off to bed after more "straitforrad" folk had got into their nightcaps and their second sleep. That was where Natt soon put himself.

When all was still in that troubled house, the moon's white face peered through a rack of flying cloud and looked in at the dark windows.

CHAPTER X.

Next morning, Tuesday morning, Hugh Ritson found this letter on his table:

"Dearest,—I do not know what is happening to me, but my eyes get worse and worse. To-day and yesterday I have not opened them. Oh, dear, I think I am losing my sight; and I have had such a fearful fright. The day after I wrote to you, Mrs. Drayton's son came home, and I saw him. Oh, I thought it was your brother Paul, and his name is Paul, too, but I think now it must be my eyes—they were very bad, and perhaps I did not see plain. He asked me questions, and went away next morning. Do not be long writing, I am, oh, so very lonely. When are you coming to me? Write soon. Your loving, Mercy."

Hugh Ritson had risen in a calmer mood. He was prepared for a disclosure like this. Last night he had been overwhelmed by the discovery that Paul Ritson was not the son of Robert Lowther. With the coming of daylight a sterner spirit of inquiry came upon him. The question that now agitated him was the identity of the man who had been mistaken for Paul.

After Mercy's letter the mystery was in a measure dispelled. There could hardly be the shadow of a doubt that the man who had slept at the Pack Horse—the man who had been seen by many persons at the fire—the man who Greta had encountered in the lane—was one and the same with the man whom Mercy knew for Paul Drayton, the innkeeper at Hendon.

But so much light on one small spot only made the surrounding gloom more dark. Far more important than any question of who this man was by repute was the other question of why he was there. Wherefore had he come? Why did he not come openly? What hidden reason had he for moving like a shadow where he knew no one and was known of none?

Hugh thought again of the circumstance of his mother's strange seizure. Last night he had formulated his theory respecting it. And it was simple enough. The second man, whoever he was, had, for whatever reason, come to the house, and, failing to attract attention in the hall, had wandered aimlessly upstairs to the first room in which he heard a noise. That room happened to be his mother's, and when the stranger, with the fatal resemblance to her absent son, presented himself before her in that strange way, at that strange hour, in that strange place, the fear had leaped to her heart that it was his wraith warning her of his death, and she had fainted and fallen.

The theory had its serious loop-holes for incredulity, but Hugh Ritson minded them not at all. Another and a graver issue tortured him.

But this morning, by the light of Mercy's letter, his view was clearer. If the man who resembled Paul had come secretly to Newlands, he must have had his reasons for not declaring himself. If he had wandered when none was near into Mrs. Ritson's room, it must have been because he had a purpose there. And his mother's seizure might not have been due to purely superstitious fears, or her silence to shattered nerves.

There was one thing to do, and that was to get at the heart of this mystery. Whoever he was, this second man was to be the living influence in all their lives.

Thus far, one thing only was plain—that Paul Ritson was not the half-brother of Greta.

Hugh determined to travel south forthwith. If the other man was still beating about Newlands, so much the better. Hugh would be able to see the old woman, his mother, and talk with her undisturbed by the suspicions of a cunning man.

Hugh spent most of that day in his office at the pit-head, settling up such business as could not await his return. On Wednesday morning early he dispatched Natt on foot with a letter to Mr.

Bonnithorne, explaining succinctly, but with shrewd reservations, the recent turn of events. Then he stepped for a moment into his mother's room.

Mrs. Ritson had risen, and was sitting by the fire writing. Hugh observed, as she rose, that there were tears in her eyes, and that the paper beneath her pen was stained with great drops that had fallen as she wrote. A woman was busy on her knees on the floor sorting linen into a trunk. This garrulous body, old Dinah Wilson, was talking as Hugh entered.

"It caps all—you niver heard sec feckless wark," she was saying. "And Reuben threept me down, too. There he was in the peat loft when I went for the peats, and he had it all as fine as clerk after passon. 'It was Master Paul at the fire, certain sure,' he says, ower and ower again. 'What, man, get away wi' thy botheration—Mister Paul was off to London!' I says. 'Go and see if tha can leet on a straight waistcoat any spot,' I says. But he threept and he threept. 'It was Master Paul or his own birth brother,' he says."

"Hush, Dinah!" said Mrs. Ritson.

Hugh told his mother, in a quiet voice, that business was taking him away. Then he turned about and said "Good-day" without emotion.

She held out her hand to him and looked him tenderly in the eyes.

"Is this our parting?" she said, and then leaned forward and touched his cheek with her lips.

He seemed surprised, and turned pale; but he went out calmly and without speaking. In half an hour he was walking rapidly over the snow-crustrated road to the station.

CHAPTER XI.

When Paul parted from Natt at the station on Saturday night, he had told the stableman to meet him with the trap at the same spot and at the same hour on Wednesday. Since receiving these instructions, however, Natt had, as we have seen, arrived at conclusions of his own respecting certain events. The futility of doing as he had been bidden began to present itself to his mind with peculiar force. What was the good of going to the station for a man who was not coming by the train? What was the use of pretending to bring home a person who had never been away? These and other equivocal problems defied solution when Natt essayed them.

He revolved the situation fully on his way home from Mr. Bonnithorne's, and decided that to go to the station that night at eight o'clock would be only a fine way of making a fool of a body. But when he reached the stable, and sat down to smoke, and saw the hour approaching, his instinct began to act automatically, and in sheer defiance of the thing he called his reason. In short, Natt pulled off his coat and proceeded to harness the mare.

Then it was that, relieved of the weight of abstract questions, he made two grave discoveries. The first was that the horse bore marks of having been driven in his absence; the next, that the harness was not hanging precisely on those hooks where he had last placed it. And when he drew out the trap he saw that the tires of the wheels were still crustrated with unmelted snow.

These concrete issues finally banished the discussion of general principles. Natt had not entirely accounted for the strange circumstances when he jumped into his seat and drove away. But the old idea of Paul's dubious conduct was still fermenting; the froth and bubbles were still rising.

Natt had not gone half-way to the station when he almost leaped out of the trap at the sudden advent of an original thought: The trap had been driven out before! He had not covered a mile more before that thought had annexed another: And along this road, too! After this the sequence of ideas was swift. In less than half a league, Natt had realized that Paul Ritson himself had driven the mare to the station in order that he might be there to come home at eight o'clock, and thus complete the deception which he had practiced on gullible and slow-witted persons. But in his satisfaction at this explanation Natt overlooked the trifling difficulty of how the trap had been got home again.

Driving up into the station, he was greeted by a flyman waiting for hire.

"Bad on the laal mare, ma man—two sec journeys in ya half day. I reckon tha knows it's been here afore?"

Natt's face broadened into a superior smile, which seemed to desire his gratuitous informant to tell him something he didn't know. This unspoken request was about to be gratified.

"Dusta ken who came down last?"

Natt waved his hand in silent censure of so much unnecessary zeal, and passed on.

Promptly as the clock struck eight, the London train drew up at the station, and a minute afterward Paul Ritson came out. "Here he be, of course," thought Natt.

Paul was in great spirits. His face wore the brightest smile, and his voice had the cheeriest ring. His clothes, seen by the lamp, looked a little draggled and dirty.

He swung himself into the trap, took the driver's seat and the reins and rattled along with cheerful talk.

It was months since Natt had witnessed such an access of geniality on Paul's part.

"Too good to be true," thought Natt, who, in his own wise way, was silently making a study in histrionics.

"Anything fresh while I've been away?" asked Paul.

"Humph!" said Natt.

"Nothing new? Nobody's cow calved? The mare not lost her hindmost shoe—nothing?" asked Paul, and laughed.

"I know no more nor you," said Natt, in a grumpy tone.

Paul looked at him and laughed again. Not to-night were good spirits like his to be quenched by a servant's ill humor.

They drove some distance without speaking, the silence being broken only by Paul's coaxing appeals to the old mare to quicken the pace that was carrying him to somebody who was waiting at the vicarage.

Natt recovered from his natural dudgeon at an attempt to play upon him, and began to feel the humor of the situation. It was good sport, after all—this little trick of Master Paul. And the best of it was that nobody saw through it but Natt himself. Natt began to titter and look up significantly out of his sleepy eyes into Paul's face. Paul glanced back with a look of bewilderment; but of course that was only a part of the game.

"Keep it up," thought Natt; "how we are doing 'em!"

The landscape lying south was a valley, with a double gable of mountains at the top; the mill stood on a knoll two miles further up, and on any night but the darkest its black outlines could be dimly seen against the sky that crept down between these fells. There was no moon visible, but the moon's light was behind the clouds.

"What has happened to the mill?" said Paul, catching sight of the dismantled mass in the distance.

"Nowt since Saturday neet, as I've heard on," said Natt.

"And what happened then?"

"Oh, nowt, nowt—I's warrant not," said Natt, with a gurgling titter.

Paul looked perplexed. Natt had been drinking, nothing surer.

"Why, lad, the wheel is gone—look!"

"I'll not say but it is. We know all about that, we do!"

Paul glanced down again. Liquor got into the brains of some folk, but it had gone into Natt's face. With what an idiotic grin he was looking into one's eyes!

But Paul's heart was full of happiness. His bosom's lord sat lightly on its throne. Natt's face was excruciatingly ridiculous, and Paul laughed at the sight of it. Then Natt laughed, and they both laughed together, each at, neither with, the other. "I don't know nothing, I don't. Oh, no!" chuckled Natt, inwardly. Once he made the remark aloud.

When they came to the vicarage Paul drew up, threw the reins to Natt, and got down.

"Don't wait for me," he said; "drive home."

Natt drove as far homeward as the Flying Horse, and then turned in there for a crack, leaving the trap in the road. Before he left the inn, a discovery yet more astounding, if somewhat less amusing, was made by his swift and subtle intellect.

CHAPTER XII.

An itinerant mendicant preacher had walked through the valley that day, and when night fell in he had gravitated to the parson's door.

"Seeing the sun low," he said, "and knowing it a long way to Keswick, and I not being able to abide the night air, but sure to catch a cold, I came straight to your house."

Like other guests of high degree, the shoeless being made a virtue of accepting hospitality.

"Come in, brother, and welcome," said Parson Christian; and that night the wayfarer lodged at the vicarage. He was a poor, straggle-headed creature, with a broken brain as well as a broken purse, but he had the warm seat at the ingle.

Greta heard Paul's step on the path and ran to meet him.

"Paul, Paul! thank God you are here at last!"

Her manner was warm and impulsive to seriousness, but Paul was in no humor to make nice distinctions.

Parson Christian rose from his seat before the fire and shook hands with feeling and gravity.

"Right glad to see you, good lad," he said. "This is Brother Jolly," he added, "a fellow-soldier of the cross, who has suffered sore for neglecting Solomon's injunction against suretyship."

Paul took the flaccid hand of the fellow-soldier, and then drew Greta aside into the recess of the square window.

"It's all settled," he said, eagerly; "I saw my father's old friend, and agreed to go out to his sheep runs as steward, with the prospect of farming for myself in two years' time. I have been busy, I can tell you. Only listen. On Monday I saw the good old gentleman—he's living in London now, and he won't go back to Victoria, he tells me—wants to lay his bones where they were got, he says—funny old dog, rather—says he remembers my father when he wasn't as solemn as a parish clerk on Ash Wednesday. Well, on Monday I saw the old fellow, and settled terms and things—liberal old chap, too, if he has got a hawk beak—regular Shylock, you know. Well—where was I? Oh, of course—then on Tuesday I took out our berths—yours, mother's, and mine—the ship is called the 'Ballarat'—queer name—a fine sea-boat, though—she leaves the London docks next Wednesday—"

"Next Wednesday?" said Greta, absently, and with little interest in her tone.

"Yes, a week to-day—sails at three prompt—pilot comes on at a quarter to—everybody aboard at twelve. But it didn't take quite four-and-twenty hours to book the berths, and the rest of the day I spent at a lawyer's office. Can't stomach that breed, somehow; they seem to get all the clover—maybe it's because they're a drift of sheep with tin cans about their necks, and can never take a nibble without all the world knowing. Ha! ha! I wish I'd thought of that when I saw old Shylock."

Paul was rattling on with a glib tongue, and eyes that danced to the blithe step of an emancipated heart.

In the slumberous fire-light the parson and the itinerant preacher talked together of the dust and noise in the great world outside these sleepy mountains.

Greta drew back into the half-light of the window recess, too greedy of Paul's good spirits to check them.

"Yes, I went to the lawyer's office," he continued, "and drew out a power of attorney in Hugh's name, and now he can do what he likes with the Ghyll, just as if it were his own. Much luck to him, say I, and some bowels, too, please God! But that's not all—not half. This morning—ah, now, you wise little woman, who always pretend to know so much more than other folks, tell me what I did in London before leaving it this morning?"

Greta had hardly listened. Her eyes had dropped to his breast, her arms had crept about his neck, and her tears were falling fast. But he was not yet conscious of the deluge.

"What do you think? Why, I went to Doctors' Commons and bought the license—dirt cheap, too, at the price—and now it can be done any day—any day—think of that! So ho! so ho! covering your face, eh?—up, now, up with it—gently. Do you know, they asked me your complexion, the color of your eyes, or something—that old Shylock or somebody—and I couldn't tell for the life of me—there, a peep, just one wee peep! Why, what's this—what the d— What villain—what in the name of mischief is the ma—Why, Greta, you're cry—yes, you are—you are crying!"

Paul had forced up Greta's face with gentle violence, and now he held her at arm's length, surveying her with bewildered looks.

Parson Christian twisted about in his chair. He had not been so much immersed in wars and rumors of wars as to be quite ignorant of what was going on around him. "Greta is but in badly case," he said, pretending to laugh. "She has fettled things in the house over and over again, and she has if't and haffled over everything. She's been longing, surely." The deep voice had a touch of tremor in it this time, and the twinkling old eyes looked hazy.

"Ah, of course!" shouted Paul, in stentorian tones, and he laughed about as heartily as the parson.

Greta's tears were gone in an instant.

"You must go home at once, Paul," she said; "your mother must not wait a moment longer."

He laughed and bantered and talked of his dismissal. She stopped him with a grave face and a solemn word. At last his jubilant spirit was conquered; he realized that something was amiss. Then she told him what happened at the Ghyll on Monday night. He turned white, and at first stood tongue-tied. Next he tried to laugh it off, but the laughter fell short.

"Must have been my brother," he said; "it's true, we're not much alike, but then it was night, dark night, and you had no light but the dim lamp—and at least there's a family resemblance."

"Your brother Hugh was sitting in his room."

Paul's heart sickened with an indescribable sensation.

"You found the door of my mother's room standing open?"

"Wide open."

"And Hugh was in his own room?" said Paul, his eyes flashing and his teeth set.

"I saw him there a moment later."

"My features, my complexion, my height, and my build, you say?"

"The same in everything."

Paul lifted his face, and in that luminous twilight it were an expression of peculiar horror: "In fact, myself—in a glass?"

Greta shuddered and answered, "Just that, Paul; neither more nor less."

"Very strange," he muttered. He was shaken to the depths. Greta crept closer to his breast.

"And when my mother recovered she said nothing?"

"Nothing."

"You did not question her?"

"How could I? But I was hungering for a word."

Paul patted her head with his tenderest touch.

"Have you seen her since?"

"Not since. I have been ill—I mean, rather unwell."

Parson Christian twisted again in his chair. "What do you think, my lad? Greta in a dream last night rose out of bed, went to the stair-head, and there fell to the ground."

"My poor darling," said Paul, the absent look flying from his eyes.

"But, blessed be God, she has no harm," said the parson, and turned once more to his guest.

"Paul, you must hurry away now. Good-bye for the present, dearest. Kiss me good-bye."

But Paul stood there still.

"Greta, do you ever feel that what is happening now has happened before—somehow—somewhere—and where?—when?—the questions keep ringing in your brain and racking your heart—but there is no answer—you are shouting into a voiceless cavern."

His face was as pale as ashes, his eyes were fixed, and his gaze was far away. Greta grew afraid of the horror she had awakened.

"Don't think too seriously about it," she said. "Besides, I may have been mistaken. In fact, Hugh said—"

"Well, what did he say?"

"He made me ashamed. He said I had imagined I saw you and screamed, and so frightened your mother."

"There are men in the world who would see the Lord of Hosts come from the heavens in glory and say it was only a water-spout."

"But, as you said yourself, it was in the night, and very dark. I had nothing but the feeble oil-lamp to see by. Don't look like that, Paul."

The girl lifted a nervous hand and covered his eyes, and laughed a little, hollow laugh.

Paul shook himself free of his stupor.

"Good-night, Greta," he said, tenderly, and walked to the door. Then the vacant look returned.

"The answer is somewhere—somewhere," he said, faintly. He shook himself again, and shouted, in his lusty tones:

"Good-night, all—good-night, good-night!"

The next instant he was gone.

Out in the road, he began to run; but it was not from exertion alone that his breath came and went in gusts. Before he reached the village his nameless sentiment of dread of the unknown had given way to anxiety for his mother. What was this strange illness that had come upon her in his absence? Her angel-face had been his beacon in darkness. She had lifted his soul from the dust. Tortured by the world and the world's law, yet Heaven's peace had settled on her. Let the world say what it would, into her heart the world had not entered.

He hurried on. What a crazy fool he had been to let Natt go off with the trap! Why had not that coxcomb told him what had occurred? He would break every bone in the blockhead's skin.

How long the road was, to be sure! A hundred fears suggested themselves on the way. Would his mother be worse? Would she be still conscious? Why, in God's name, had he ever gone away?

He came by the Flying Horse, and there, tied to the blue post, stood the horse and trap. Natt was inside. There he was, the villain, in front of the fire, laughing boisterously, a glass of hot liquor in his hand.

Paul jumped into the trap and drove away.

It was hardly in human nature that Natt should resist the temptation to show his cronies by ocular demonstration what a knowing young dog he could be if he liked. Natt never tried to resist it.

"Is it all die-spensy?" he asked, with a wink, when, with masterly circumlocution, he had broached his topic.

"It's a fate, I tell tha'," said Tom o' Dint, taking a churchwarden from between his lips; and another thin voice, from a back bench—it was little Jacob Berry's—corroborated that view of the mystery.

A fine scorn sat on the features of Natt as he exploded beneath their feet this mine of supernaturalism.

"Shaf on your bogies and bodderment, say I," he cried; "there are folks as won't believe their own senses. If you'll no' but show me how yon horse of mine can be in two places at once, I'll maybe believe as Master Paul Ritson can be here and in London at the same time. Nowt short o' that'll do for me, I can tell you."

And at this conclusive reasoning Natt laughed, and crowed, and stirred his steaming liquor. It was at that moment that Paul whipped up into the trap and drove away.

"Show me as my horse as I've tied to the post out there is in his stable all the time, and I's not be for saying as maybe I won't give in."

Gubblum Oglethorpe came straggling into the room at that instant, and caught the words of Natt's clinching argument.

"What see a post?" he asked.

"Why, the post afore the house, for sure!"

"Well, I wudna be for saying but I's gotten a bit short-sighted, but if theer's a horse tied to a post afore this house, I's not be for saying as I won't be domd!"

Natt ran to the door, followed by a dozen pairs of quizzing eyes. The horse was gone. Natt sat down on the post and looked around in blank astonishment.

"Well, I will be domd!" he said.

At last the bogies had him in their grip.

CHAPTER XIII.

By the time that Paul had got to the Ghyll his anxiety had reached the point of anguish. Perhaps it had been no more than a fancy, but he thought as he approached the house that a mist hung about it. When he walked into the hall his footsteps sounded hollow to his ear, and the whole place seemed empty as a vault. The spirit-deadening influence of the surroundings was upon him, when old Dinah Wilson came from the kitchen and looked at him with surprise. Clearly he had not been expected. He wanted to ask twenty questions, but his tongue cleaved to his mouth. The strong man trembled and his courage oozed away.

Why did not the woman speak? How scared she looked, too! He was brushing past her, and up the stairs, when she told him, in faltering tones, that her mistress was gone.

The word coursed through his veins like poison. "Gone! how gone?" he said. Could it be possible that his mother was dead?

"Gone away," said Dinah.

"Away! Where?"

"Gone by train, sir, this afternoon."

"Gone by train," Paul repeated, mechanically, with absent manner.

"There's a letter left, sir; it's on the table in her room."

Recovering his self-possession, Paul darted upstairs at three steps a stride. His mother's room

was empty; no fire in the grate; the pictures down from the walls; the table coverless; the few books gone from the shelf; all chill, voiceless, and blind.

What did it mean? Paul stood an instant on the threshold, seeing all in one swift glance, yet seeing nothing. Then, with the first return of present consciousness, his eye fell on the letter that lay on the table. He took it up with trembling fingers. It was addressed in his mother's hand to him. He broke the seal. This is what he read:

"I go to-day to the shelter of the Catholic Church. I had long thought to return to this refuge, though I had hoped to wait until the day your happiness with Greta was complete. That, in Heaven's purposes, was not to be, and I must leave you without a last farewell. Good-bye, dear son, and God bless and guide you. If you love me, do not grieve for me. It is from love of you I leave you. Think of me as one who is at peace, and I will bless you even in heaven. If ever the world should mock you with your mother's name, remember that she is your mother still, and that she loved you to the last. Good-bye, dear Paul; you may never know the day when this erring and sorrowing heart will be allowed, in His infinite pity, to join the choirs above. Then, dearest, from the hour when you read this letter, think of me as dead, for I shall be dead to the world."

Paul held the letter before him, and looked at it long with vacant eyes. Feeling itself seemed gone. Not a tear came from him, not a sigh, not one moan of an overwrought heart escaped him. All was blind, pulseless torpor. He stood there crushed and overwhelmed, a shaken, shattered man. A thousand horrors congealed within him to one deep, dead stupor.

He turned away in silence, and walked out of the house. The empty chambers seemed, as he went, to echo his heavy footsteps. He took the road back toward the vicarage, turning neither to the right nor the left, looking straight before him, and never once shifting his gaze. The road might be long, but now it fretted him no more. The night might be cold, but colder far was the heart within him. The moon might fly behind the cloud flocks, and her light burst forth afresh; but for him all was blank night.

In the vicarage the slumberous fire was smoldering down. The straggle-brained guest had been lighted to his bed, and the good parson himself was carrying to his own tranquil closet a head full of the great world's dust and noise. Greta was still sitting before the dying fire, her heart heavy with an indefinable sensation of dread.

When Paul opened the door his face was very pale and his eyes had a strange look; but he was calm, and spoke quietly. He told what had occurred, and read aloud his mother's letter. The voice was strong in which he read it, and never a tremor told of the agony his soul was suffering. Then he sat some time without speaking, and time itself had no reckoning.

Greta scarcely spoke, and the old parson said little. What power had words to express a sorrow like this? Death had its solace; but there was no comfort for death in life.

At last Paul told Parson Christian that he wished the marriage to take place at once— to-morrow, or, at latest, the day after that. He told of their intention to leave England, of his father's friend, and, in answer to questions, of the power of attorney drawn up in the name of his brother.

The old man was deeply moved, but his was the most unselfish of souls. He understood very little of all that was meant by what had been done, and was still to do. But he said, "God bless you and go with you!" though his own wounded heart was bleeding. Greta knelt at his chair, and kissed the tawny old face lined and wrinkled and damp now with a furtive tear. It was agreed that the marriage should take place on Friday. This was Wednesday night.

Paul rose and stepped to the door, and Greta followed him to the porch.

"It is good of you to leave all to your brother," she said.

"We'll not speak of it," he answered.

"Is there not something between you?" she asked.

"Another time, darling."

Greta recalled Hugh Ritson's strange threat. Should she mention it to Paul? She had almost done so, when she lifted her eyes to his face. The weary, worn expression checked her. Not now; it would be a cruelty.

"I knew the answer to that omen was somewhere," he said, "and it has come."

He stepped over the threshold and stood one pace outside. The snow still lay under foot, crusted with frost. The wind blew strongly, and souged in the stiff and leafless boughs. Overhead the flying moon at that moment broke through a rack of cloud. At the same instant the red glow of the fire-light found its way through the open door, and was reflected on Paul's pallid face.

Greta gasped; a thrill passed through her. There, before her, eye to eye with her once again, was the face she saw at the Ghyll!

CHAPTER XIV.

Paul went back home, carrying with him a crushed and broken spirit. He threw himself into a chair in a torpor of dejection. When the servants spoke to him, he lifted to their faces two clouded eyes, heavy with suffering, and answered their questions in few words. The maid laid the supper, and told him it was ready. When she returned to clear the cloth, the supper was untouched. Paul stepped up to his mother's room, and sat down before the cold grate. The candle he carried with him burned out.

In the kitchen the servants of the farm and house gossiped long and bickered vigorously. "Whatever ails Master Paul?" "Crossed in love, maybe." "Shaf on sec woman's wit!" "Wherever has mistress gone?" "To buy a new gown, mayhap." "Sista now how a lass's first thowt runs on finery!" "Didsta hear nowt when you drove mistress to the rail, Reuben?" "Nay, nowt." "Dusta say it war thee as drove to the station this afternoon." "I wouldn't be for saying as it warn't." "Wilta be meeting Master Hugh in the forenoon, Natt?" "Nay, ax Natt na questions. He's fair tongue-tied to-neet, Natt is. He's clattering all of it to hisself—swearing a bit, and sec as that."

When the servants had gone to bed, and the house was quiet, Paul still sat in his mother's abandoned room. No one but he knew what he suffered that night. He tried to comprehend the disaster that had befallen him. Why had his mother shut herself in a convent? How should her love for him require that she should leave him? To demand answers to these questions was like knocking at the door of a tomb; the voice was silent that could reply; there came no answer save the dull, heavy, hollow echo of his own uncertain knock. All was blind, dumb, insensate torpor. No outlook; no word; no stimulating pang.

His stupor was broken by a vision that for long hours of that dead night burned in his brain like molten lead. The face which Greta had seen, and which his mother must also have seen, seemed to rise up before him as he sat in that deserted chamber. He saw his own face as he might have seen it in a glass. Not even the blackness of night could conceal it. Clear as a face seen in the day it shone and burned in that dark room. He closed his eyes to shut it out, but it was still before him. It was within him. It was imprinted in features of fire on his brain. He trembled with fear, never until that hour knowing what fear was. It acted upon him like his own ghost.

He knew it was but a phantasy, but no phantasy was ever more horrible. He got up to banish it, and it stood before him face to face. He sunk down again, and it sat beside him eye to eye.

Then it changed. For a moment it faded away into a palpitating mist, and the tension of his gaze relaxed. How blessed was that moment's respite! His thought returned to his mother. "If ever the world should mock you with your mother's name, remember that she is your mother still, and that she loved you to the last." Dear, sacred soul. Little fear that he should forget it! Little fear that the wise world should tarnish the fair shrine of that holy love! Tears of tenderness rose to his eyes, and in the midst of them he thought his mother sat before him. Her head was bent; an all-eating shame was crimsoning her pale cheek. Then he knew that other eyes were upon her, looking into her heart, prying deep down into her dead past, keeping open the heavy eyelids that could never sleep. He looked up; his own shadow was silently gazing down upon both of them.

Paul leaped to his feet and ran out of the room. Surely the spirit of his mother still inhabited the deserted chamber. Surely this was the shadow that had driven her away. Big drops of sweat rolled in beads from his forehead. He went out of the house. Heavy black clouds were adrift in a stormy sky; behind them, the bright moon was scudding.

He walked among the naked trees of the gaunt wood at the foot of Coledale, and listened to the short breathings of the wind among the frost-covered boughs. At every second step he gave a quick glance backward. But at last he saw the thing he looked for—it was walking with him side by side, pace for pace.

He passed slowly out of the wood, not daring now to run. The white fell rose sheer up to the grim, gray crags that hung in shaggy, snowy masses over the black seams of the ravines; and the moon's light rested on them for an instant. Without thought or aim he began to climb. The ascent was perilous at any hour to any foot save that of a mountaineer. The exertion and the watchfulness banished the vision, and his liberated mind turned to Greta. What was life itself now without Greta's love? Nothing but a succession of days. She was the savior of his outcast state; she was his life's spring, whence the waters of content might flow. And a flood of emotion came over him, and in his heart he blessed her. It was then that on that gaunt headland he seemed to see her at his side. But between them, and dividing them, stalked the spectre of himself.

All to the east was dense gloom, save where the pulsating red of the smelting house burned in the distance. With no rest for his foot, Paul walked in the direction of the light, and the shadow of his face walked with him. As the wind went by him it whistled in his ear, and it sounded in that solitude like the low cry of the thing at his side.

Old Laird Fisher was at his work of wheeling the refuse of the ore from the mouth of the furnace, and shooting it down the bank. The glow of the hot stone in the iron barrow that he trundled was reflected in sharp white lights on his wrinkled face.

"Ista theer, Mister Paul?" he said, catching his breath and coughing amid the smoke, and shouting between the gusts of wind.

The slow beat of the engine and the clank of the chain of the cage in the shaft deadened the wind's shrill whistle. The smoke from the bank shot up and swirled away like a long flight of swallows.

Standing there, the vision troubled him no longer. It had been merely a waking phantasy, bred of what Greta said she saw in the snow, and heightened by the shock to his nerves caused by his mother's departure. The sight of Matthew helped to beat it off. His submissive face was the sign of his broken spirit. A tempest had torn up his only hold on the earth. He was but a poor naked trunk flung on the ground, without power of growth or grip of the soil. He was old and he had no hope. Yet he lived on and worked submissively. Paul's own case was different. Destiny had dashed him in unknown seas against unseen rocks. But he was young, he had the power of life, and the stimulus of love. Yet here he was, the prey to an idle fancy, tortured by an agony of fear.

"Good-night to you, Matthew!" he shouted cheerily above the wind, and went away into the night.

He would go home and sleep the fever out of his blood; he took the road; and as he went, the monotonous engine-throb died off behind him. He passed through the village; the street was empty, and it echoed loud to the sound of his footfall. Large shadows fell about him when for an instant the moon shot clear of a cloud. A light burned in a cottage window. Poor Mrs. Truesdale's sick life was within that sleepless chamber lingering out its last days. The wind fell to silence at one moment, and then a child's little cry came out to him in the night.

He walked on, and plunged again into the darkness of the road beyond. The dogs were howling at the distant Ghyll. A sable cloud floated in the sky, and at its back the moon sailed. It was like black hair silvered with gray. But on one spot on the road before him the moon shone clear and white. The place fascinated him like a star. He quickened his pace until he came into the moon's open light. Then it turned to an ashy tint; it lay over the church-yard. His father's grave was only a few paces from the road.

What unseen power had drawn him there? Was it meant that he should understand that all the stings that fate had in store for him were to be in some unsearchable way the refuse of his father's deed? His mind went back to the night of his father's death. He thought of his mother's confession—a confession more terrible to make more fearful to listen to, than a mother ever made before or a son ever heard. And now again, was the disaster of this very night a link in the chain of destiny?

Let no man compare the withering effects of a father's curse with the blasting influence of a father's sin. If the wrath of Providence should fail in its stern and awful retribution, the world in its mercy would not forget that the sins of the fathers must be visited upon the children.

Paul entered the lych-gate and entered the church-yard. The night dew on his cheeks was not colder than his tears as he knelt by his father's grave. At one instant he cursed the world and the world's cruel law. Then there stole into his heart a poison that corroded its dearest memory: he thought of his father with bitterness.

At that moment a strange awe crept over him. He knew, though still only by the eyes of his mind, that the vision had returned. He knew it was standing against the night-sky as a ghastly headstone to the grave. But when he raised his eyes what he saw was more terrible. The face was before him, but it was a dead face now. He saw his own corpse stretched out on his father's grave.

His head fell on the cold sod. He lay like the dead on the grave of the dead. Then he knew that it was ordered above that the cloud of his father's sin should darken his days; that through all the range and change of life he was to be the lonely slave of a sin not his own. His fate was sin-inherited, and the wages of sin is death.

Was it strange that at that moment, when all the earth seemed gloomed by the shadow of a curse that lay blackest over him—when reverence for a father's memory and love learned at a mother's knee were deadened by a sense of irremediable wrong—was it strange that there and then peace fell on him like a dove from heaven?

Orphaned in one hour—now, and not till now—foredoomed to writhe like a worm amid the dust of the world—the man in him arose and shook off its fear.

It was because he came to know—rude man as he was, unlettered, but strong of soul—that there is a Power superior to fate, that the stormiest sea has its Master, that the waif that is cast by the roughest wave on the loneliest shore is yet seen and known.

And the voice of an angel seemed to whisper in his heart the story of Hagar and her son; how the boy was the first-born of his father; how the second-born became the heir; how the woman and son were turned away; how they were nigh to death in the desert; and how, at last, the cry came from heaven, "God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is."

The horror of the vision had gone. It would come back no more. Paul walked home, went up to his own room, and slept peacefully.

When he awoke the pink and yellow rose of a wintery sunrise bloomed over the head of the Eel Crag. The tinkle of the anvil came from across the vale. Sheep were bleating high up on the frost-nipped side of the fell. The echo of the ax could be heard from the wood, and the muffled lowing of the kine from the shippin in the yard behind. The harsh scrape of Natt's clogs was on

the gravel. A robin with full throat perched on the window-ledge and warbled cheerily.

Last night was gone from him for all eternity. Before him was the day, the world, and life.

CHAPTER XV.

That day—the day before the wedding—all the gossiping tongues in Newlands were cackling from morning till night. Natt had been sent round the dale with invitations addressed to statesmen, their wives, sons and daughters. Parson Christian himself made the round of the homes of the poor.

"The poor ye have always with you,' but not everywhere, and not often in Cana of Galilee," he said to Greta on setting out.

And the people of the highways and hedges were nothing loath to come in to the feast. "God luck to the weddiners!" they said, "and may they never lick a lean poddish-stick."

There was not much work done in the valley that day. The richest heiress on the country-side was about to be married to the richest statesman in the dale. On the eve of such an event it was labor enough to drop in at the Flying Horse and discuss mathematics. The general problem was one in simple addition, namely, how much Paul Ritson would be worth when he married Greta Lowther. And more than once that day twice two made a prodigious five.

The frost continued and the roads were crisp. Heavy rains had preceded the frost, and the river that ran down the middle of the valley had overflowed the meadows to the width of a wide carriage-way. This was now a road of ice five miles long, smooth as glass, and all but as straight as an arrow.

Abraham Strong, the carpenter, had been ordered to take the wheels off a disused landau and fix instead two keels of wood beneath the axles. This improvised sledge, after it had been shod in steel by the blacksmith, was to play a part in to-morrow's ceremony.

Early in the day Brother Peter was dispatched to the town to fetch Mr. Bonnithorne. The four miles' journey afoot seemed to him a bigger candle than the entire game was worth.

"Don't know as I see what the lass wants mair nor she's got," he told himself, grumpily, as he plodded along the road. "What call has she for a man? Hasn't she two of 'em as she is? I made her comfortable enough myself. But lasses are varra ficklesome."

Mr. Bonnithorne gathered enough from Brother Peter's "Don't know as there's not a wedding in t' wind," to infer what was afoot. Hugh Ritson was away from home, and his brother Paul was availing himself of his absence to have the marriage ceremony performed.

This was the inference with which Mr. Bonnithorne had walked from the town; but before reaching the vicarage he encountered Paul himself, who was even then on the way to his office. Few words passed between them. Indeed, the young dalesman was civil, and no more. He gave scant courtesy, but then he also gave something that was more substantial, and the severity of the lawyer's cynicism relaxed. Paul handed Mr. Bonnithorne, without comment, the deed drawn up in London. Mr. Bonnithorne glanced at it, pocketed it, and smiled. His sense of Paul's importance as a dangerous man sunk to nothing at that moment. They parted without more words.

Parson Christian got home toward evening, dead beaten with fatigue. He found the lawyer waiting for him. The marriage had been big in his eyes all day, and other affairs very little.

"So you shall give her away, Mr. Bonnithorne," he said, without superfluous preface of any kind.

"I—I?" said Mr. Bonnithorne, with elevated brows.

"Who has more right?" said the parson.

"Well, you know, you—you—"

"Me! Nay, I must marry them. It is you for the other duty."

"You see, Mr. Christian, if you think of it, I am—I am—"

"You are her father's old friend. There, let us look on it as settled."

Mr. Bonnithorne looked on it as awkward. "Well, to say the truth, Mr. Christian, I'd—I'd rather not."

The old parson lifted two astonished eyes, and gazed at Mr. Bonnithorne over the rims of his spectacles. The lawyer's uneasiness increased. Then Parson Christian remembered that only a little while ago Mr. Bonnithorne had offered reasons why Paul should not marry Greta. They were rather too secular, those same reasons, but no doubt they had appealed honestly to his mind as a friend of Greta's family.

"Paul and Greta are going away," said the parson.

"So I judged."

"They go to Victoria to farm there," continued the parson.

"On Greta's money," added the lawyer.

Parson Christian looked again over the rims of his spectacles. Then for once his frank and mellow face annexed a reflection of the curl on the lawyer's lip. "Do you know," he said, "it never once came into my simple old pate to ask which would find the dross and which the honest labor?"

Mr. Bonnithorne winced. The simple old pate could, on occasion, be more than a match for his own wise head.

"Seeing that I shall marry her, I think it will be expected that you should give her to her husband; but if you have an objection—"

"An objection?" Mr. Bonnithorne interrupted. "I don't know that my feeling is so serious as that."

"Then let us leave it there, and you'll decide in the morning," said Parson Christian.

So they left it there, and Mr. Bonnithorne, the dear friend of the family, made haste to the telegraph office and sent this telegram to Hugh Ritson in London: "They are to be married tomorrow. If you have anything imperative to say, write to-night, or come."

Paul and Greta saw each other only for five minutes that day amid the general hubbub; but their few words were pregnant with serious issues. Beneath the chorus of their hearts' joy there was an undersong of discord; and neither knew of the other's perplexity.

Greta was thinking of Hugh Ritson's mysterious threat. Whether or not Hugh had the power of preventing their marriage was a question of less consequence to Greta at this moment than the other question of whether or not she could tell Paul what Hugh had said. As the day wore on, her uncertainty became feverish. If she spoke, she must reveal—what hitherto she had partly hidden—the importunity and unbrotherly disloyalty of Hugh's love. She must also awaken fresh distress in Paul's mind, already overburdened with grief for the loss of his mother. Probably Paul would be powerless to interpret his brother's strange language. And if he should be puzzled, the more he must be pained. Perhaps Hugh Ritson's threat was nothing but the outburst of a distempered spirit—the noise of a bladder that is emptying itself. Still, Greta's nervousness increased; no reason, no sophistry could allay it. She felt like a blind man who knows by the current of air on his face that he has reached two street crossings, and can not decide which turn to take.

Paul, on his part, had a grave question to revolve. He was thinking whether it was the act of an honorable man to let Greta marry him in ignorance of the fact that he was not his father's legitimate son. Yet he could never tell her. The oath he had taken over his father's body must seal his lips forever. His mother's honor was wrapped up in that oath. Break the one, and the other was no longer inviolate. True, it would be to Greta, and Greta alone, and she and he were one. True, too, his mother was now dead to the world. But the oath was rigid:

"Never to reveal to any human soul, by word or deed, his act, or her shame." He had sworn it, and he must keep it. The conflict of emotion was terrible. Love was dragging him one way, and love the other. Honor said yes, and honor said no. His heart's first thought was to tell Greta everything, to keep nothing back from her whose heart's last thought was his. But the secret of his birth must lie as a dead and speechless thing within him.

If it was not the act of an honorable man to let Greta marry him in ignorance of his birth, there was only one escape from the dishonor—not to let her marry him at all. If they married, the oath must be kept. If the oath were kept, the marriage might be dishonored—it could not be the unreserved and complete union of soul with soul, heart with heart, mind with mind, which true marriage meant. It would be laying the treasure at the altar and keeping back part of the price.

Paul was not a man of subtle intellect, or perhaps such reflections would have troubled him too deeply. Love was above everything, and to give up Greta was impossible. If Circumstance was the evil genius of a man's life, should it be made the god of it also?

At all hazards Paul meant to marry Greta. And after all, what did this question of honor amount to? It was a mere phantasm. What did it matter to Greta whether he were high or basely born? Should he love her less or more? Would he be less or more worthy of her love? And how was his birth base? Not in God's eyes, for God had heard the voice of Hagar's son. Only in the eyes of the world. And what did that mean? It meant that whether birth was high or base depended one part on virtue and nine hundred and ninety-nine parts on money. Where had half the world's titled great ones sprung from? Not—like him—from their father and their father's fathers, but from a monarch's favorite.

Thus Paul reasoned with himself at this juncture. Whether he was wholly right or wholly wrong, or partly right and partly wrong, concerns us not at all. It was natural that such a man, in such a place, at such an hour, should decide once for all to say not a word to Greta. It was just as natural that his reticence should produce the long series of incidents still to be recorded.

Thus it was not a word was said between them of what lay nearest to the hearts of both.

CHAPTER XVI.

The morning was brilliant—a vigorous, lusty young day, such as can awake from the sleep of the night only in winter and in the north. The sun shone on the white frost; the air was hazy enough to make the perspective of the fells more sharp, and leave a halo of mystery to hang over every distant peak and play about every tree.

The Ghyll was early astir, and in every nook and corner full of the buzz of gossip.

"Well, things is at a pass, for sure!" "And never no axings nowther." "And all cock-a-hoop, and no waiting for the mistress to come back." "Shaf, what matter about the mistress—she's no' but a kill-joy. There'd be no merry neet an' she were at home." "Well, I is fair maizelt 'at he won't wait for Master Hugh—his awn brother, thoo knows." "What, lass, dusta think as he wad do owt at the durdum to-need? Maybe tha's reckoning on takin' a step wi' him, eh?" "And if I is, it's nowt sa strange." "Weel, I wadna be for saying tha's aiming too high, for I mind me of a laal lass once as they called Mercy Fisher, and folks did say as somebody were partial to her." "Hod thy tongue about the bit thing; don't thoo misliken me to sec a stromp!"

Resplendent in a blue cloth coat, light check trousers, a flowered yellow silk waistcoat, and a white felt hat, Natt was flying up and down the stairs to and from Paul's room. Paul himself had not yet been seen. Rumor in the kitchen whispered that he had hardly taken the trouble to dress, and had not even been at the pains to wash. Natt had more than once protested his belief that his master meant to be married in his shirt-sleeves. Nothing but "papers and pens and sealing-wax and things" had he asked for.

Outside the vicarage a motley group had gathered. There was John Proudfoot, the blacksmith, uncommonly awkward in a frock coat and a pair of kid gloves that sat on his great hands like a clout on a pitchfork. Dick, the miller, was there, too, with Giles Raisley, the miner; and Job Sheepshanks (by the way of treaty of peace) stood stroking the tangled mane of Gubblum Oglethorpe's pony. Children hung on the fence, women gathered about the gate, dogs capered on the path. Gubblum himself had been in the house, and now came out accompanied by Brother Peter Ward and a huge black jug. The jug was passed round with distinct satisfaction.

"Is the laal man ever coming?" said Gubblum, smacking his lips and taking a swift survey of the road.

"Why, here he is at sec a skuffer as'll brak' his shins!"

At the top of his speed, and breathless, clad in a long coat whose tails almost swept the ground, grasping a fiddle in one hand and a paper in the other, Tom o' Dint came hurrying up.

"Tha's here at last, Tom, ma man. Teem a glass into him, Peter, and let's mak' a start."

"Ye see, I's two men, I is," said the small man, apologetically. "I had my rounds with my letters to do first, and business afore pleasure, you knows."

"Pleasure afore business, say I," cried Gubblum. "Never let yer wark get the upper hand o' yer wages—them's my maxims."

Two coaches came up at the moment, having driven four miles for the purpose of driving four furlongs.

John Proudfoot, without needless courtesy, took the fiddler-postman by the neck of his coat and the garment beneath its tails, and slung him, fiddle and all, on to the saddle of the pony, and held him there a moment, steadying him like a sack with an open mouth.

"Sit thee there as steady as a broody hen; and now let's mak' shift," said the blacksmith.

"But I must go inside first," said the fiddler; "I've a letter for Lawyer Bonnithorne."

"Shaf on thee and thy letter! Away with thee! Deliver it at the church door."

The men dropped into a single file, with Tom o' Dint riding at their head, and Gubblum walking by the pony's side and holding the reins.

"Strike up!" shouted Job Sheepshanks. "Ista ever gaen to begin?"

Then the fiddler shouldered his fiddle, and fell to, and the first long sweeps of his wedding-march awoke the echoes of the vale.

The women and children followed the procession a few hundred yards, and then returned to see the wedding-party enter the coaches.

Inside the vicarage all was noise and bustle. Greta was quiet enough, and ready to set out at any time, but a bevy of gay young daleswomen were grouped about her, trying to persuade her to change her brown broche dress for a pale-blue silk, to have some hothouse plants in her hair, and at least to wear a veil.

"And mind you keep up heart, darling, and speak out your responses; and, dearest, don't cry until the parson gets to 'God bless you!'"

Greta received all this counsel with equal thanks. She listened to it, affected to approve of it, and

ignored it. Her face betrayed anxiety. She hardly understood her own fears, but whenever the door opened, and a fresh guest entered, she knew that her heart leaped to her mouth.

Parson Christian stood near her in silk gaiters and a coat that had been old-fashioned even in his youth. But his Jovian gray head and fine old face, beautiful in its mellowness and child-like simplicity, made small demand of dress. He patted Greta's hair sometimes with the affectionate gesture that might be grateful to a fondled child.

Mr. Bonnithorne arrived early, in a white waistcoat and coat adorned by a flower. His brave apparel was scarcely in keeping with the anxiety written on his face. He could not sit down for more than a moment in the same seat. He was up and down, walking to and fro, looking out of the window, and diving for papers into his pocket.

The procession, headed by Tom o' Dint, had not long been gone, when word was given, and the party took to the coaches and set off at a trot. Then the group of women at the gate separated with many a sapient comment.

"Weel, he's gotten a bonny lass, for sure."

"And many a sadder thing med happen to her, too."

The village lay midway between the vicarage and the church, and the fiddler and his company marched through it to a brisk tune, bringing fifty pairs of curious eyes to the windows and the doors. Tom o' Dint sat erect in the saddle, playing vigorously, and when a burst of cheering hailed the procession as it passed a group of toppers gathered outside the Flying Horse, Tom accepted it as a tribute to his playing, and bowed his head with becoming dignity, and without undue familiarity, always remembering that courtesy comes after art, as a true artist is in loyalty bound to do.

Once or twice the pony slipped its foot on the frosty road, and then Tom was fain to abridge a movement in music and make a movement in gymnastics toward grasping the front of the saddle.

But all went well until the company came within fifty paces of the church door, and there a river crossed the road. Being shallow and very swift, the river head escaped the grip of the frost, and slipped through its fingers. There was a foot-bridge on one side, and the men behind the fiddler fell out of line to cross by it.

Gubblum dropped the reins and followed them; but, as bridges are not made for the traffic of ponies, Tom o' Dint was bound to go through the water. Never interrupting the sweep and swirl of the march he was playing, he gave the pony a prod with his foot, and it plunged in. But scarcely had it taken two steps and reached the depth of its knees, when, from the intenser cold, or from coming sharply against a submerged stone, or from indignation at the fiddler's prod, or from the occult cause known as pure devilment, it shied up its back legs, and tossed down its tousled head, and pitched the musician head-foremost into the stream.

Amid a burst of derisive cheers, Tom o' Dint was drawn, wet as a sack, to the opposite bank, and his fiddle was rescued from a rapid voyage down the river.

Now, the untoward adventure had the good effect of reducing the fiddler's sense of the importance of his artistic function, and bringing him back to consciousness of his prosaic duties as postman. He put his hand into his pocket, feeling as if he had dipped it into a bag of eels, and drew out the lawyer's letter. It was wet, and the ink of the superscription was beginning to run.

Tom o' Dint also began to run. Fearing trouble, he left his unsympathetic cronies, hurried on to the church, went into the vestry, where he knew there would be a fire, and proceeded to dry the letter. The water had softened the gum, and the envelope had opened.

"So much the mair easier dried," thought Tom, and, nothing loath, he drew out the letter, unfolded it, and held it to the fire.

The paper was smoking with the heat, and so was Tom, when he heard carriage-wheels without, and then a mighty hubbub, and loud voices mentioning his own name without reverence: "Where's that clothead of a fiddler?" and sundry other dubious allusions.

Tom knew that he ought to be at the gate striking up a merry tune to welcome the bride. But then the letter was not dry. There was not a moment to lose. Tom spread the paper and envelope on the fender, intending to return for them, and dashed off with his fiddle to the discharge of his artistic duty.

As Tom o' Dint left the vestry, Parson Christian entered it. The parson saw the papers on his fender, picked them up, and in all innocence read them. The letter ran as follows:

"Morley's Hotel, Trafalgar Square, Nov. 28.

"Dear Bonnithorne,—The man who was in Newlands is Paul Lowther, Greta's half-brother. Paul Ritson is my own brother, my father's son. Keep this to yourself as you value your salvation, your pride, or your purse, or whatever else you hold most dear. Send me by wire to-day the name of their hotel in London, the time of their train south, and who, if any, are with them. Yours,

"HUGH RITSON."

"P.S.—The girl Mercy will be troublesome."

The parson had scarcely time to understand the words he read, when he, too, was compelled to leave the vestry. The bride and bridegroom had met at the church door. It was usual to receive them at the altar with music. The fiddler's function was at an end for the present. Parson Christian could not allow the fiddle to be heard in church. There a less secular instrument was required. The church was too poor for an organ; it had not yet reached the dignity of a harmonium; but it had an accordion, and among the parson's offices was the office of accordionist. So, throwing his gown over his head, he walked into the church, stepped into the pulpit, whipped up his instrument from the shelf where he kept it, and began to play.

Now it chanced that Mr. Bonnithorne in his legal capacity held certain documents for signature, and having accompanied the bride to the altar rail, he hurried to deposit them in the vestry. The gloom had still hung heavy on his brow as he entered the church. He was brooding over a letter that he had expected and had not received. Perhaps it was his present hunger for a letter that made his eye light first on the one which the fiddler-postman had left to dry. The parson had dropped it on the mantel-shelf. At a glance Mr. Bonnithorne saw it was his own.

Tom o' Dint had been compelled to come up the aisle at the tail of the wedding-party. He saw Mr. Bonnithorne, who was at the head of it, go into the vestry. Dripping wet as he was, and with chattering teeth, the sweat stood on his forehead. "Deary me, what sec a character will I have!" he muttered. He elbowed and edged his way through the crowd, and got into the vestry at last. But he was too late. With an eye that struck lightning into the meek face of the fiddler, Mr. Bonnithorne demanded an explanation.

The request was complied with.

"And who has been in the room since you left it?"

"Nay, nobody, sir."

"Sure of that?"

"For sure," said Tom.

Mr. Bonnithorne's countenance brightened. He had read the letter, and, believing that no one else had read it, he was satisfied. He put it in his pocket.

"Maybe I may finish drying it, sir?" said Tom o' Dint.

The lawyer gave a contemptuous snort, and turned on his heel.

When Paul walked with a firm step up the aisle, he looked fresh and composed. His dress was simple; his eyes were clear and bright, and his wavy brown hair fell back from a smooth and peaceful brow.

Greta, at Paul's side, looked less at ease. The clouds still hung over her face. Her eyes turned at intervals to the door, as if expecting some new arrival.

The service was soon done, and then the parson delivered a homily. It was short and simple, telling how the good bishop had said marriage was the mother of the world, filling cities and churches, and heaven itself, whose nursery it was. Then it touched on the marriage rite.

"I do not love ceremonies," said the parson, "for they are too often 'devised to set a gloss on faint deeds,' and there are such of them as throw the thing they celebrate further away than the wrong end of a telescope."

Then he explained that though the marriage ceremony was unknown to the early Christians, and never referred to in the old Bible, where Abraham "took" Sarah to wife, and Jacob "took" Rachel, yet that the marriage of the Church was a most holy and beautiful thing, symbolizing the union of Christ with His people. Last of all, he spoke of the stainless and pious parentage of both bride and bridegroom, and warned them to keep their name and fame unsullied, for "What is birth to man or woman," said the teacher, "if it shall be a stain to his dead ancestors to have left such offspring?"

Greta bowed her head meekly, and Paul stood, while the parson spoke, with absent eyes fixed on the tablets on the wall before him, spelling out mechanically the words of the commandments.

In a few moments the signatures were taken, the bell in the little turret was ringing, and the company were trooping out of the church. It was a rude old structure, with great bulges in the walls, little square lead lights, and open timbers untrimmed and straight from the tree.

The crowd outside had gathered about the wheelless landau which the carpenter and blacksmith had converted into a sledge. On the box seat sat Tom o' Dint, his fiddle in his hand, and icicles hanging in the folds of his capacious coat. The bride and bridegroom were to return in this conveyance, which was to be drawn down the frozen river by a score of young dalesmen shod in steel. They took their seats, and had almost set off, when Greta called for the parson.

"Parson Christian, Parson Christian!" echoed twenty voices. The good parson was ringing the bell, being bell-ringer also. Presently the brazen tongue ceased wagging, and Parson Christian reappeared.

"Here's your seat, parson," said Paul, making space.

"In half a crack," replied Parson Christian, pulling a great key out of his pocket and locking the church door. He was sexton as well.

Then he got up into the sledge, word was called, the fiddle broke out, and away they went for the river-bank. A minute more and they were flying over the smooth ice with the morning sunlight chasing them, and the music of fifty lusty voices in their ears.

They had the longer journey, but they reached the vicarage as early as the coaches that had returned by the road. Then came the breakfast—a solid repast, fit for appetites sharpened by the mountain air. Parson Christian presided in the parlor, and Brother Peter in the kitchen, the door between being thrown open. The former radiated smiles like April sunshine; the latter looked as sour as a plum beslimed by the earthworms, and "didn't know as he'd ever seen sec a pack of hungry hounds."

After the breakfast the toasts, and up leaped Mr. Bonnithorne. That gentleman had quite cast off the weight of his anxiety. He laughed and chaffed, made quips and cranks.

"Our lawyer is foreclosing," whispered a pert young damsel in Greta's ear. "He's getting drunk."

Mr. Bonnithorne would propose "Mr. and Mrs. Ritson." He began with a few hoary and reverend quotations—"Men are April when they woo, December when they wed." This was capped by "Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives." Mr. Bonnithorne protested that both had been true, only with exceptions.

Paul thanked the company in a dozen manly and well-chosen phrases, and then stepped to the kitchen door and invited the guests over whom Brother Peter presided to spend the evening at the Ghyll.

The ladies had risen and carried off Greta to prepare for her journey, when Gubblum Oglethorpe got on his feet and insisted on proposing "the lasses." What Gubblum had to say on the subject it is not given to us to record. By some strange twist of logic, he launched out on a very different topic. Perhaps he sat in the vicinity of Nancy Tantarum, for he began with the story of a funeral.

"It minds me," he said, "of the carriers at Adam Strang's funeral, at Gosforth, last back-end gone twelvemonth. There were two sets on 'em, and they'd a big bottle atween 'em—same as that one as auld Peter, the honey, keeps to hissle at yon end of the table. Well, they carried Adam shoulder high from the house to the grave-yard, first one set and then t'other, mile on mile apiece, and when one set got to the end of their mile they set down the coffin and went on for t'other set to pick it up. It were nine mile from Branthet Edge to Gosforth, so they had nine shifts atween 'em, and at every shift they swigged away at the big bottle—this way with it, Peter. Well, the mourners they crossed the fields for shortness, but the bearers, they had to keep the corpse road. All went reet for eight mile, and then one set with Adam were far ahead of the other with the bottle. They set the coffin on a wall at the roadside and went on. Well, when the second set came up they didn't see it—they couldn't see owt, that's the fact—same as I expect I'll be afore the day's gone, but not with Peter's good-will, seemingly. Well, they went on, too. And when all of 'em coom't up to the church togheter, there was the parson in his white smock and his bare poll and big book open to start. But, you see, there warn't no corpse. Where was it? Why, it was no' but resting quiet all by itsel' on the wall a mile away."

Gubblum was proceeding to associate the grewsome story with the incidents of Paul's appearance at the fire while he was supposed to be in London; but Greta had returned to the parlor, muffled in furs, Paul had thrown on a long frieze ulster, and every one had risen for the last leave-taking. In the midst of the company stood the good old Christian, his wrinkled face wet with silent tears. Greta threw herself into his arms and wept aloud. Then the parson began to cast seeming merry glances around him, and to be mighty jubilant all at once.

The improvised sledge was at the door, laden with many boxes.

"Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye!"

A little cheer, a little attempt at laughter, a suppressed sigh, then a downright honest cry, and away they were gone. The last thing seen by Greta's hazy eyes was a drooping white head amid many bright girl faces.

How they flew along. The glow of sunset was now in their faces. It crimsoned the west, and sparkled like gold on the eastern crags. Between them and the light were the skaters drawing the sledge, sailing along like a flight of great rooks, their voices echoing in unseen caverns of the fells.

Mr. Bonnithorne sat with Paul and Greta.

"Where did you say you would stay in London?" he asked.

"At Morley's Hotel," said Paul.

With this answer the lawyer looked unreasonably happy.

The station was reached in twenty minutes. The train steamed in. Paul and Greta got into the last carriage, all before it being full. A moment more, and they were gone.

Then Mr. Bonnithorne walked direct to the telegraph office. But the liquor he had taken played him false. He had got it into his stupefied head that he must have blundered about Morley's Hotel. That was not Paul's, but Hugh's address. So he sent this telegram:

"Left by train at one. Address, Hawk and Heron."

Then he went home happy.

That night there was high revel at the Ghyll. First, a feast in the hall: beef, veal, mutton, ham, haggis, and hot bacon pie. Then an adjournment to a barn, where tallow candles were stuck into cloven sticks, and hollowed potatoes served for lamps. Strong ale and trays of tobacco went round, and while the glasses jingled and the smoke wreathed upward, a song was sung:

"A man may spend
And God will send,
If his wife be good to owt;
But a man may spare
And still be bare,
If his wife be good to nowt."

Then blindman's buff. "Antony Blindman kens ta me, sen I bought butter and cheese o' thee? I ga' tha my pot, I ga' tha my pan, I ga' all I had but a rap ho' penny I gave a poor auld man."

Last of all, the creels were ranged round the hay-mows, and the floor was cleared of everything except a beer-barrel. This was run into the corner, and Tom o' Dint and fiddle were seated on top of it. Dancing was interrupted only by drinking, until Tom's music began to be irregular, whereupon Gubblum remonstrated; and then Tom, with the indignation of an artist, broke the bridge of his fiddle on Gubblum's head, and Gubblum broke the bridge of Tom's nose with his fist, and both rolled on to the floor and lay there, until Gubblum extricated himself with difficulty, shook his lachrymose noddle, and said:

"The laal man is as drunk as a fiddler."

The vicarage was quiet that night. All the guests save one were gone. Parson Christian sat before the smoldering fire. Old Laird Fisher sat with him. Neither spoke. They passed a long hour in silence.

BOOK III.

THE DECLIVITY OF CRIME.

CHAPTER I.

A way-side hostelry, six miles from London, bearing its swinging sign of the silver hawk and golden heron. It was a little, low-roofed place, with a drinking-bar in front as you entered, and rooms opening from it on either hand.

The door of the room to the left was shut. One could hear the voices of children within, and sometimes a peal of their merry laughter. The room to the right stood open to the bar. It was a smoky place, with a few chairs, a long deal table, a bench with a back, a form against the wall, pipes that hung on nails, and a rough beam across the low ceiling.

A big fire burned in an open grate on a hearth without a fender. In front of it, coiled up in a huge chair like a canoe, that had a look of having been hewn straight from the tree, sat the only occupant of the room. The man wore a tweed suit of the indefinite pattern known as pepper and salt. His hat was drawn heavily over his face to protect his eyes from the glare of the fire-light. He gave satisfactory evidence that he slept.

Under any light but that of the fire, the place must have looked cheerless to desolation, but the comfortless room was alive with the fire's palpitating heart. The rosy flames danced over the sleeper's tawny hair, over the sanded floor, over the walls adorned with gaudy prints. They threw shadows and then caught them back again; flashed a ruddy face out of the little cracked window, and then lay still while the blue night looked in.

An old woman, with a yellow face deeply wrinkled, served behind the bar. Two or three carriers and hawkers sat on a bench before it. One of these worthies screwed up the right side of his face with an expression of cutting irony.

"Burn my body, though, but what an inwalable thing to have a son wot never need do no work!"

The old woman lifted her eyes.

"There, enough of that," she said, and then jerked her head toward the room from whence came measured snores. "He'll be working at throwing you out, some of you, same as he did young

Bobby on Sunday sennight."

"Like enough. He don't know which side his bread is buttered, he don't."

"His bread?" said another, an old road-mender, with a scornful dig of emphasis. "His old mother's, you mean. Don't you notice as folks as eat other folks' bread, and earn none for theirselves, never knows no more nor babbies which side the butter is on?"

"Hold your tongue, Luke Sturgis!" said the old woman. "Mayhap you think it's you're pint of half-and-half as keeps us all out of the union."

"Now you're a-goin' to get wexed, Mrs. Drayton. So wot's to prevent me having another pint, just to get that fine son of yourn an extra cigar or so. Hold hard with the pewter, though. I'll drain off what's left, if convenient."

A drowsy-eyed countryman, with a dog snoring at his feet, said:

"Been to Lunnon again," and pointed the shank of his pipe in the direction of the sleeping man. "Got the Lunnon smell on his clothes. I allus knows it forty perches off."

"You're wrong, then, Mr. Wiseman," said the old woman, "and he ain't got no smell of no Lunnon on his clothes this day, anyways. For he's been where there ain't no smell no more nor in Hendon, leastways unless the mount'ins smells and the cataracks and the sheeps."

"The mount'ins? And has Master Paul been along of the mount'ins?"

"Yes; Cumberland, that's the mountains, and fur off, too, I've heerd."

"Cumberland? Ain't that the part as the young missy comes from?"

"Mayhap it is; I wouldn't be for saying no to that."

"So that's the time o' day, is it?" The speaker gave a prolonged whistle and turned a suggestive glance into the faces of his companions. "Well, I allus says to my old woman, 'Bide quiet,' I says, 'and it'll leak out,' and sure enough, so it has."

The landlady fired up.

"And I allus says to your missus, 'Mistress Sturgis,' I says, 'it do make me that wexed to see a man a-prying into other people's business and a-talking and a-scandalizing, which it is bad in a woman, where you expects no better, as the saying is, but it ain't no ways bearsome in a man—and I wish you'd keep him,' I says, 'from poking his nose, as you might say, into other people's pewters.' There—that's what I allus says to your missis."

"And very perverse of you, too," said the worthy addressed, speaking with the easy good-nature of one who could afford to be rated. "And wot's to prevent me having a screw of twist on the strength of it," putting a penny on the counter.

The landlady threw down the paper of tobacco, picked up the penny, and cast it into the till.

"On'y, as I say, there's no use denying now as Mister Paul Drayton has a finger in the young missy's pie."

"There, that's enough o' that. I told you afore she never set eyes on him till a fortnight come Sunday."

Two women came into the bar with jugs.

"And how is the young missy?" asked the elder of the two, catching up the conversation as the landlady served her.

"She's there," said the landlady, rather indefinitely, indicating with a sidelong nod the room to the left with the closed door.

At that moment the laughter of the children could be heard from within.

"She's merry over it, at any rate, though I did hear a whisper," said the woman, "as she feeds two when she eats her wittals, as the saying is."

The men laughed.

"That's being overcur'ous, mistress," said one, as the woman passed out sniggering.

"Such baggage oughtn't to be taken in to live with respectable people," said the other woman, the younger one, who wore a showy bonnet and a little gay ribbon at her neck.

"And that's being overcharitable," said another voice. "It's the women for charity, especially to one of themselves."

"It's cur'osity as is the mischief i' this world," said the drowsy-eyed countryman. "People talk o' the root o' all evil, and some says drink, and some says money, and some says rheumatis, but I says cur'osity. Show me the man as ain't cur'ous, and he don't go a-poking his nose into every stink-pot, as you might say."

"Of course not," said the gentleman addressed as Luke Sturgis. "And show me the man as ain't

cur'ous" he said, with a wink, "and I'll show you the man as is good at a plough and inwalable at a ditch, and wery near worth his weight in gold at gapping a hedge, and mucking up a horse-midden, and catching them nasty moles wot ruin the county worse nor wars and publicans and parsons."

CHAPTER II.

It was Mercy Fisher who sat in the room to the left of the bar, and played with the children, and laughed when they laughed, and tried to forget that she was not as young as they were, and as happy and as free from thought, living as they lived, from hour to hour, with no past, and without a future, and all in the living present. But she was changed, and was now no longer quite a child, though she had a child's heart that would never grow old, but be a child's heart still, all the same that the weight of a woman's years lay upon it, and the burden of a woman's sorrow saddened it. A little older, a little wiser, perhaps, a little graver of face, and with eyes a little more wistful.

A neighbor who had gone to visit a relative five miles away had brought round her children, begging the "young missy" to take care of them in her absence. A curly-headed boy of four sat wriggling in Mercy's lap, while a girl of six stood by her side, watching the needles as she knitted. And many a keen thrust the innocent, prattling tongues sent straight as an arrow to Mercy's heart. The little fellow was revolving a huge lozenge behind his teeth.

"And if oo had a little boy would oo give him sweets ery often—all days—sweets and cakes—would oo?"

"Yes, every day, darling; I'd give him sweets and cakes every day."

"I 'ikes oo. And would oo let him go out to play with the big boys, and get birds' nests and things, would oo?"

"Yes, bird's nests, and berries, and everything."

"I 'ikes oo, I do. And let him go to meet daddy coming home at night, and ride on daddy's back?"

A shadow shot across the girl's simple face, and there was a pause.

"Would oo? And lift him on daddy's shoulder, would oo?"

"Perhaps, dear."

"Oh!" the little chap's delight required no fuller expression.

"Ot's oo doing?"

"Knitting, darling—there, rest quiet on my knee."

"Ot is it—knitting—stockings for oo little boy?"

"I have no little boy, sweetheart. They are mittens for a gentleman."

"How pooty! Ot's a gentleman?"

"A man, dear. Mr. Drayton is a gentleman, you know."

"Oh!" Then after a moment's sage reflection, "Me knows—a raskill."

"Willy!"

"'At's what daddy says he is."

All this time the little maiden at Mercy's side had been pondering her own peculiar problem. "What would you do if you had a little girl?"

"Well, let me see; I'd teach her to knit and to sew, and I'd comb her hair so nice, and make her a silk frock with flounces, and, oh! such a sweet little hat."

"How nice! And would you take her to market and to church, and to see the dolls in Mrs. Bicker's window?"

"Yes, dearest, yes."

"And never whip her?"

"My little girl would be very, very good, and oh! so pretty."

"And let her go to grandma's whenever she liked, and not tell grandpa he's not to give her ha'pennies, would you?"

"Yes ... dear ... yes ... perhaps."

"Are your eyes very sore to-day, Mercy, they are so red?"

But the little one of all was not interested in this turn of the conversation: "Well, why don't oo

have a little boy?"

A dead silence.

"Wont oo, eh?"

Willy was put to the ground. "Let us sing something. Do you like singing, sweetheart?"

The little fellow climbed back to her lap in excitement. "Me sing, me sing. Mammy told I a song—me sing it oo."

And without further ceremony the little chap struck up the notes of a lullaby.

Mercy had learned that same song, as her mother crooned it long ago by the side of her cot. A great wave of memory and love and sorrow and remorse, in one, swept over her. It cost her a struggle not to break into a flood of tears. And the little innocent face looked up at the ceiling as the sweet child-voice sung the familiar words.

There was a new-comer in the bar outside. It was Hugh Ritson, clad in a long ulster, with the hood drawn over his hat. He stepped up to the landlady, who courtesied low from behind the counter. "So he has returned?" he said, without greeting of any kind.

"Yes, sir, he is back, sir; he got home in the afternoon, sir."

"You told him nothing of any one calling?"

"No, sir—that is to say, sir—not to say told him, sir—but I did mention—just mention, sir, that—"

Hugh Ritson smiled coldly. "Of course—precisely. Were you more prudent with the girl?"

"Oh, yes, sir, being as you told me not to name it to the missy—"

"He is asleep, I see."

"Yes, sir; he'd no sooner taken bite and sup than he dropped off in his chair, same as you see, sir; and never a word since. He must have traveled all night."

"He did not explain?"

"Oh, no, sir; he on'y called for his cold meat and his ale, sir, and—"

"You see, his old mother ain't noways in his confidence, master," said one of the countrymen on the bench.

"Nor you in mine, my friend," said Hugh Ritson, facing about. Then turning again to the landlady, he said: "Tell him some one wants to speak with him. Or, wait, I'll tell him myself."

He stepped into the room with the sleeping man, and closed the door after him.

"Luke Sturgis," said the landlady, with sudden austerity, "I'll have you know as it's none of your business saying words what's onpleasant—and me his mother, too. What's it you say? Cloven hoof? He's a personable gentleman, if he has got summat a matter with a foot, and a clever face how-an'-ever!"

CHAPTER III.

Alone with the sleeping man, Hugh Ritson stood and looked down at him intently. The fire had burned to a steady glow of red coal without flame. There was no other light in the room.

The sleeper began to stir with the uneasy movement of one who is struggling against the effect of a fixed gaze bent upon him. Then, with a shake of the head and a shrug of the shoulders, he sat up in his chair. He tossed his hat back from his forehead, and a tuft of wavy brown hair tumbled over it. His head was held down, and his eyes were on the fire. Hugh Ritson took a step toward him and put one hand on his arm.

"Paul Drayton," he said, and the man shrunk under his touch and slowly turned his face full upon him.

When their eyes met Hugh Ritson saw what he had expected to see—the face of Paul Ritson. In that low, red light, every feature was the same. By the swift impulse of sense it seemed as if it could be the same man and no other; as if Paul Drayton and Paul Ritson were one man.

Drayton got on to his feet with an uncertain shuffle, and then in a moment the hallucination was dispelled. He kicked, with a heavy boot, at the slumbering coals, and the fire broke into a sharp crackle and bright blaze. The white light fell on his face. It was a fine face brutalized by excess. The features were strong, manly, and impressive. What God had done was very good; but the eyes were bleared, and the lips discolored, and the expression, which might have been frank, was sullen.

"I don't wonder that you were tired after your journey; it was a long one," said Hugh Ritson. He affected an easy manner, but there was a tremor in his voice. "You caught the early Scotch mail

from Penrith," he added, and drew a bench nearer to the fire and sat down.

Drayton made a half-dazed scrutiny of his visitor, and said:

"Damme, if you're not the fence as was here afore, criss-crossing at our old woman! Tell us your name."

The voice was husky, but it had, nevertheless, a note or two of the voice of Paul Ritson.

"That will be unnecessary," said Hugh Ritson, with complete self-possession. "We've met before," he added, smiling.

"The deuce we have—where?"

"You slept at the Pack Horse at Keswick rather more than a week ago," said Hugh.

Drayton betrayed no surprise.

"Last Saturday night you were active at the fire that almost destroyed the old mill at Newlands."

Drayton's sullen face was immovable.

"By the way," said Hugh, elevating his voice and affecting a sudden flow of spirits, "I owe you my personal thanks for your exertions. What do you drink—brandy?"

Going to the door, he called for a bottle of brandy and glasses.

"Then, again, on Monday night," he added, turning into the room, "you did me the honor to visit my own house."

Drayton was still standing.

"I know you," he said. "Shall I tell you your name?"

Hugh smiled with undisturbed humor. "That also will be unnecessary," he said; and leisurely drew off his gloves.

"What d'ye want? I ain't got no time to waste—that's flat."

"Well, let me see, it's just ten o'clock," said Hugh Ritson, taking out his watch. "I want you to earn twenty pounds before twelve."

Mr. Drayton gave vent to a grim laugh.

"I'll pound it as I'm fly to what that means! You're looking to earn two hundred before midnight."

Mr. Drayton gave Hugh a sidelong glance of great astuteness.

Hugh lifted his eyebrows and shook his head.

"Money is not my object."

"Oh, it ain't, eh? Well, I'm not afraid for you to know as it's mine—very much so." And Mr. Drayton gave vent to another grim laugh.

Mrs. Drayton entered the room at this moment, and set down the brandy, two glasses, and a water-bottle on the deal table.

"Let me offer you a little refreshment," and Hugh took up the brandy and poured out half a tumbler.

"Thankee, thankee!"

"Water? Say when."

But Mr. Drayton stopped the dilution by snatching up his tumbler. His manner had undergone a change. The watchfulness of a ferocious creature dogged and all but trapped gave way to reckless abandonment, bravado and audacity.

"What's the lay?" he said, with a chuckle.

"To accompany a lady to Kentish Town Junction, and see her safe into the midnight train—that's all."

Drayton laughed outright.

"Of course it is," he said.

"The lady will be here shortly before midnight."

"Of course she will."

Hugh Ritson's face lost its smiles.

"Don't laugh like that—I won't have it!"

Mr. Drayton made another application to the spirit bottle, and then leaned toward Hugh Ritson over the arm of his chair.

"Look here," he said, "it's just a matter o' thirty years gone August since my mother put me into swaddling clothes, and deng my buttons if I'm wearing 'em yet!"

"What do you mean, my friend?" said Hugh.

Drayton chuckled contemptuously.

"Speak out plain," he said. "Give the work its right name. I ain't afraid for you to say it. A man don't give twenty pounds for the like o' that. Not if he works for it honest, same as me. I'm a licensed victualer, and a gentleman—that's what I am, if you want to know."

Hugh Ritson repudiated all unnecessary curiosity, whereupon Mr. Drayton again had recourse to the spirit bottle, mentioned afresh his profession and pretensions, and wound up by a relative inquiry, "And what do you call yourself?"

Hugh did not immediately gratify Mr. Drayton's curiosity.

"Quite right, Mr. Drayton," he said; "I know all about you. Shall I tell you why you went to Cumberland?"

Remarking that it was easy to repeat an old woman's gossip, Mr. Drayton took out of his pocket a goat-skin tobacco-pouch, and proceeded to charge a discolored meerschaum pipe.

"Thirty years ago," said Hugh Ritson, "a young lady tried to drown herself and her child. She was rescued and committed to an asylum. Her child, a son, was given into the care of the good woman with whom she had lodged."

Mr. Drayton interrupted. "Thankee; but, as the wice-chairman says, 'we'll take it as read,' so we will."

Hugh Ritson nodded his head, and continued, while Mr. Drayton smoked vigorously: "You have never heard of your mother from that hour to this; but one day you were told by the young girl whom circumstances had cast on your foster-mother's care, that among the mountains of Cumberland there lived another man who bore you the most extraordinary resemblance. That excited your curiosity. You had reasons for thinking that if your mother were alive she might be rich. Now, you yourself had the misfortune to be poor."

"And I'm not afraid for anybody to know it," interrupted Mr. Drayton. "Come to the point honest. Look here, we are like two hyenas I saw one day at the Zoo. One got a bone in his tooth at feeding time, and blest if the other didn't fight for that bone I don't know how long and all."

"Well," continued Hugh Ritson, with a dubious smile that the cloud of smoke might have hidden from a closer observer, "being a man of spirit, and not without knowledge of the world, having inherited brains, in short, from the parents who bequeathed you nothing else—"

Mr. Drayton puffed volumes, then poured himself half a tumbler of the raw spirit and tossed it off.

—"You determined on seeing if, after all, this were only a fortuitous resemblance."

Mr. Drayton raised his hand. "I am a licensed victualer, that's what I am, and I ain't flowery," he said, in an apologetic tone; "I hain't had the chance of it, being as I'd no schooling—but, deng me, you've just hit it!" And the gentleman who could not be flowery shook hands effusively with the gentleman who could.

"Precisely, Mr. Drayton, precisely," said Hugh Ritson. He paused and watched Drayton closely. That worthy had removed his pipe, and was staring, with stupid eyes and open mouth, into the fire.

"But you found nothing."

"How d'ye know?"

"Your face at this moment says so."

"Pooh! Don't you go along trusting this here time-piecer for the time o' day. It ain't been brought up in habits o' truthfulness same as yours."

Hugh Ritson laughed.

"You and I are meant to be friends, Mr. Drayton," he said. "But let us first understand each other. Your idea that you could find your parents in Cumberland was a pure fallacy."

"Eh! Why?"

"Because your mother is dead."

Drayton shook off the stupor of liquor, and betrayed a keen if momentary interest.

"The book of the asylum in which she was confined, after the attempted suicide, contains the record—"

"But she escaped," interrupted Drayton.

"Contains the record of her escape and subsequent recovery—dead. The body was picked out of

the river, recognized by the authorities as that of the unknown woman, and buried in the name she gave."

"What name?" said Drayton.

Hugh Ritson's face underwent a momentary change.

"That is indifferent," he said; "I forget."

"Sure you forget?" said Drayton. "Couldn't be Ritson, eh?"

Hugh struck the table.

"Assuredly not—the name was not Ritson."

The tone irritated Mr. Drayton. He glanced down with a look that seemed to say that Hugh Ritson had his Maker to thank for giving him the benefit of an infirm foot.

Hugh Ritson mollified him by explaining that if he had any curiosity as to the name, he could discover it for himself. "Besides," said Hugh, "what matter about the name if your mother is dead?"

"That's true," said Drayton, who, being now appeased, began to see that his anger had been puerile.

"Depend upon it, your father, wherever he is, is a cipher," said Hugh Ritson.

Drayton got on to his feet and trudged the floor uneasily. An idea had occurred to him. "The person picked out of the river may have been another woman. I've heard of such."

"Possibly; but the chance of error is worth little to you." Hugh looked uncomfortable as he said this, but Drayton saw nothing.

"Bah! What matter?" said Drayton, and, determined to cudgel his brains no longer, he reached for the brandy and drank another half glass. There was then an interchange of deep amity.

"Tell me," said Hugh, "what passed at the Ghyll on Monday night?"

"The Ghyll? Monday? That was the night of the snow. What passed? Nothing."

"Why did you go?"

"Wanted to see your mother. Saw your brother one night late at the door of the parson's house. Saw you at the fire. At the fire?—certainly. Stood a matter of a dozen yards away when that young buck of a stableman drove up with the trap. What excuse for going? Blest if I remember—summat or other; knocked, and no one came. I don't know how long and all I stood cooling my heels at the door. Then I saw a light coming from a room on the first floor, and up I went and knocked. 'Come in,' says somebody. I went in. Withered old party got up. Black crape and beads, you know. But, afore I could speak, she reeled like a top and fell all of a heap. Blest if the old girl didn't take me for a ghost!" Mr. Drayton elevated his eyebrows, and added with emphasis, "I got out."

"And on the way back you frightened a young lady in the lane, who, like my mother, mistook you for the ghost of my brother Paul. Well, that young lady was married to my brother this morning. They are now on their way to London. They intend to leave England on Wednesday next, and they mean to pass to-night in your house."

Mr. Drayton's eyebrows went up again.

"It is certainly hard to understand—but look," and Hugh Ritson handed to Drayton the telegram he had received from Bonnithorne. That worthy examined it minutely, back and front, with bleared and bewildered eyes, and then looked to his visitor for explanation.

"The lady must not leave England," said Hugh.

Drayton steadied himself, and tried hard to look appalled.

"Upon my soul, you make my flesh creep!" he said. "What do you want for your twenty pounds? Speak out plain. I'm not flowery, I'm not. I'm a licensed victualer and a gentleman—"

"What do I want? Only that you should send the lady home again by the first train."

Drayton began to laugh.

"You see, there was no cause for alarm," said Hugh, with an innocent smile.

Drayton's laughter became boisterous.

"I am to decoy the young thing away by making her believe as I'm her husband, eh?"

"Mr. Drayton, you are a shrewd fellow."

"And what about the husband—ain't he another shrewd fellow?"

"Leave him to me. When the time comes, make no delay. Don't expose yourself unnecessarily. Wear that ulster you have on at present. Say as little as possible—nothing if practicable. Get the

lady into the fly that shall be waiting at the door; drive to the station; book her to Keswick; put her into the carriage at the last moment; then clear away with all expedition. The midnight train never stops this side of Bedford."

Drayton was shuffling across the room, chuckling audibly. "He, he, he! haw! haw!—so I'm to leave her at the station, eh? Poor young thing; I hain't got the heart—I hain't got it in me to be so cruel. No, no, I couldn't be such a vagabond of a husband—he, he! haw, haw!—and on the poor thing's wedding day, too."

Hugh Ritson rose to his feet.

"If you go an inch further than the station, you'll repent it to your dying day!" he said, once more bringing down his fist heavily on the table.

At this Drayton chuckled and crowed yet louder, and declared that it would be necessary to have another half glass in order to take the taste of the observation out of his mouth.

Then his laughter ceased.

"Look here: you want me to do a job as can only be done by one man alive. And what do you offer me—twenty pounds? Keep it," he said; "it won't pass, sir!"

The fire had burned very low, the cheerless room was dense with smoke and noisome with the smell of dead tobacco. Drayton buttoned up to the throat the long coat he wore.

"I've summat on," he said; "good-night."

The sound of children's voices came from the bar. The little ones were going home.

"Good-night, missy, and thank you." It was a woman's voice.

"Good-night, Mercy," cried the children.

Drayton was opening the door.

"Think again," said Hugh Ritson. "You run no risk. Eleven forty-five prompt will do."

CHAPTER IV.

When Drayton went out, Hugh Ritson walked into the bar. The gossips had gone. Only the landlady was there. The door to the room opposite now stood open.

"Mrs. Drayton," said Hugh, "have you ever seen this face before?"

He took a medallion from his pocket and held it out to her.

"Lor's a mercy me!" cried the landlady; "why, it's her herself as plain as plain—except for the nun's bonnet."

"Is that the lady who lodged with you at Pimlico—the mother of Paul?"

"As sure as sure! Lor's, yes; and to think the poor young dear is dead and gone! It's thirty years since, but it do make me cry, and my husband—he's gone, too—my husband he said to me, 'Martha,' he said, 'Martha—'"

The landlady's garrulity was interrupted by a light scream: "Hugh, Hugh!"

Mercy Fisher stood in the door-way, with wonder-stricken eyes and heaving breast.

In an instant the poor little soul had rushed into Hugh Ritson's arms with the flutter of a frightened bird.

"Oh, I knew you would come—I was sure you would come!" she said, and dried her eyes, and then cried again, and then dried them afresh, and lifted her pouting lips to be kissed.

Hugh Ritson made no display. A shade of impatience crossed his face at first, but it was soon gone. He tried to look pleased, and bent his head and touched the pale lips slightly.

"You look wan, you poor little thing," he said, quietly. "What ails you?"

"Nothing—nothing, now that you have come. Only you were so long in coming, so very long."

He called up a brave word to answer her.

"But you see I keep my word, little woman," he said, and smiled down at her and nodded his head cheerfully.

"And you have come to see me at last! All this way to see poor little me!"

The mute weariness that had marked her face fled at that moment before a radiant smile.

"One must do something for those who risk so much for one," he said, and laughed a little.

"Ah!"

The first surprise over, the joy of that moment was beyond the gift of speech. Her arms encircled his neck, and she looked up at his face in silence and with brightening eyes.

"And so you found the time long and tedious?" he said.

"I had no one to talk to," she said, with a blank expression.

"Why, you ungrateful little thing! you had good Mrs. Drayton here, and her son, and all the smart young fellows of Hendon who came to drink at the bar and say pretty things to the little bar-maid, and—"

"It's not that—I had no one who knew you," she said, and dropped her voice to a whisper.

"But you go out sometimes—into the village—to London?" he said.

"No, I never go out—never now."

"Then your eyes are really worse?"

"It's not my eyes. But, never mind. Oh, I knew you would not forget me. Only sometimes of an evening, when the dusk fell in, and I sat by the fire all alone, something would say, 'He doesn't want me,' 'He won't come for me.' But that was not true, was it?"

"Why, no; of course not."

"And then when the children came—the neighbor's children,—and I put the little darlings to bed, and they said their prayers to me, and I tried to pray, too—sometimes I was afraid to pray—and then, and then," (she glanced round watchfully and dropped her voice) "something would say, 'Why didn't he leave me alone? I was so happy!'"

"You morbid little woman! You shall be happy again—you are happy now, are you not?" he said.

Her eyes, bleared and red, but bright with the shafts of love, looked up at him in the dumb joy that is perfect happiness.

"Ah!" she said, and dropped her comely head on his breast.

"But you should have taken walks—long, healthy, happy walks," he said.

"I did—while the roses bloomed and the dahlias and things, and I saved so many of them against you would come, moss roses and wild white roses; but you were so long coming and they withered. And then I couldn't throw them away, because, you know, they were yours; so I pressed them in the book you gave me. See, let me show you."

She stepped aside eagerly to pick up a little gilt-edged book from the table in the inner room. He followed her mechanically, hardly heeding her happy prattle.

"And was there no young fellow in all Hendon to make those lonely walks of yours more cheerful?"

She was opening her book with nervous fingers, and stopped to look up with blank eyes.

"Eh? No handsome young fellow who whispered that you were a pretty little thing, and had no right to go moping about by yourself? None? Eh?"

Her old look of weariness was creeping back.

"Come, Mercy, tell the truth, you sly little thing—eh?"

She was fumbling his withered roses with nervous fingers. Her throat felt parched.

He looked down at her saddening face, and then muttered, as if speaking to himself: "I told that Bonnithorne this hole and corner was no place for the girl. He should have taken her to London."

The girl's heart grew sick. The book was closed and dropped back on to the table.

"And now, Mercy," said Hugh Ritson, "I want you to be a good little woman, and do as I bid you, and not speak a word. Will you?"

The child-face brightened, and Mercy nodded her head, a little tear rolling out of one gleaming eye. At the same moment she put her hand in the pocket of her muslin apron, and took out a pair of knitted mittens, and tried to draw them on to Hugh's wrists.

He looked at the gift, and smiled, and said: "I won't need these—not to-day, I mean. See, I wear long gloves, with fur wristbands—there, I'll store your mittens away in my pocket. What a sad little soul—crying again?"

Mercy's pretty dreams were dying one by one. She lifted now a timid hand until it rested lightly on his breast.

"Listen. I'm going out, but I'll soon be back. I must talk with Mrs. Drayton, and I've something to pay her, you know."

The timid hand fell to the girl's side.

"When I return there may be some friends with me—a lady and a gentleman—but I want to see them alone, quite alone, and I don't want them to see you—do you understand?"

A great dumb sadness was closing in on Mercy's heart.

"But they will soon be gone, and then to-morrow you and I must talk again, and try to arrange matters so that you won't be quite so lonely, but will stir about, and see the doctor for your eyes, and get well again, and try to forget—"

"Forget!" said the girl, faintly. Her parched throat took away her voice.

"I mean—that is to say—I was hoping—of course, I mean forget all the trouble in Cumberland. And now get away to bed like a good little girl. I must be off. Ah, how late!—see, a quarter to eleven, and my watch is slow."

He walked into the bar, buttoning up his coat to his ears. The girl followed him listlessly. Mrs. Drayton was washing glasses behind the counter.

"Mind you send this little friend of mine to bed very soon," said Hugh to the landlady. "Look how red her eyes are! And keep a good fire in this cozy parlor on the left—you are to have visitors—you need not trouble about a bedroom—they won't stay long. Let me see, what do they say is the time of your last up-train?"

"To London? The last one starts away at half past twelve," said the landlady.

"Very good. I'll see you again, Mrs. Drayton. Good-night, Mercy, and do keep a brighter face. There—kiss me. Now, good-night—what a silly, affectionate little goose—and mind you are in bed and asleep before I return, or I shall be that angry—yes, I shall. You never saw me angry. Well, never mind. Good-night."

The door opened and closed. Mercy went back into the room. It was cheerless and empty, and the children's happy voices lived in it no more. The girl's heart ached with a dull pain that had never a pang at all, but was dumb and dead and cold; and Mercy was all alone.

"Perhaps he was only in fun when he said that about walking out with somebody and trying to forget, and not being seen," she thought. "Yes; he must have been only in fun," she thought, "because he knew how I waited and waited."

Then she took up again the book that he had hardly glanced at. It fell open at a yellow, dried-up rose that had left the stain of its heart's juice on the white leaf.

"Yes, he was only in fun," she said, and then laughed a little; and then a big drop fell on to the open page and on to the dead flower.

Then she tried to be very brave.

"I must not cry; it makes my eyes, oh! so sore. I must get them well and strong—oh, yes! I must be well and strong against—against—then."

She lifted her head slowly where she stood alone, and a smile, like a summer breeze on still water, rippled over her mouth.

"He kissed me," she thought, "and he came to see me—all this long, long way."

A lovely dream shone in her face now.

"And if he does not come again until—until then—he will be glad—oh, he will be very glad!"

The thought of a future hour when the poor little soul should be rich with something of her own that would be dearest of all because not all her own, shone like a sleeping child's vision in her face. She went out into the bar and lighted a candle.

"So that's your sweetheart—not the lawyer man, eh?" said Mrs. Drayton, bustling about.

"I've no call to hide my face now—not now that he has come—have I?" said Mercy.

"Well, he is free of his money, and I've just been hoping you get some of it, for, as I says, you want things bad, and them as has the looking to it should find 'em, as is only reasonable."

Mercy did as she had been bidden: she went off to her bedroom. But her head was too full of thoughts for sleep. She examined her face in the glass, and smiled and blushed at it because he called it pretty. It was prettier than ever to her own eyes now. After half an hour she remembered that she had left the book on the table in the parlor, and crept down-stairs to recover it. When she was on the landing at the bottom, she heard a hurried knock at the outer door.

Thereafter all her dreams died in an instant.

CHAPTER V.

When Hugh Ritson stepped out into the road, the night was dark. Fresh from the yellow light of the inn, his eyes could barely descry the footpath or see the dim black line of the hedge. The atmosphere was damp. The moisture in the air gathered in great beads on his eyebrows and beard, stiffening them with frost. It was bitterly cold. The mist that rose from the river spread itself over the cold, open wastes of marshy ground that lay to the right and to the left. The gloomy road was thick with half-frozen mud.

Hugh Ritson buttoned his coat yet closer and started at a brisk pace.

"No time to lose," he thought, "if I've to be at the station when the north train goes through. Would have dearly liked to keep an eye on my gentleman. Should have done it, but for the girl. 'Summat on,' eh? What is it, I wonder? It might be useful to know."

With a cutting wind at his back he walked faster as his eyes grew familiar with the darkness. He was thinking that Bonnithorne's telegram might be an error. Perhaps it had even been tampered with. It was barely conceivable that Paul and Greta had ever so much as heard of the Hawk and Heron. And what possible inducement could they have to sleep in Hendon when they would be so near to London?

His mind went back to Mercy Fisher. At that moment she was dreaming beautiful dreams of how happy she was very soon to make him. He was thinking, with vexation, that the girl was a connecting link with the people in Cumberland. Yes—and the only link, too. Could it be that Mercy—No; the idea of Mercy's disloyalty to him was really too ridiculous. If he could get to the station before the train from the north was due to stop there, he would see for himself whether Paul and Greta alighted. If they did not, as they must be in that train, he would get into it also, and go on with them to London. Bonnithorne might have blundered.

The journey was long, and the roads were heavy for walking. It seemed a far greater distance than he had thought. At the angle of a gate and a thick brier hedge he struck a match and read the time by his watch. Eleven o'clock. Too late, if the watch were not more than a minute slow.

At that moment he heard the whistle of a train, and between the whirs of the wind he heard the tinkle of the signal bell. Too late, indeed. He was still a quarter of a mile from the station.

Still he held on his way, without hope for his purpose, yet quickening his pace to a sharp run.

He had come within three hundred yards of the station when he heard an unearthly scream, followed in an instant by a great clamor and tumult of human voices. Shrieks, shouts, groans, sobs, wails—all were mingled together in one agonized cry that rent the thick night air asunder.

Hugh Ritson ran faster.

Then he saw haggard men and women appearing and disappearing before him in the light of a fire that panted on the ground like an overthrown horse.

The north train had been wrecked.

Within a dozen yards from the station the engine and three of the front carriages had broken from their couplings and plunged on to the bank. The last four carriages, free of the fatal chain, had kept the rails and were standing unharmed above.

Women who had been dragged through the tops of the overturned carriages fled away with white faces into the darkness of the fields. Men, too, with panic-stricken eyes, sat down on the grass, helpless and useless. Some resolute souls, roused to activity, were pulling at the carriages to set them right. Men from the station came with lanterns, and rescued the injured, and put them to lie out of harm's way.

The scene was harrowing, and only two of its incidents are material to this history. Over all the rest, the clamor, the tumult, the agony, the abject fear, and the noble courage, let a veil be drawn.

Fate had brought together, in that hour of disaster, three men whose lives, hitherto apart, were henceforth to be bound up as one life for good or ill.

Hugh Ritson rushed here and there like a man distraught. He peered into every face. He caught up a lantern that some one had set down, and ran to and fro in the darkness, stooping to let the light fall on those on the ground, holding up the red glare to the windows of the uninjured carriages.

At that moment all his frozen soul seemed to melt. Face to face with the pitiless work of destiny, his own heartless schemes disappeared. At last he saw the face he looked for. Then he dropped the lantern to his side, and turned the glass of it from him.

"Stay here, Greta," said a voice he knew. "I shall be back with you presently. Let me lend them a hand over yonder." The man went by him in the darkness.

Hark!

Hugh Ritson heard a cry from the field beyond the bank. It was there that they had placed the injured.

"Help! help! I am robbed— help!" came out of the darkness.

"Where are you?" asked another voice.

"Here! Help! help!"

Hugh Ritson ran toward the place whence the first voice came, and saw the figure of a man stooping over something that lay on the ground. At the same moment another man rushed up and laid strong hold of the stooping figure. There was a short, sharp struggle. The two men were of one stature, one strength. There was a sound as of cloth ripped asunder.

At the next moment one of the men went by like the wind and was lost in the blackness of the fields. But Hugh Ritson had held up the lantern as the man passed, and caught one swift glimpse of his face. He knew him.

A group had gathered about the injured person on the ground and about the other man who had struggled to defend him.

"Could you not hold the scoundrel?" said one.

"I held him till his coat came to pieces in my hand. See here," said the other.

Hugh Ritson knew the voice.

"A piece of Irish frieze, I should say" (feeling it).

"You must have gripped him by the lappel of his ulster. Let me keep this. I am a police sergeant. What is your name, sir?"

"Paul Ritson."

"And your address?"

"I was on my way to Morley's Hotel, Trafalgar Square. What place is this?"

"Hendon."

"Could one get accommodation here for the night? A lady is with me."

"Best go up by the twelve-thirty, sir."

"The lady is too much worn and excited. Any hotel, inn, lodging-house?"

A porter came up.

"The Hawk and Heron's handiest. A mile, sir. Drayton—it's him as keeps it—he's here somewhere. Drayton!" (calling).

"Can you get me a fly, my good fellow?"

"Yes, sir."

The police sergeant moved off.

"Then I may look for you at the Hawk and Heron?" he said.

Hugh Ritson heard all. He kept the lantern down. In the darkness not a face of that group was seen of any man.

A quarter of an hour later, Hugh Ritson, panting for breath, was knocking at the door of the inn. The landlady within fumbled with the iron bar behind it.

"Come, quick!" said Hugh.

The door opened, and he stepped in sharply, bathed in perspiration.

"Is your son back?" he said, catching his breath.

"Back, sir? No, sir; it's a mercy if he gets home afore morning, sir; he's noways—"

"Stop your clatter. The girl is in her room. Go and turn the key on her!"

It was at that moment that Mercy, having stood an instant at the bottom of the stairs, had ventured nervously into the bar. Turning about, Hugh Ritson came face to face with her. At the sight of her his crimsoning cheeks became white with wrath.

"Didn't I tell you to be in bed?" he muttered, in a low, hoarse whisper.

"I've only come for ... I came down for ... Hugh, don't be angry with me."

"Come, get back, then; don't stand there. Quick—and mind you lock your door."

"Yes, I'm going. You wouldn't be angry with me, would you?"

"Well, no, perhaps not; only get off—and quick! Do you hear? Why don't you go?"

"I only came down for ... I only came...."

"God! what foolery is this? The girl's fainting. Never mind. Here, landlady, bring a light! Lead the way. She's not too heavy to carry. Upstairs with you. What a snail you are, old woman! Which

room?"

Another knock at the outer door. Another and another in rapid succession.

"I'm a-coming, I'm a-coming!" cried the landlady from the floor above.

She bustled down the stairs as fast as her stiff joints would let her, but the knock came again.

"Mercy me, mercy me! and whoever is it?"

"Damme, move your bones, and let me in!"

The door flew open with pressure from without. Ghastly white, yet dripping with perspiration, his breath coming in short, thick gusts, his neck bare, his shirt-collar torn aside, the lappel of the frieze ulster gone, and the rent of the red flannel lining exposed, Paul Drayton entered. He was sober now.

"Where is he?" with an oath.

"I'm here," said Hugh Ritson, walking through the bar and into the bar-room to the right, and candle in hand.

Drayton followed him, trying to laugh.

"Am I in time?"

"Of course you are," with a hard smile.

"Fearing I might be late."

"Of course you were."

"Ran all the way."

"Of course you did."

"What are you sniggering and mocking at?" with another oath.

Hugh Ritson dropped his banter, and pointed without a word to the torn ulster and the disordered shirt-collar. Drayton glanced down at his dress in the light of the candle.

"Crossed the fields for shortness, and caught in a bramble-bush," he said, muttering.

"Drop it," said Hugh. "There's no time for it. Look here, Drayton, I'm a downright man. Don't try it on with me. As you say, it won't pass. Shall I tell you where the collar of that coat is now? It's at the police-station."

Drayton made an uneasy movement and glanced up furtively. There was no mistaking what he saw in Hugh Ritson's face.

"I've my own suspicions as to what caused that accident," said Hugh.

Drayton shuddered and shrunk back.

"No, damme! That shows what you are, though. Show me the man as allus suspects others of lying, and I'll show you a liar. Show me the man as allus suspects others of stealing, and I'll show you a thief. You suspect me of that, d'ye? I know you now!"

"No matter," said Hugh, impatiently; "your sense of the distinction between crimes is a shade too nice. One crime I do not suspect you of—I saw you commit it. Is that enough?"

Drayton was silent.

"You'll go to the station with the lady. The gentleman will go to London with me. They are to come here, after all, though my first advice was a blunder."

"I'll take the twenty," Drayton mumbled.

"Will you now? We'll discuss that matter afterward."

Drayton seemed stupefied for a moment. Then he lifted his haggard face and grinned. Hugh Ritson understood him in an instant.

"No tricks, I tell you. If you don't put the lady in the train—the right train—and be back here at half past one to-morrow, you shall improve your acquaintance with the Old Bailey."

Drayton carried his eyes slowly up to Hugh Ritson's face, then dropped them suddenly.

"If I'm lagged, it will be a lifer!" he muttered. He fumbled his torn ulster. "I must change my coat," he said.

"No."

"She'll see the rent."

"So much the better."

"But the people at the junction will see it."

"What matter?—you will be there as Paul Ritson, not Paul Drayton."

Drayton began to laugh, to chuckle, to crow.

"Hush!"

The sound of carriage-wheels came from the road.

"They're here," said Hugh Ritson. "Keep you out of sight, as you value your liberty. Do you hear? Take care that he doesn't see you, and that she doesn't see you until he is gone."

Drayton was tramping about the floor in the intensity of his energy.

"Here's the bar-slide. I'll just lift it an inch."

"Not half an inch," said Hugh, and he blew out the candle.

Then he took the key out of the inside of the lock, and put it on the outside.

"What! am I to be a prisoner in my own house?" said Drayton.

"I'll put the key on the bar-slide," whispered Hugh. "When you hear the door close after us, let yourself out—not a moment sooner."

The carriage-wheels stopped outside. There was a sound as of the driver jumping from the box. Then there came a knock.

Hugh Ritson stepped back to Drayton and whispered:

"This is the very man who tried to hold you—keep you close."

CHAPTER VI.

"This way, sir; this way, my lady; we knew you was a-coming, so we kep' a nice warm fire in the parlor. This way, my lady, and mind the step up. Yes, it air dark, but it's clean, sir; yes, it is, sir; but there's a light in here, sir."

Paul and Greta followed the landlady through the dark bar.

"We'll find our way, my good woman. Ah, and how cozy you are here! As warm as toast on a cold night. Thank you, thank you—and—why, surely we've—we've surprised you. Did you say you were expecting somebody? Ah, I see!"

Mrs. Drayton was backing out of the room with a pallid face, and twitching at the string of her apron. When she got to the bar she was trembling from head to foot.

"I don't believe in ghosts," she muttered to herself, "but if so be as I did believe in ghosts, and afeart of 'em, I don't know as ... Lor's a mercy me! Who was a-saying as our Paul was like some one? And now here's some one as is like our Paul. And as much a match as two pewters, on'y one more smarter, mayhap, and studdier."

"Whatever ails the old lady?" said Greta, faintly.

Paul stood a moment and laughed.

"Strange, but we can't trouble now. What a mercy we're safe and unharmed."

"A fearful sight—I'll never, never forget it," said Greta, and she covered her face.

Paul stepped to the door. The flyman was bringing in the luggage.

"Leave the boxes in the bar, driver—there, that will do. Many of them, eh? Rather. Here's for yourself. Why, bless my soul, who's this? What, Hugh!"

Hugh Ritson walked into the room calm and smiling, and held out his hand to Greta and then to his brother.

"I came up to meet your train," he said, in answer to the look of inquiry.

"Well, that was good of you. Of course, you know of the accident. How did you find us here?"

"I heard at the station that a lady and gentleman had gone to the Hawk and Heron."

"And you followed? Well, Hugh, I must say that was brotherly of you, after all. Wasn't it, Greta?"

"Yes, dear," said Greta, faintly, her voice trembling.

Paul observed her agitation.

"My poor girl, you are upset. I don't wonder at it. You must get off for the night. Hugh, you must excuse her. It was a terrible scene, you know. Our new life begins with a great shock to you, Greta. Never mind; that only means that the bright days are before us."

Paul stepped to the door again, and called to Mrs. Drayton.

"Here, my good landlady, take my wife to her room."

The landlady hobbled up.

"Room, sir, room? The gentleman didn't say nothing—"

"Take the lady to your best room upstairs," said Hugh, with a significant look.

Greta was going. Her step was slow and uncertain.

"Won't you say good-night, Greta?" said Hugh.

"Good-night," she said, so faintly as hardly to be heard.

The brothers looked after her.

"God bless her!" said Paul, fervently. "The days before her shall be brighter, if I can make them so."

Hugh Ritson closed the door.

"Paul," he said, "you and your wife must never meet again."

Paul Ritson turned red, and then ashy pale. A scarcely perceptible tremble of the eyelids, then a jaunty laugh, and then an appalling solemnity.

"What d'ye mean, man?" he said, with a vacant stare.

"Sit down and listen," said Hugh, seating himself, and lifting the poker to draw the fire together.

"Quick, tell me what it, is!" said Paul again.

"Paul, don't chafe. We are hot-tempered men, both, at bottom," said Hugh, and his eye perused his brother with searching power.

"Don't look at me like that," said Paul. "Don't try to frighten me. Speak out, and quickly."

"Be calm," said Hugh.

"Bah! you take me blindfold to the edge of a precipice, and tell me to 'be calm.'"

"You are wrong. I find you there, and remove the bandage," said Hugh.

"Quick! what is it? In another moment I shall cry out!"

Hugh Ritson rose stiffly to his feet.

"Paul, did you tell Greta she was marrying a bastard?"

With one look of anguish Paul fell back mute and trembling.

"Did you tell her?" said Hugh, with awful emphasis.

Paul's eyes were on the ground, his head bent forward. He was silent.

"I thought you did not mean to tell her," said Hugh, coldly. His eyes looked steadfastly at Paul's drooping head. "I think so still."

Paul said nothing, but drew his breath hard. Hugh watched him closely.

"To marry a woman under a false pretense—is it the act of an honorable man? Is it a cheat? Give it what name you will."

Paul drew himself up; his lips were compressed, and he smiled.

"Is this all?" he asked.

"Why did you not tell her?" said Hugh.

"Because I had sworn to tell no one. You will read that secret, as you have read the other."

Hugh smiled.

"Say, rather, because you dare not do so; because, had you told her, she had never become your wife."

Paul laughed vacantly.

"We shall see. My own lips are sealed, but yours are free. You shall tarnish the memory of our father and blacken the honor of our mother. You shall humble me, and rob me of my wife's love—if you will and can."

Saying this, Paul stepped hastily to the door, flung it open, and cried: "Greta! Greta!"

Hugh followed him and caught his arm.

"What are you doing?" he said, in a hoarse whisper; "be quiet, I tell you—be quiet."

Paul turned about.

"You say I am afraid to tell her. You charge me with trapping her into marrying me. You shall tell her yourself, now, here, and before my very face!"

"Come in and shut the door," said Hugh.

"It would do no good, and perhaps some harm. No matter, you shall tell her. I challenge you to tell her."

"Come in, and listen to me," said Hugh, sullenly; and putting himself between Paul and the door, he closed it. "There is more to think of than what Greta may feel," he added. "Have you nothing to say to me?"

Paul's impetuous passion cooled suddenly.

"I have made you atonement," he said, faintly, and dropped into a seat.

"Atonement!"

Hugh Ritson smiled bitterly.

"When you return you will see," said Paid, his eyes once more on the ground.

"You are thinking of the deed of attorney—I have heard of it already," said Hugh. A cold smile played on his compressed lips.

"It was all that was left to do," said Paul, his voice hardly stronger than a whisper. His proud spirit was humbled, and his challenge dead.

"Paul, you have robbed me of my inheritance, consciously, deliberately. You have stood in my place. You stand there still. And you leave me your pitiful deed by way of amends!"

A black frown crossed Hugh Ritson's face.

"Atonement! Are you not ashamed of such mockery? What atonement is there for a wrong like that?"

"I did it for the best; God knows I did!" said Paul, his head fell on the table.

Hugh Ritson stood over him, pale with suppressed wrath.

"Was it best to hold my place until my place was no longer worth holding, and then to leave it with an empty show of generosity? Power of attorney! What right have you to expect that I will take that from you? Take my own from the man who robbed me of it, and to receive it back on my knees! To accept it as a gift, whereof the generosity of giving is yours, and the humility of receiving is mine!"

A strong shudder passed over Paul's shoulders.

"I was helpless—I was helpless!" he said.

"Understand your true position—your legal position. You were your mother's illegitimate son—"

"I did it to protect her honor!"

"You mean—to hide her shame!"

"As you will. I was helpless, and I did it for the best."

Hugh Ritson's face grew dark.

"Was it best to be a perjured liar?" he said.

Paul gasped, but did not reply.

"Was it best to be a thief?"

Paul leaped to his feet.

"God, give me patience!" he muttered.

"Was it best to be an impostor?"

"Stop, for God's sake, stop!"

"Was it best to be a living lie—and all for the sake of honor? Honor, forsooth! Is it in perjury and robbery that honor lies?"

Paul strode about the room in silence, ashy pale, his face convulsed and ugly. Then his countenance softened, and his voice was broken as he said:

"Hugh, I have done you too much wrong already. Don't drive me into more; don't, don't, I beseech you!"

Hugh laughed lightly—a little trill that echoed in the silent room.

At that heartless sound all the soul in Paul Ritson seemed to freeze. No longer abashed, he lifted

his head and put his foot down firmly.

"So be it," he said, and the cloud of anguish fell from his face. "I say it was to save our mother's good name that I consented to do what I did."

"Consented?" said Hugh, elevating his eyelids.

"You don't believe me? Very well; let it pass. You say my atonement is a mockery. Very well, let us say it is so. You say I have kept your place until it is no longer worth keeping. You mean that I have impoverished your estate. That is not true. And you know it is not true. If the land is mortgaged, you yourself have had the money!"

"And who had a better right to it?" said Hugh, and he laughed again.

Paul waved his hand, and gulped down the wrath that was rising.

"You have led me the life of the damned. You know well what bitter cup you have made me drink. If I have stood to the world as my father's heir, you have eaten up the inheritance. If my father's house was mine, I was no more than a cipher in it. I have had the shadow, and you the substance. You have undermined me inch by inch!"

"And, meantime, I have been as secret as the grave," said Hugh, and once more he laughed lightly.

"God knows your purpose—you do nothing without one," said Paul. "But it is not I alone that have suffered. Do you think that all this has been going on under our mother's eyes without her seeing it?"

Hugh Ritson dropped the bantering tone.

Paul's face grew to an awful solemnity.

"When our father died, it was to be her honor or mine to die with him. That was the legacy of his sin, Heaven forgive him. I did not hesitate. But since that hour she has wasted away."

"Is this my fault?" Hugh asked.

"Heaven knows, and Heaven will judge between you," said Paul. "She could bear it no longer." Paul's voice trembled as he added, "She's gone!"

There was a moment's silence. It was as if an angel went by weeping.

"I know it," said Hugh, coldly. "She has taken the veil. I have since seen her."

Paul glanced up.

"She is in the Catholic Convent at Westminster," said Hugh.

Paul's face quivered.

"Miserable man! but for you, how happy she might have been!"

"You are wrong," said Hugh. "It came of her own misdeed—and yours."

Paul strode toward his brother with uplifted hand.

"Not another word of that," he said, and his voice was low and deep.

"How could she examine her conscience and be happy? She had put an impostor in the place of my father's heir," said Hugh.

"She had put there your father's first-born son," said Paul.

"It is false! She had put there her bastard by another man!"

Silent and awful, Paul stood a moment, with an expression of agony so horrible that for an instant even Hugh Ritson quailed before it.

"Go on," he said, huskily, and crouched down into his seat.

"Your mother was married before," said Hugh, "and her marriage was annulled. It was invalid. A child was born of that union."

Paul lifted his head.

"I won't believe it!"

"It is true, and you shall believe it!"

Paul's heart sickened with dread.

"Your father married again, and had a daughter. Your mother married again, and had a son. Your father's daughter is now living. Shall I tell you who she is? She is your wife—the woman you have married to-day!"

Paul sprung to his feet.

"It is a lie!" he cried.

"See for yourself," said Hugh Ritson; and taking three papers from his pocket, he threw them on to the table. They were the copies of certificates which Bonnithorne had given him.

Paul glanced at them with vacant and wandering eyes, fell back in his chair, dropped his head on to the table, and groaned.

"Oh, God! can this thing be?"

"When your mother told you that you were an illegitimate son, she omitted to say by what father. That was natural in her, but cruel to you. I knew the truth from the first."

"Then you are a scoundrel confessed!" cried Paul.

Hugh rolled his head slightly, and made a poor pretense to smile.

"I knew how she had passed from one man to another; I knew what her honor counted for. And yet I was silent—silent, though by silence I lost my birthright. Say, now, if you will, which of us—you or I—has been the true guardian of our mother's name?"

Paul got up again, abject, crushed, trembling in every limb.

"Man, man, don't gnaw my heart away! Unsay your words! Have pity on me, and confess that it is a lie—a black, foul lie! Think of the horror of it—only think of it, and have pity!"

"It is true!"

Then Paul fell on his knees and caught his brother by the arm.

"Hugh, Hugh! my brother, confess it is false! Don't let my flesh consume away with horror! Don't let me envy the very dead who lie at peace in their graves! Pity her, if you have no pity left for me!"

"I would save you from a terrible sin."

Paul rose to his feet.

"Now I know it is a lie!" he said, and all the abject submission of his bearing fell away in one instant.

Hugh Ritson's face flushed.

"There is that here," said Paul, throwing up his head and striking his breast, "that tells me it is false!"

Hugh smiled coldly, and regained his self-possession.

"My mother knew all. If Greta had been my half-sister, would she have stood by and witnessed our love?"

Hugh waved his hand deprecatingly.

"Your mother was as ignorant of the propinquity as you were. Robert Lowther was dead before she settled at Newlands. The survivors knew nothing of each other. The secret of that early and ill-fated marriage was buried with him."

"Destiny itself would have prevented it, for destiny shapes its own ends, and shapes them for the best," said Paul.

"Yes, destiny is shaping them now," said Hugh, "here, and in me. This is the point to which the pathways of your lives have tended. They meet here—and part."

Paul's ashy face smiled.

"Then nature would have prevented it," he said. "If this thing had been true, do you think we should not have known it—she and I—in the natural recoil of our own hearts? When true hearts meet, there is that within which sanctions their love, and says it is good. That is Heaven's own license. No sanction of the world or the world's law, no earthly marriage is like to that, for it is the marriage first made by nature itself. Our hearts have met, hers and mine, and the same nature has sanctioned our love and sanctified it. And against that last, that first, that highest arbiter, do you ask me to take the evidence of these poor, pitiful papers? Away with them!" Paul's eyes were bright, his face had lost its shadows.

"That is very beautiful, no doubt," said Hugh, and he smiled deeply. "But I warn you to beware."

"I have no fear," said Paul.

"See to it, I tell you. These lofty emotions leave a void that only a few homely facts can fill. Verify them."

"I will, please God!"

"Accept my statements and these papers, or—disprove both."

"I will disprove them."

"Meantime, take care. Leave your wife in this house until morning, but do you go elsewhere."

"What!"

Paul's anger was boiling up.

"If you have wronged Greta—"

"I have done her no wrong," said Paul, growing fiercer.

"I say, if you have wronged her, and would have it in your power to repair the injury, you must pass this night apart."

"Hugh!" cried Paul, in white rage, rising afresh to his feet, "you have tortured me and broken the heart of my mother; you have driven me from my home and from the world; you have thrust yourself between me and the woman who loves me, and now, when I am stripped of all else but that woman's love, and am going out to a strange land, a stranger and with empty hands, you would take her from me also and leave me naked!"

"I would save you from a terrible sin," said Hugh Ritson, once again.

"Out of my way!" cried Paul, in a thick voice, and he lifted his clinched fist.

"Take care, I tell you," said Hugh.

Paul looked dangerous; his forehead contracted into painful lines; his quick breathing beat on Hugh's face.

"For the love of Heaven, get out of my way!"

But with awful strength and fury his fist fell at that moment, and Hugh Ritson was dashed to the ground.

In an instant Paul had lifted his foot to trample him, but he staggered back in horror at the impulse, his face ghastly white, his eyes red like the sun above snow. Then there was silence, and then Paul gasped in a flood of emotion:

"Get up! get up! Hugh, Hugh! get up!"

He darted to the door and threw it open.

"Come in, come in! will nobody come?" he cried.

The landlady was in the room at a stride. She had been standing, listening and quivering, behind the door.

In another moment Greta hurried down-stairs, and hastened to Paul's side.

Paul was leaning against the wall, his face buried in his hands.

"Take him away," he groaned, "before I rue the day that I saw him!"

Hugh Ritson rose to his feet.

"Paul, what has happened?" cried Greta.

"Take him away."

And still Paul covered his eyes from the sight of what he had done and had been tempted to do.

"Hugh, what is it?"

Hugh Ritson stepped to the door.

"Ask your husband," he said, with emphasis, and an appalling calmness. "And remember this night. You shall never forget it!"

Then he halted out of the room.

CHAPTER VII.

Hugh Ritson walked to the bare room opposite. The handle of the door did not turn in his hand. Drayton held it at the other side, and with head bent low he crouched there and listened.

"Who is it?" he whispered, when Hugh Ritson unlocked the door and pushed at it.

"Let me in," said Hugh, sullenly.

"Does he suspect?" whispered Drayton, when the door closed again. "Did he follow me? What are you going to do for a fellow? Damme, but I'll be enough for him!"

And Drayton groped in the dark room among the dead cinders on the hearth, and picked up the poker.

"You fool!" said Hugh, in a low voice. "Put that thing down."

"Isn't he after me? D'ye think I'm going to be taken? Let him come here and see!"

Drayton tramped the room, and the floor creaked beneath his heavy tread.

"Speak lower, you poltroon!" Hugh whispered, huskily. "He knows nothing about you. He has never heard of you. Be quiet. Do you hear?"

There was a light, nervous knock at the door.

"Who's there?" said Hugh.

"It's only me, sir," said Mrs. Drayton, from without, breathing audibly, and speaking faintly amid gusts of breath.

Hugh Ritson opened the door, and the landlady entered.

"Lor's a mercy me! whatever ails the gentleman? Oh, is it yourself in the dark, Paul? I'm that fearsome, I declare I shiver and quake at nothing. And the gentleman so like you, too! I never did see nothing like it, I'm sure!"

"Hush! Stop your clatter. What does he say?" said Hugh.

"The gentleman? He says and says and says as nothing and nothing and nothing will make him leave the lady this night."

"He'll think better of that."

"And wherever can I put them? And me on'y one room, forby Paul's. And no cleaning and airing, and nothing. That's what worrits me."

"Hold your tongue! Put the lady in your son's room. Your son won't need it to-night."

"That's where I did put her."

"Very well; leave her there."

"And the gentleman, too, belike?"

"The gentleman will go back with me. Come, get away!"

"Quite right; on'y there's no airing and cleaning; and I declare I'm that fearsome—"

Hugh Ritson had taken the landlady by the shoulders and was pushing her out of the room.

"One moment," he whispered, and drew her back. "Anything doing upstairs?"

"Upstairs?—the bed—airing—"

"The girl? Has she made any noise yet? Is she conscious?"

"Not as I know of. I went up and listened, and never a sound. Deary me, deary me! I'm that fearsome—"

"Go up again, and put your ear to the door."

"I'm afeart she'll never come round, and her in that way, and weak, too, and—"

At that instant there came from the dark road the sound of carriage-wheels approaching. Hugh Ritson thrust the landlady out of the room, slammed the door to, and locked it.

"What's that?" said Drayton, in a husky whisper. "Who do they want? You've not rounded on a fellow, eh?"

"It's the carriage that is to take you and the lady to Kentish Town," said Hugh. "Hush! Listen!"

The driver rapped at the door with the end of his whip, and shouted from his seat: "Heigho, heigho—ready for Kentish Town? Eleven o'clock struck this half hour!" Then he could be heard beating his crossed arms under his armpits to warm his hands.

"The fool!" muttered Hugh, "can't he keep his tongue in his mouth?"

"Quite right," shouted Mrs. Drayton, in a shrill voice, putting her face to the window-pane. "Belike it's for the gentleman," she explained to herself, and then, with candle in hand, she began to mount the stairs.

The door of the room to the left opened, and Paul Ritson came out. His great strength seemed to be gone—he reeled like a drunken man.

"Landlady," he said, "when does your last train go up to London?"

"At half past twelve," said Mrs. Drayton, from two steps up the stairs.

"Can I get a fly, my good woman, at this hour of the night?"

"The fly's at the door, sir—just come, sir."

Paul went back into the room where he had left his wife.

The two men in the dark room opposite listened intently.

"Be quiet," whispered Hugh Ritson. "I knew he must think better of it. He is going. Keep still. Five minutes more, and you start away with the lady for Kentish Town. He shall walk to the station with me. The instant we leave the house, you go to the lady and say, 'I have changed my mind, Greta. We must go together. Come.' Not a word more; hurry her into the fly, and away."

"Easier said nor done, say I."

CHAPTER VIII.

Alone with Greta, Paul kissed her fervently, and his head fell on her shoulder. The strong man was as feeble as a child now. He was prostrate. "The black lie is like poison in my veins!" he said.

"What is it?" said Greta, and she tried to soothe him.

"A lie more foul than man ever uttered before—more cruel, more monstrous."

"What is it, dearest?" said Greta again, with her piteous, imploring face close to his.

"I know it's a lie. My heart tells me it is a lie. The very stones cry out that it is a lie!"

"Tell me what it is," said Greta, and she embraced him tenderly.

But even while he was struggling with the poison of one horrible word, it was mastering him. He put his wife from him with a strong shudder, as if her proximity stung him.

Her bosom heaved. She looked appealingly into his face.

"If it is false," she said, "whatever it is, why need it trouble you?"

"That is true, my darling," he said, gulping down his fear and taking Greta in his arms, and trying to laugh lightly. "Why, indeed? Why need it trouble me?"

"Can you not tell me?" she said, with an upward look of entreaty. She was thinking of what Hugh Ritson had said of an impediment to their marriage.

"Why should I tell you what is false?"

"Then let us dismiss the thought of it," she said, soothingly.

"Why, yes, of course, let us dismiss the thought of it, darling," and he laughed a loud, hollow laugh. His forehead was damp. She wiped away the cold sweat. His temples burned. She put her cool hand on them. He was the very wreck of his former self—the ruin of a man. "Would that I could!" he muttered to himself.

"Then tell me," she said. "It is my right to know it. I am your wife now—"

He drew himself away. She clung yet closer. "Paul, there can be no secrets between you and me—nothing can be kept back."

"Heavenly Father!" he cried, uplifting a face distorted with agony.

"If you can not dismiss it, let it not stand between us," said Greta. Could it be true that there had been an impediment?

"My darling, it would do no good to tell you. When I took you to be my wife, I vowed to protect and cherish you. Shall I keep my vow if I burden you with a black lie that will drive the sunshine out of your life? Look at me—look at me!"

Greta's breast heaved heavily, but she smiled with a piteous sweetness as she laid her head on his breast, and said, "No, while I have you, no lie can do that!"

Paul made no answer. An awful burden of speech was on his tongue. In the silence they heard the sound of weeping. It was as if some poor woman were sobbing her heart out in the room above.

"Dearest, when two hearts are made one in marriage they are made one indeed," said Greta, in a soft voice. "Henceforth the thought of the one is the thought of both; the happiness of one is the happiness of both, the sorrow of one is the sorrow of both. Nothing comes between. Joy is twofold when both share it, and only grief is less for being borne by two. Death itself, cruel, relentless death itself, even death knits that union closer. And in sunshine and storm, in this world and in the next, the bond is ever the same. The tie of the purest friendship is weak compared with this tie, and even the bond of blood is less strong!"

"Oh, God of heaven, this is too much!" said Paul.

"Paul, if this union of thought and deed, of joy and grief, begins with marriage and does not end even with death, shall we now, here, at the threshold of our marriage, do it wrong?"

A great sob choked Paul's utterance. "I can not tell you," he cried; "I have sworn an oath."

"An oath! Then, surely, this present trouble was not that which Hugh Ritson has threatened?"

"Greta, if our union means anything, it means trust. Trust me, my darling. I am helpless. My tongue is sealed. I dare not speak. No, not even to you. Scarcely to God Himself!"

There was silence for a moment.

"That is enough," she said, very tenderly, and now the tears coursed down her own cheeks. "I will not ask again. I do not wish to know. You shall forget that I asked you. Come, dearest, kiss me. Think no more of this. Come, now." And she drew his head down to hers.

Paul threw himself into a chair. His prostration was abject.

"Come, dearest," said Greta, soothingly, "be a man."

"There is worse to come," he said.

"What matter," said Greta, and smiled. "I shall not fear if I have you beside me."

"I can bear it no more," said Paul. "The thing is past cure."

"No, dearest, it is not. Only death is that."

"Greta, you said death would bind us closer together, but this thing draws us apart."

"No, dearest, it does not. That it can not do."

"Could nothing part us?" said Paul, lifting his face.

"Nothing. Though the world divided us, yet we should be together."

Again the loud sobs came from overhead.

Paul rose to his feet, a shattered man no more. His abject mien fell from him like a garment. "Did I not say it was a lie?" he muttered, fiercely. "Greta, I am ashamed," he said; "your courage disgraces me. See what a pitiful coward you have taken for your husband. You have witnessed a strange weakness. But it has been for the last time. Thank God, I am now the man of yesterday!"

Her tears were rolling down her cheeks, but her eyes were very bright. "What do you wish me to do?" she whispered. "Is it not something for me to do?"

"It is, darling. You said rightly that the thought of one is the thought of both."

"What is it?"

"A terrible thing!"

"No matter. I am here to do it. What?"

"It is to part from me to-night—only for to-night—only until to-morrow."

Greta's face broke into a perfect sunshine of beauty. "Is that all?" she asked.

"My darling!" said Paul, and embraced her fervently and kissed the quivering lips, "I am leading you through dark vaults, where you can see no single step before you."

"But I am holding your hand, my husband," Greta whispered.

Speech was too weak for that great moment. Again the heart-breaking sobs fell on the silence. Then Paul drew a cloak over Greta's shoulders and buttoned up his ulster. "It is a little after midnight," he said with composure. "There is a fly at the door. We may catch the last train up to London. I have a nest for you there, my darling."

Then he went out into the bar. "Landlady," he said, "I will come back to-morrow for our luggage. Meantime, let it lie here, if it won't be in your way. We've kept you up late, old lady. Here, take this—and thank you."

"Thankee! and the boxes are quite safe, sir—thankee!"

He threw open the door to the road, and hailed the driver of the fly, cheerily. "Cold, sleety night, my good fellow. You'll have a sharp drive."

"Yes, sir; it air cold waiting, very, specially inside, sir, just for want of summat short."

"Well, come in quick and get it, my lad."

"Right, sir."

When Paul returned to the room to call Greta, he found her examining papers. She had picked them up off the table. They were the copies of certificates which Hugh Ritson had left there. Paul had forgotten them during the painful interview. He tried to recover them unread, but he was too late.

"This," she said, holding out one of them, "is not the certificate of your birth. This person, Paul Lowther, is no doubt my father's lost son."

"No doubt," said Paul, dropping his head.

"But he is thirty years of age—see! You are no more than twenty-eight."

"If I could but prove that, it would be enough," he said.

"I can prove it, and I will!" she said.

"You! How?"

"Wait until to-morrow, and see," she said.

He had put one arm about her waist, and was taking her to the door.

She stopped. "I can guess what the black lie has been," she whispered.

"Now, driver, up and away."

"Right, sir. Kentish Town Junction?"

"The station, to catch the 12:30."

The carriage door was opened and closed. Then the bitter weeping from the upper room came out to them in the night.

"Poor girl! whatever ails her? I seem to remember her voice," said Greta.

"We can't wait," Paul answered.

CHAPTER IX.

The clocks of London were striking one when Paul and Greta descended the steps in front of St. Pancras Station. The night was dark and bitterly cold. Dense fog hung in the air, and an unaccustomed silence brooded over the city. A solitary four-wheeled cab stood in the open square. The driver was inside, huddled up in his great-coat, and asleep. A porter awakened him, and he made way for Greta and Paul. He took his apron from the back of his horse, wrapped it about his waist, and snuffed the wicks of his lamps—they burned low and red, and crackled in the damp atmosphere.

"What hotel, sir?"

"The convent, Westminster."

"Convent, sir? Did you say the convent, sir? St. Margaret's, Westminster, sir?"

"The Catholic convent."

Greta's hand pressed Paul's arm.

The cabman got on to his box, muttering something that was inaudible. As he passed the gate lodge he drew up while the porter on duty came out with a lamp, and took the number of the cab.

The fog grew more dense at every step, and the pace at which they traveled was slow. To avoid the maze of streets that would have helped them to a shorter cut on a clearer night, the driver struck along Euston Road to Tottenham Court Road, and thence south toward Oxford Street. This straighter and plainer course had the disadvantage of being more frequented. Many a collision became imminent in the uncertain light.

The cabman bought a torch from a passer-by, and stuck it in his whip-barrel. As they reached the busier thoroughfares he got down from his box, took the torch in one hand and the reins in the other, and walked at his horse's head.

The pace was now slower than before. It was like a toilsome passage through the workings of an iron mine. Volumes of noisome vapor rolled slowly past them. The air hung close over their heads like an unseen, vaulted roof. Red lights gleamed like vanishing stars down the elastic vista. One light would turn out to be a coffee-stall, round which a group of people gathered—cabmen muffled to the throat, women draggled and dirty, boys with faces that were old. Another would be a potato-engine, with its own volumes of white vapor, and the clank of its oven door like the metallic echo of the miner's pick. The line of regular lamps was like the line of candles stuck to the rock, the cross streets were like the cross-workings, the damp air settling down into streaks of moisture on the glass of the cab window was like the ceaseless drip, drip of the oozing water from overhead.

And to the two laden souls sitting within in silence and with clasped hands, the great city, nay, the world itself, was like a colossal mine, which human earthworms had burrowed underground, while the light and the free air were both above.

At one point, where a patch of dry pavement indicated a bake-house under the street, three or four squalid creatures crouched together and slept. The streets were all but noiseless. It would be two hours yet before the giant of traffic would awake. The few cabmen hailed each other as

they passed unrecognized, and their voices sounded hoarse. When the many clocks struck two, the many tones came muffled through the dense air.

The journey was long and wearisome, but Paul and Greta scarcely felt it. They were soon to part; they knew not when they were to meet again. Perhaps soon, perhaps late; perhaps not until a darkness deeper than this should cover the land.

Turning into Oxford Street, the cabman struck away to the west, in order to come upon Westminster by the main artery of Regent Street. The great thoroughfare was quiet enough now. Fashion was at rest, but even here, and in its own mocking guise, misery had its haunt. A light laugh broke the silence of the street, and a girl, so young as to be little more than a child, dressed in soiled finery, and reeling with unsteady step on the pavement, came up to the cab window and peered in.

At the open door of a hotel, from whence a shaft of light came out into the fog, the cabman drew up. "Comfortable hotel, sir; think you'd like to put up, sir?"

Paul dropped the window. "We want the Catholic convent at Westminster, my man."

The cabman had put up his torch and was flapping his arms under his armpits. "Cold job, sir. Think I've had enough of it. Ha'past two, and a mile from St. Margaret's yet, sir. Got a long step home, sir, and the missis looking out for me this hour and more."

The night porter of the hotel had opened the cab door, but not for an instant did Paul's purpose waver. "I'm sorry, my good fellow, but we must reach the convent, as I tell you."

"Won't to-morrow do, sir? Comfortable quarters, sir. Can recommend 'em," with a tip of his hand over his shoulder.

"We must get to the convent to-night, my man."

The cabman returned to his horse's head with a grunt of dissatisfaction. "Porter, can you keep a bed for me here? I shall be back in an hour," said Paul. The porter signified assent, and once again the cab moved off on its slow journey.

As it passed out of Trafalgar Square by way of Charing Cross, the air suddenly lightened. It was as if waves of white mist rolled over the yellow vapor. The cabman threw away his torch, mounted his box, and set off at a trot. When he reached Parliament Square the fog was gone. The great clock of Westminster was striking three; the sky was a dun gray behind the clocktower, and the dark mass of the abbey could be dimly seen.

The cab drew up on the south-west of Abbey Gardens and before a portico railed in by an iron gate. The lamp burning on the sidewalk in front cast a hazy light on what seemed to be a large brick house plain in every feature.

"This is Saint Margaret's, sir. Eight shillings, sir, if you please."

Paul dismissed the cabman and rang the bell; the hollow tongue sent out a startling reverberation into the night. The sky to the east was breaking; thin streaks of a lighter gray foretold the dawn.

The door opened and the iron gate swung back. A sister carrying an open oil lamp motioned them to enter.

"Can I see the superior?" said Paul.

"She is newly risen," said the sister, and she fixed the lamp to a bracket in the wall and went away. They were left in a bare, chill, echoing hall.

The next moment a line of nuns in their coifs passed close by them with quick and silent steps. At that gray hour they had risen for matins. Some of them were pale and emaciated, and one that was palest and most worn went by with drooping head and hands that inlaced her rosary. Paul stepped back a pace. The nun moved steadily onward with the rest. Never a sign of recognition, never an upward glance, only the quivering of a lip—but it was his mother!

He, too, dropped his head, and his own lips trembled. The mother superior was standing with them before he was aware. For an instant his voice was suspended, but he told her at length that a great calamity had befallen them, and begged her to take his wife for a time into her care.

"Charity is our office," said the mother, when she had heard his story. "Come, my sister, the Church is peace. Your poor laden soul may put off its load while you are here."

Paul begged to be allowed a moment to say farewell, and the good mother left them together.

Then from an inner chamber came the solemn tones of an organ and the full voices of a choir. The softened harmonies seemed to float into their torn hearts, and they wept. The gray dawn was creeping in. It blurred the red light of the lamp.

"Good-bye, darling, good-bye!" Paul whispered; but even while he spoke he clung the closer.

"Good-bye for the present, dear husband," said Greta, and smiled.

"Who would have thought that this calamity could wait for you at the very steps of God's altar?"

"A day will turn all this evil into good."

"At the threshold of our life together to be torn apart!"

"Think of it no more, dearest. Our lives will yet be the brighter for this calamity. Do you remember what Parson Christian used to say? The happiest life is not that which is always in the sunlight, but rather that over which a dark cloud has once lowered and passed away."

Paul shook his head. "My lips are sealed. You do not know all. It is a cruel lie that separates us. But what if it can not be disproved?"

Greta's eyes were full of a radiant hopefulness. "It can, and shall!"

Paul bent his head and touched her forehead with his lips. "The past is a silence that gives back no answer," he said. "My mother alone could disprove it, and she is dead to the world."

"Not alone, dearest. I can disprove it. Wait and see!"

Paul smiled coldly, and once more shook his head. "You don't know all," he said again, and kissed her reverently. "What if to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow brings no light to unravel this mystery?"

"Never fear it. The finger of Heaven is in this," said Greta.

"Say, rather, the hand of destiny. And how little we are in the presence of that pitiless power!"

"God sees all," said Greta. "He has led me in here, and He will guide me out again."

"What if I brought you for a day, and you remain for a year, for life?"

"Then think that God Himself has taken your wife at your hands."

Paul's face, that had worn a look of deep dejection, became distorted with pain. "Oh, it is horrible! And this cloister is to be your marriage-bed!"

"Hush! All is peace here. Good-bye, dearest Paul. Be brave, my husband."

"Brave? Before death a man may be brave; but in the face of a calamity like this, what man could be brave?"

"God will turn it away."

"God grant it. But I tremble to ask for the truth. The future is not more awful to me now than the past."

"Keep up heart, dear Paul. You know how pleasant it is to fall asleep amid storms that shake the trees, and to awake in the stillness and the sunshine, and amid the songs of the birds. To-morrow the falsehood will be outfaced, and you will return to fetch me."

"Yes," said Paul, "or else drag out my days as an outcast in the world."

"No, no, no. Good-bye, dearest." Then the voice of the comforter failed her, and she dropped her head on his breast.

The choir within chanted the matin service. Paul removed the iron bar that crossed the door, and opened it. The opposite side of the street was a blank wall, with gaunt boughs of leafless trees behind it and above it, and beyond all was the dim sanctuary. Traffic's deep buzz flowed in the distance. The dawn had reddened the eastern sky, and the towers of the abbey were black against the glory of the coming day.

"It may be that there is never a sunrise on this old city but it awakens some one to some new calamity," said Paul; "yet surely this is the heaviest stroke of all Good-bye, my darling!"

"Good-bye, my husband!"

"Yonder gray old fabric has looked on the scarred ruins of many a life, but never a funeral that has passed down its aisles was so sad as this parting. Good-bye, dearest wife, good-bye!"

"Good-bye, Paul!"

He struck his breast and drew his breath audibly, "I must go. The thing is not to be thought of and endured!"

"Good-bye, Paul!" Her face was buried in his breast, to hide it from his eyes.

"They say that the day a dear friend is lost to us is purer and calmer in remembrance than the day before. May it be so with us!"

"Hush! You will soon be back to take me away." And Greta nestled closer to his breast.

"If not—if not"—his hot breathing beat fast on her drooping head—"if not, then—as the world is dead to both without the other's love—remain here—in this house—forever. Good-bye! Good-bye!"

He disengaged her clinging arms. He pressed her cold brow with his quivering lips. Her fears conquered her brave heart at last. A mist was fast hiding her from him.

"Good-bye! good-bye!"

A moment's silence, a breaking sigh, a rising sob, a last lingering touch of the inlaced fingers, and then the door closed behind him. She was alone in the empty hall; her lips were cold; her eyes were shut. The rosy hues of morning were floating in the air, now rich and sweet and balmy and restful, with the full, pure, holy harmonies of the choir.

CHAPTER X.

It was merely a momentary vexation which Hugh Ritson felt when the course that Paul had taken falsified his prescience. "No matter," he said, "it is only a question of a day, more or less. The thing must be done."

Drayton made no attempt to conceal his relief when the door closed and the fly drove off. "I ain't sorry the fence is gone, and that's flat!"

"Only, being gone, you will have a bigger risk to run now, my friend," said Hugh Ritson, with undisguised contempt.

Drayton looked up with a glance half of fear, half of suspicion. "You ain't gone and rounded on a fellow, after all? You ain't told him as I'm here?"

"Don't be a fool! Get off to bed. Wait, you must put me up for the night. You'll take care of yourself if you're wise. The police will be here in the morning; take my word for that."

"Here? In the morning? No!"

"When they asked for his address, he gave them the name of this house. They'll not forget it. Men of that sort don't forget."

"I'll pound if they don't."

"They have memories for other things besides addresses. Consider if they have any other reason to remember the landlord of your house."

"No criss-crossing! you don't do me the same as the old woman."

"No matter. You know best. Take care of yourself, Mr. Drayton."

Drayton buttoned his coat as near to the throat as the torn lapel would allow. "That's what I mean to do. I ain't going to be lagged. It's a lifer this time, and that would take the stiff'ning out of a man."

"Where are you going?"

"No criss-crossing, I say."

"Leave this house, and they'll have you in twenty-four hours."

"Stay here, and they'll lag me in twelve. Being as that's twelve to the good, I'm off."

Drayton's hand was on the door-handle. Hugh Ritson snatched it away. "An idiot like you deserves to be taken. Such men ought to be put away."

Drayton lifted his fist. "Damme, but I'll put you away if—if—"

Hugh Ritson did not flinch. "What if I show you how to escape the consequences of to-night's work altogether?"

Drayton's uplifted hand fell. "I ain't objecting to that," he growled. "How?"

"By putting another man in your place."

Drayton's eyes opened in a stare of blank amazement.

"And what about me?" he asked.

"You," said Hugh Ritson, and a scarcely perceptible sneer curled his lip—"you shall stand in his shoes."

A repulsive smile crossed Drayton's face. He fumbled the torn lapel with restless fingers. His eyes wandered to the door. There was a moment's silence.

"Him?" he said, with an elevation of the eyebrows.

Hugh Ritson bent his head slightly. Drayton stood with mouth agape.

Old Mrs. Drayton was pottering around the bar preparatory to going to bed.

"I'll be a-bidding you good-night, sir. Paul, you'll lock up after the gentleman."

"Good-night, Mrs. Drayton."

The landlady hobbled away. But from midway up the stairs her querulous voice came again. "The poor young thing—I declare she's a-crying her eyes out."

"Why d'ye mean to do?" asked Drayton.

"To get him here."

"How'll ye track him? He's gone to London, ain't he? That's a big haystack to find a needle in, ain't it?"

"London is not a haystack, Mr. Drayton. It's a honey-comb, and every cell is labeled. On getting out of the train at St. Pancras Station they will either hire a cab or they will not. If they hire one, then the number will be taken at the lodge. By that number the cabman can be found. He will know where he drove his fare. If my brother left his wife at one place, and settled himself at another, the cabman will know that also. If they do not hire a cab, then, as the hour is late, and one of them is a lady, they must be somewhere in the vicinity of the station. Thus, in that vast honey-comb, their particular cells are already marked out for us. That's enough for the present. Who sleep in this house beside yourselves—and the girl?"

"Nobody but a lad—a pot-boy."

"Where is he now—in bed?"

"Four hours agone."

"Where does he sleep?"

"Up in the attic."

"Don't let that lad see you. On which side of the house does the attic lie?"

"In the gable, this end."

"Is there an attic in the other gable?"

"Yes, a bad one."

"No matter. Get a mattress and sleep there yourself, and lie close all day to-morrow. Take food, but no liquor, mind that. I'll come for you when all is clear. And now show me to your room."

After some preparation the two men went upstairs, carrying the only remaining light.

"Give me the candle. You had best go up to your attic in the dark. Here, put this key in the girl's door and unlock it. She's quiet enough now. Hush—! No; it was only the wind. Good-night—and mind what I say, don't let that boy see you—and, listen, no liquor!"

CHAPTER XI.

The day had not yet dawned, and all lay still in that house when Mercy Fisher opened noiselessly the door of her room and crept stealthily down the stairs. It was very dark in the bar below, and she had no light. The sickening odor of dead tobacco was in the air. She carried a little bundle in one hand, and with the other she felt her way around the walls until she came to the outer door. A heavy chain fastened it, and with nervous fingers she drew it out of the slide. When free of its groove, it slipped from her hand, and fell against the door-jamb with a clang. The girl's heart leaped to her throat. At first she crouched in fear, then lifted the latch, opened the door, and fled away into the gloom without, leaving the door wide open.

Never to the last day of her life did she know what purpose guided her in that hour. She had no object, no aim. Only to fly away from a broken heart. Only to lie down on the earth and know no more, with all the heartache over. But she was drifting in her blind misery to that reservoir of life, London.

She hurried down the road, never once looking back. The leafless trees were surging in the night-wind; their gaunt branches were waving grimly over her head. The hedges took fantastic shapes before her, and beside her. Her limbs trembled and her teeth chattered, yet she hastened on. Her head ached. She felt suffocated. The world was so cruel to her. If only she could fly from it and forget—only forget!

The day was dawning; the deep blue of the sky to the left of her was streaked with thin bars. All before her was a blank void of dun gray. A veil of vapor beat against her cheeks. The wide marshy lands lay in mist around her. Not a sound but her own footstep on the road. Not a bird in the empty air, not a cloud in the blank sky. It was a dreary scene; neither day nor night.

And through this grim realm that is aloof from all that is human, one poor, broken-hearted girl hurried on, her little bundle in her hand, a shawl wrapped about her shoulders, her red, tearless eyes fixed in front of her.

Like the spirit of unrest, the wind moaned and soughed. Now and then a withered leaf of last year went by her with a light rustle and stealthy motion. Desolate as the heart within her was the

waste ground.

Bit by bit the gray sky lightened; the east was fretted over with pink, and a freshness was breathed into the air. Then she began to run. Behind her were all her pretty dreams, and they were dead. Behind her was the love she had cherished, and that was dead, too. From a joyful vision she had awakened to find the idol cold at her breast.

Running hard along the gloomy road, under the empty sky, through the surging wind, the outcast girl cried in her tearless grief as a little child cries for the mother who is in her grave—never knowing its loss until it has grown tired, and weary, and sick, and the night is very near.

She came to a brick-kiln that stood back from the road. Its wreathing smoke coiled slowly upward in the smoke-like atmosphere. The red haze drew her to it, as it drew the shivering waifs of the air. Cold and tired, she crept up and stood some minutes in the glow; but a step fell on her ear from behind the kiln, and she stole away like a guilty thing.

Away, away, she knew not where. On, on, she knew not why.

The day had dawned now. In the brightness of morning her heart sunk lower. Draggled and soiled, her hair still damp with the dew, and the odor of night in her dress, she walked on in the golden radiance of the risen sun.

Oh, to bury herself forever, and yet not to die—no, no, not to die!

At a cross-road there was a finger-post, and it read, "To Kilburn." Beyond it there was a wood, and the sunlight played on the pine-trees and reddened the dead leaves that still clung to an oak. She was warm now, but, oh! so tired. Behind the ambush of a holly-bush, close to the road, Mercy crouched down on a drift of withered leaves at the foot of a stout beech. She dozed a little and started. All was quiet. Then weary nature conquered fear, and overcame sorrow, and she slept.

And sleep—that makes kings and queens of us all—gracious sleep, made a queen of the outcast girl, a queen of love; and she dreamed of her home among the mountains.

Mercy was still sleeping when a covered wagon, such as carriers use, came trundling along the road. The driver, a bright-eyed man, with the freshness of the fields in his face, sat on the front rail and whistled. His horse shied at something, and this made him get up. He was at that moment in front of the holly-bush, and he saw Mercy lying behind it.

Her face was worn and pale, her bonnet fallen back from her forehead, her head leaning against the trunk of the tree, one hand on her breast, the other straying aside on the drift of yellow leaves, where a little bundle covered by a red handkerchief had fallen from her graspless fingers, and the radiant morning sunlight over all.

The driver of the wagon jumped to the ground. At the same moment Mercy awoke with a frightened look. She rose to her feet, and would have hurried away.

"Young to be wagranting about, ain't ye, miss?" said the driver. His tone was kindlier than his words.

"Let me go, please," said Mercy, and she tried to pass.

"Coorse, coorse; if yer wants to."

Mercy thanked him, her eyes on the ground. She was already on the road.

"Being as you're going my way, I ain't objecting to giving you a lift."

"No, thank you. I have no—I've no money. I must run."

"You'll wait till I ax for it, won't ye, missy? Come, get up."

"And will you let me go down whenever I like?"

"Coorse I will; why not? Up with ye! There, easy, kneel on the shaft, that's the size of it. Now, go set yourself down on them sacks. Them's apples, them is. Right? Very well. We're off, then."

The wagon was about half full of sacks, and Mercy crept down in the furthest corner.

"I ain't in the apple line reg'lar. I'm a fern-gatherer, that's wot I am. On'y nature don't keep ferning all the year round, so I'se forced to go fruiting winter times—buying apples same as them from off'n the farmers down the country, and bringing 'em up to Covent Garden. That's where I'm going now, that is. And got to be there afore the sales starts."

Mercy listened, but said nothing.

"You know Covent Garden—not fur from Leicester Square and the Haymarket?"

Mercy shook her head.

"What! Never been there—and that near?"

Mercy shook her head again and dropped her eyes.

The driver twisted about to look at her. "Let a be, she's feeling it bad," he thought, and was silent for a moment. Then he twisted about for another look.

"I say, missy, got bad eyes?"

"They're sore, and a little dim," said Mercy.

"Blest if you don't look the spitting image of a friend of mine—'boutn the eyes, I mean—red and swelled up and such. It was Tom Crow, a partner of mine, in fact. Tom caught cold sleeping out one night as we was ferning down Roger Tichborne's estates—him as was the claimant for 'em, you know, on'y he didn't get 'em. The cold flew to Tom's eyes straight, and blest if he ain't gone blind as a mole."

Mercy's lips quivered. The driver stopped his chatter, conscious that he had gone too far, and then, with somewhat illogical perversity, he proceeded to express his vexation at himself by punishing his horse.

"Get along, you stupid old perverse old knacker's crutch!"

The horse set off at a trot. They passed through a village, and Mercy read the name "Child's Hill" printed on the corner of a house.

"Is it London you are going to?" said Mercy, timidly; "Covent Garden—is that London?"

"Eh?" The driver opened his eyes very wide in a blank stare.

Mercy trembled and held down her head. They jogged on awhile in silence, and then the driver, who had cast furtive glances at the girl, drew rein, and said: "I'm wexed as I said Tom Crow was as blind as a mole. How-and-ever, a mole ain't blind, and it's on'y them coster chaps as think so, but I've caught a many of 'em out ferning. Besides, Tom was a-worrited with his missus, Tom was, and happen that was worse nor his cold.

("Git along, you old perverse old file!")

"You see, Tom's missus cut away and left him. As young as you, and maybe as good to look at, but a bad 'un; and she broke Tom's heart, as the saying is. So Tom left the ferning. He hadn't no heart for it. Ferning's a thing as wants heart, it do. He started costering first, and now Tom's got a 'tater-ngine, on'y being as he's blind he has a boy to wheel it. And that woman, she done it all. 'Jim Groundsell,' he says to me—that's my name—'Jim,' he says, 'don't fix your heart on nothing,' he says, 'and keep to your sight and the ferning.'

("Well, you perverse old crutch! Get along with you!")

"But I went and done it myself. And now my missus, she's a invalide, as they say, and she ain't out o' bed this twelvemonth come Christmas, and she gets lonesome lying all by herself, and frets a bit maybe, and—

("Git along, will you, you wexing old fence!")

There was a long silence this time. They were leaving the green fields behind them, and driving through longer streets than Mercy had ever seen before. Though the sun was shining feebly, the lamps on the pavement were still burning. They passed a church, and Mercy saw by the clock that it was hard on eight. They drove briskly through Camden Town into St. Giles's, and so on to Long Acre.

The streets were thronged by this time. Troops of people were passing to and fro. Cabs and omnibuses were rattling hither and thither. At every turn the crowd became denser and the noise louder. Mercy sat in her corner, bewildered. The strange city frightened her. For the time it drove away the memory of her sorrow.

When they reached Covent Garden, Jim, the driver, drew up with a jerk, and nodded to some of the drivers of similar wagons, and hailed others with a lusty shout. All was a babel to the girl's dazed sense: laughter, curses, yelling, whooping, quarreling.

Mercy's head ached. She got down, hardly knowing what to do next. Where was she to go? In that wilderness of London, more desolate than the trackless desert, what was she?

She stood a moment on the pavement, her little bundle in her hand, and all the bewildering scene went round and round. The tears rose to her eyes, and the glare and noise and the tumult were blotted out.

The next instant she felt herself being lifted back into the wagon, and then she remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER XII.

Two days later Hugh Ritson entered the convent church of St. Margaret. It was evening service, and the nave was thronged from chancel to porch. The aisles, which were bare of seats, were filled only half-way down, the rest of the pavement being empty save for a man here and there who leaned lightly against the great columns of the heavy colonnade.

The sermon had already begun. Hugh Ritson walked up the aisle noiselessly until he came close

behind the throng of people standing together. Then he stood at the side of a column and looked around on those in the nave.

He was within range of the preacher's voice, but he hardly listened. His eyes traversed the church until at last they rested on one spot in the south transept, where a company of nuns sat with downcast eyes half closed. The face of one of them was hidden beneath her drooping coif; the rosary held to her breast was gripped with nervous fingers. Near at hand there was another face that riveted Hugh Ritson's gaze. It was the face of Greta, radiant in its own beauty, and tender with the devotional earnestness of parted lips and of lashes wet with the dew of a bruised spirit.

From these two his eyes never wandered for longer than a minute! Languidly he listened to the words that floated over the people, and held them mute. The preacher was a slight young man, emaciated, pale, with lustrous eyes, and a voice that had a thin, meek pipe. But the discourse was in a strain of feverish excitement, a spirit of hard intolerance, a tone of unrelenting judgment, that would have befitted the gigantic figure and thunderous accents of the monk Jerome.

"There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof is death." This was the text, twenty times repeated. Men talked of the rights of conscience, as if conscience were God's law. They babbled of toleration, as if any heresy were to be endured, if only it were believed. Conscience! It was the slave of Circumstance. Toleration! It was the watchword at the gate of hell.

Hugh Ritson listened with a vague consciousness, his eyes fixed alternately on the nun with the drooping coif and on the fair, upturned face beside her. At last a word struck him, and made his whole soul to vibrate. Men, women, the great mute throng, pillars, arches, windows of figured saints, altar aflame with candles, the surpliced choir, and the pale, thin face with the burning eyes in the pulpit above—all vanished in an instant.

What was true, said the preacher, in the realm of thought, could not be false in the world of life. Men did evil deeds, and justified them to their own enslaved minds. No way so dark but it had appeared to be the path of light; none so far wrong but it had seemed to be right. Let man beware of the lie that he told to his own heart. The end thereof is death.

Staring from a bloodless face, Hugh Ritson reeled a step backward, and then clung with a trembling hand to the pillar against which he had leaned. The harsh scrape of his foot was heard over the hushed church, and here and there a neck was craned in his direction. His emotion was gone in an instant. A light curl of the hard lip told that the angel within him had once again been conquered.

The sermon ended with a rapturous declaration of the immutability of God's law, and the eternal destinies of man. The world was full of change, but man, who seemed to change most, changed least. The stars that hung above had seen the beginning and the end of ages. Before man was, they were. The old river that flowed past the old city that night had flowed there centuries ago, and generations of men had lived and died in joy and sorrow, and still the same waters washed the same shore. But the stars that measure time itself, and the sea that recorded it, would vanish away, and man should be when time would be no more. "They shall perish, but thou shalt endure. They shall wax old as doth a garment.... But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end."

The preacher finished, and the buzz and rustle of the people shifting in their seats told of the tension that had been broken. Faces that had been distorted with the tremors of fear, or contracted with the quiverings of remorse, or glorified with the lights of ecstasy, resumed their normal expression.

The vesper hymn was sung by the whole congregation, standing. It floated up to the blue roof, where the lights that burned low over the people's heads left in the gloom the texts written on the open timbers and the imaged Christ hung in the clerestory. There was one voice that did not sing the vesper hymn; and the close-locked lips of Hugh Ritson were but the symbol of the close-locked heart.

He was asking himself, was it true that when the fire of the stars should be burned to ashes, still man would endure? Pshaw! What was man? These throngs of men, whose great voice swelled like the sea, what were they? In this old church where they sung, other men had sung before them, and where were they now? Who should say they had not perished? Living, believing, dying, they were gone: gone with their sins and sorrows; gone with their virtues and rewards; gone from all sight and all memory; and no voice came from them, pealing out of the abyss of death to join this song of hope. Hope! It was a dream. A dream that great yearning crowds like these, filling churches and chapels, dreamed age after age. But it was a dream from which there would be no awakening to know that it was not true.

The priest and choir left the church. Then the congregation broke up and separated. Hugh Ritson stood awhile, still leaning against the column of the colonnade. The nuns in the south transept rose last, and went out by a little aperture opening from the south aisle. Hugh watched them pass at the distance of the width of the nave. Greta walked a few paces behind them. When the people had gone, and she rose from her seat, her eyes fell on Hugh. Then she dropped her head, and walked down the aisle with a hurried step. Hugh saw her out; the church was now empty, and the voluntary was done. He followed her through the door, and entered into the sacristy.

Before him was another door; it led into the convent. The last of the line of nuns was passing

through it. Greta stood in the sacristy, faint, with a scared face, one hand at her breast, the other on the base of a crucifix that stood by the wall. When she saw that he had followed her, her first impulse was to shrink away; her second was to sink to her knees at his feet. She did neither. Conquering her faintness, but still quivering from head to foot, she turned upon him with a defiant look. "Why do you come here? I do not wish to speak with you. Let me pass," she said.

Hugh Ritson made no effort to detain her. He stood before her with downcast eyes, his infirm foot bent under him. "I come to bid you farewell," he said, calmly; "I come to say that we meet no more."

"Would that we had parted forever before we met the last time!" said Greta, fervently.

"Would that we had never met!" said Hugh, in a low voice.

"That was a lie with which you parted me from my husband," she said.

"It was—God forgive me."

"And you knew it was a lie?" said Greta.

"I knew it was a lie."

"Then where is your shame, that you can look me in the face? Have you no shame?" she said.

"Have you no pity?" said Hugh.

"What pity had you for me? Have you not done me wrong enough already?"

"God knows it is true. And He knows I am a miserable man. Have pity and forgive me, and say farewell!"

Something of contrition in the tone touched her. She was silent.

"The preacher was wrong," he said. "There is no spirit of evil. We are betrayed by our own passions, and the chief of those passions is love. It is the Nemesis that stalks through the world, haunting all men, and goading some to great wrong."

"It was of your doing that I came here," said Greta.

"Would to God it may be of my doing that you remain here," said Hugh.

"That is a prayer He will not hear. I am leaving this house to-night. There is some one coming who can unmask your wicked falsehood."

"Parson Christian?" said Hugh.

Greta made no answer, and Hugh continued, "His journey is needless. A word from my mother would have done all. She is in this house."

"Yes, Heaven forgive you, she is here!" said Greta.

"You are wrong; you do not know all. Where is your husband?"

Greta shook her head. "I have neither seen him nor heard from him since we parted at these doors," she said.

"And when you leave them to-night, do you leave him behind you?" said Hugh.

"Heaven forbid!" said Greta, passionately.

Hugh Ritson's bloodless face was awful to look upon. "Greta," he said, in a tone of anguish, "give up the thought. Look on that false union as broken forever, and all this misery will end. It was I and you—you and I. But that is over now. I do not come between you. It is useless to think of that. I do not offer you my love; you refused it long ago. But I can not see you my brother's wife. That would be too much for me to endure. I will not endure it. Have pity upon me. If I have no claim to your love, have I no right to your pity? What have I suffered for your love? A life's misery. What have I sacrificed to it? My name—my place—my inheritance."

Greta lifted her eyes with a look of inquiry.

"What? Has he not even yet told you all?" said Hugh. "No matter. What has he done to earn your love that I have not done? What has he suffered? What has he sacrificed?"

"If this is love, it is selfish love," said Greta, in a broken voice.

"Selfish?—be it so. All love is selfish."

"Leave me—leave me!"

Hugh Ritson paused; the warmth of his manner increased. "I will leave you," he said, "and never seek you again; I will go from you forever, and crush down the sorrow that must be with me to the end, if you will promise me one thing."

"What is it?" said Greta, her eyes on the ground.

"It is much," said Hugh, "but it is not all. If the price is great, think of the misery that it buys—"

and buries. You would sacrifice something for me, would you not?"

His voice swelled as he spoke, and his pale face softened, and the light of hopeless love was in his great eyes.

"Say that you would—for me—me!" He held out his arms toward her as if soul and body together yearned for one word, one look of love.

Greta stood there, silent and immovable. "What is it?" she repeated.

"Let me think that you would do something for my sake—mine," he pleaded. "Let me carry away that solace. Think what I have suffered for you, and all in vain. Think that perhaps it was no fault of mine that you could not love me; that another woman might have found me worthy to be loved who had not been unworthy of love from me."

"What is it?" repeated Greta, coldly, but her drooping lashes were wet with tears.

"Think that I am of a vain, proud, stubborn spirit; that in all this world there is neither man nor woman, friend nor enemy, to whom I have sued for grace or favor; that since I was a child I have never even knelt in prayer in God's house that man might see or God might hear. Then think that I am at your feet, a miserable man."

"What is it?" said Greta, again.

Hugh Ritson paused, and then added, more calmly: "That you should take the vows and the veil, and stay here until death."

Greta lifted her eyes. Hugh's eyes were bent upon her.

"No, I can not. I should be false to my marriage vows," she said, quietly.

"To be true to them is to be false to yourself, to your husband, and to me," said Hugh.

"I love my husband," said Greta, with an eloquent glance. "To be true to them is to be true to him."

There was a pause. Hugh Ritson's manner underwent a change. It was the white heat of high passion that broke the silence when he spoke again.

"Greta," he said, and his deep voice had a strong tremor, "if there is any truth in what that priest told us to-night—if it is not a dream and a solemn mockery made to enchant or appal the simple—if there is a God and judgment—my soul is already too heavily burdened with sins against you and yours. I would have eased it of one other sin more black than these; but it was not to be."

"What do you mean?" said Greta. Her face was panic-stricken.

Hugh Ritson came a step nearer.

"That your husband is in my hands—that one word from me would commit him to a doom more dreadful than death—that if he is to be saved as a free man, alive, you must renounce him forever."

"Speak plain. What do you mean?" said Greta.

"Choose—quick! Which shall it be? You for this convent, or your husband for lifelong imprisonment?"

Greta's mind was in a whirl. She was making for the door in front of them. He stepped before her.

"I parted you with a lie," he said, "but to me it was not always a lie. I believed it once. Do you think I should have denied my self my inheritance, and let a bastard stand in my place, if I had not believed it?"

"What further lie is this?" said Greta.

"No matter. Heaven knows. And all I did was for love of you. Is it so guilty a thing that I have loved you—to all lengths and ends of love? I meant to put a hemisphere between you—to send him to Australia, and you back home to Cumberland. What if the lie had then been outfaced? I should have parted you, and that would have been enough."

"And now, when your revenge falls idle at your feet, you come to me on your knees," said Greta.

"Revenge? That was but a feeble revenge," said Hugh. "He would have learned the truth and come back to claim you. There would have been no peace for me while he was alive and free. Do I come to you on my knees? Yes; but it is to pray of you to save your husband. Is it so much that I ask of you? Think what is earned by it. If you have no pity for me, have you none for him?"

She was struggling to pass him.

"Greta," he said, "choose, and at once. It is now or never. To-night—to-morrow will be too late. You for a holy life of self-renouncement, or your husband to drag out his miserable days in penal servitude."

"This is only another lie. Let me pass," she said.

"It is the truth, as sure as God hears us," said Hugh.

"I shall never believe it."

"I will swear it." He laid a strong hand on her wrist. "I will swear it at the very foot of God's altar."

He tried to draw her back into the church. She resisted.

"Let me go; I will cry for help."

He dropped her wrist, and fell back from her. She drew herself up in silence, and walked slowly away.

He stood a moment alone in the sacristy. Then he went out through the church. It was empty and all but dark. The sacristan, with a long rod, was putting out the lights one by one. He turned, with arm uplifted, to look after the halting figure that passed down the aisle and out at the west porch.

CHAPTER XIII.

Abbey Gardens, the street in front, was dark and all but deserted. Only a drunken woman went reeling along. But the dull buzz in the distance, and the white sheet in the sky, told that, somewhere near, the wild heart of the night beat high.

Hugh Ritson looked up at the heavy mass of the convent building as he crossed the street. The lights were already out, and all was dark within. He went on, but presently stopped by a sudden impulse, and looked again.

It was then he was aware that something moved in the deep portico. The lamp on the pavement sent a shaft of light on to the door, and there, under the gas-light, with the face turned from him, was the figure of a woman. She seemed to cast cautious and stealthy glances around, and to lift a trembling hand to the bell that hung above her. The hand fell to her side, but no ring followed. Once again the hand was lifted, and once again it fell back. Then the woman crept tottering down the steps and turned to go.

Hugh Ritson recrossed the street. Amid all the turmoil of his soul, the incident had arrested him.

The woman was coming toward him. He put himself in her path. The light fell full upon her, and he saw her face.

It was Mercy Fisher.

With a low cry, the girl sunk back against the railings of the convent, and covered her face with her hands.

"Is it you, Mercy?" said Hugh.

She made no answer. Then she tried to steal away, but he held her with gentle force.

"Why did you leave Hendon?" he asked.

"You did not want me," said the girl, in a tone of unutterable pain. And still her face was buried in her hands.

He did not reply. He let her grief spend itself.

Just then a drunken woman reeled back along the pavement and passed them close, peering into their midst, and going by with a jarring laugh.

"What's he a-doing to ye, my dear, eh?" she said, jeeringly. "Sarve ye right!" she added, and laughed again. She was a draggled, battered outcast—a human ruin, such as night, the pander, flings away.

Mercy lifted her head. A dull, weary look was in her eyes.

"You know how I waited and waited," she said, "and you were so long in coming, so very long." She turned her eyes aside. "You did not want me; in your heart you did not want me," she said.

The wave of bitter memory drowned her voice. Not unmoved, he stood and looked at her, and saw the child-face wet with tears, and the night breeze of the city drift in her yellow hair.

"Where have you been since?" he said.

"A man going to market brought me up in his wagon. I fainted, and then he took me to his home. He lives close by, in the Horse and Groom Yard. His wife is bedridden, and such a good creature, and so kind to me. But they are poor, and I had no money, and I was afraid to be a burden to them; and besides—besides—"

"Well?"

"She saw that I was—she saw what was going to—being a woman, she knew I was soon—"

"Yes, yes," said Hugh, stopping another flood of tears with a light touch of the hand. "How red your eyes look. Are they worse?"

"The man was very good; he took me to the doctors at a hospital, and they said—oh, they said I might lose my sight!"

"Poor little Mercy!" said Hugh.

He was now ashamed of his own sufferings. How loud they had clamored awhile ago; yet, what were they side by side with this poor girl's tangible sorrows! Mere things of the air, with no reality.

"But no matter!" she burst out. "That's no matter."

"You must keep up heart, Mercy. I spoke angrily to you the other night, but it's over now, is it not?"

"Oh, why didn't you leave me alone?" said the girl.

"Hush, Mercy; it will be well with you yet." His own eyes were growing dim, but even then his heart was bitter. Had he not said in his wrath that passion was the demon of the world? He might say it in his sorrow, too. The simple heart of this girl loved him, even as his own lustier soul loved Greta. He had wronged her. But that was only a tithe of the trouble. If she could but return him hate for wrong, how soon everything would be right with her! "What brought you here, Mercy?"

"One of the sisters—they visit the sick—one of them visited the house where they gave me lodgings, and I heard that they sometimes took homeless girls into the convent. And I thought I was homeless, now, and—and—"

"Poor little woman!"

"I came the night before last, but saw your brother Paul walking here in front. So I went away."

"Paul?"

"Then I came last night, and he was here again. So I went away once more, and to-night I came earlier, and he wasn't here, but just as I was going to ring the bell, and say that I had no home, and that my eyes were growing worse, something seemed to say they would ask if I had a father, and why I had left him; and then I couldn't ring—and then I thought if only I could die—yes, if only I could die and forget, and never wake up again in the morning—"

"Hush, Mercy. You shall go back home to your father."

"No, no, no!"

"Yes; and I shall go with you."

There was silence. The bleared eyes looked stealthily up into his face. A light smile played there.

"Ah!"

A bright vision came to her of a fair day when, hand in hand with him she loved, she should return to her forsaken home in the mountains, and hold up her head, and wipe away her father's tears. She was in the dark street of the city, then; she and her home were very far apart.

He laughed inwardly at a different vision. In a grim spirit of humor he saw all his unquenchable passion conquered, and he saw himself the plain, homely, respectable husband of this simple wife.

"Was Paul alone when you saw him?" said Hugh.

"Yes. And would you tell them all?"

The girl's sidelong glance was far away.

"Mercy, I want you to do something for me."

"Yes, yes."

Again the sidelong glance.

Hugh lifted the girl's head with his hand to recall her wandering thoughts.

"Paul will come again to-night. I want you to wait for him and speak to him."

"Yes, yes; but won't he ask me questions?"

"What if he does? Answer them all. Only don't say that I have told you to speak to him. Tell him—will you remember it?—are you listening?—look me in the face, little woman."

"Yes, yes."

"Tell him that Mr. Christian—Parson Christian, you know—has come to London and wishes to see him at once. Say he has looked for him at the hotel in Regent Street and not found him there, and is now at the inn in Hendon. Will you remember?"

"Yes."

"Where were you going, Mercy—back to your poor friends?"

"No. But will he be sure to come to-night?"

"No doubt. At what time was he here last night?"

"Ten o'clock."

"It is now hard on nine. Tell him to go to Hendon at once, and when he goes, you go with him. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Don't forget—to-night; to-morrow night will not do. If he does not come, you must follow me to Hendon and tell me so. I shall be there. Don't tell him that—do you hear?"

The girl gave a meek assent.

"And now good-bye for an hour or two, little one."

He turned away, and she was left alone before the dark convent. But, she was not all alone. A new-born dream was with her, and her soul was radiant with light.

CHAPTER XIV.

Hugh Ritson walked rapidly through Dean's Yard in the direction of the sanctuary. As he turned into Parliament Street the half moon rose above the roof of Westminster Hall. But the night was still dark.

He passed through Trafalgar Square and into the Haymarket. The streets were thronged. Crowds on crowds went languidly by. Dim ghosts of men and women, most of them, who loitered at this hour in these streets. Old men, with the souls long years dead within them, and the corruption reeking up with every breath to poison every word, or lurking like charnel lights in the eyes to blink contagion in every glance. Young girls hopping like birds beside them, the spectres of roses in their cheeks, but the real thorns at their hearts. There had been no way for them but this—this and one other way: either to drift into the Thames and be swallowed up in the waters of death, or to be carried along for a brief minute on the froth of the waves of life.

Laughing because they might not weep; laughing because their souls were dead; laughing in their conscious travesty of the tragedy of pleasure—they tripped and lounged and sauntered along. And the lamps shone round them, and above them was the glimmering moon.

As Hugh Ritson went up the steep Haymarket, his infirmity became more marked, and he walked with a sliding gait. Seeing this, a woman who stood there halted and limped a few paces by his side, and pretending not to see him, shouted with a mocking laugh, "What is it—a man or a bat?"

How the wild, mad heart of the night leaped up!

A man passed through the throng with eyes that seemed to see nothing of its frantic frenzy and joyless joy—a stalwart man, who strode along like a giant among midgets, his vacant eyes fixed before him, his strong white face expressionless. Hugh Ritson saw him. They passed within two paces, but without recognition. The one was wandering aimlessly in his blind misery toward the Convent of St. Margaret, the other was making for the old inn at Hendon.

An hour later Hugh Ritson was standing in the bar of the Hawk and Heron. His mind was made up; his resolve was fixed; his plan was complete.

"Anybody with him?" he said to the landlady, motioning toward the stairs.

"Not as I knows on, sir, but he do seem that restless and off his wittals, and I don't know as I quite understands why—"

Hugh Ritson stopped her garrulous tongue. "I have found the girl. She will come back to you to-night, Mrs. Drayton. If she brings with her the gentleman who left these boxes in your care, take him to your son's bedroom and tell him the person he wishes to see has arrived, and will be with him directly."

With this he went up the stairs. Then, calling down, he added: "The moment he is in the room come up and tell me."

A minute later he called again: "Where's the key to this door? Let me have it."

The landlady hobbled up with the key to Drayton's bedroom; the room was empty and the door stood open. Hugh Ritson tried the key in the lock and saw that the wards moved freely. "That will do," he said, in a satisfied tone.

The old woman was hobbling back. Hugh was standing in thought, with head bent, and the nail of his forefinger on his cheek.

"By the way, Mrs. Drayton," he said, "you should get the girl to help you a little sometimes."

"Lor's, sir, I never troubles her, being as she's like a visitor."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Drayton. She's young and hearty, and your own years are just a little past their best, you know. How's your breathing to-day—any easier?"

"Well, I can't say as it's a mort better, neither, thanking you the same, sir," and a protracted fit of coughing bore timely witness to the landlady's words.

"Ah! that's' a bad bout, my good woman."

"Well, it is, sir; and I get no sympathy, neither—leastways not from him as a mother might look to—in a manner of speaking."

"Bethink you. Is there nothing the girl can do for you when she comes? Nothing wanted? No errand?"

"Well, sir, taking it kindly, sir, there's them finings in the cellar a-wants doing bad, and the boy as ought to do 'em, he's that grumpysome, as I declare—"

"Quite right, Mrs. Drayton. Send the girl down to them the moment she comes in, and keep her down until bed-time."

"Thank you, sir! I'm sure I takes it very kind and thoughtful of a gentleman to say as much, and no call, neither."

The landlady shuffled down-stairs, wagging gratefully her dense old noddle; the thoughtful gentleman left the key of Drayton's room in the lock on the outside of the door, and ascended a ladder that went up from the end of the passage. He knocked at a door at the top. At first there was no answer. A dull shuffling of feet could be heard from within. "Come, open the door," said Hugh, impatiently.

The door was opened cautiously. Drayton stood behind it. Hugh Ritson entered. There was no light in the room; the red, smoking wick of a tallow candle, newly extinguished, was filling the air with its stench.

"You take care of yourself," said Hugh. "Let us have a light."

Drayton went down on his knees in the dark, fumbled on the floor for a box of lucifers, and relighted the candle. He was in his shirt-sleeves.

"Cold without your coat, eh?" said Hugh. A sneer played about his lips.

Without answering, Drayton turned to a mattress that lay in the gloom of one corner, lifted it, took up a coat that lay under it, and put it on. It was the ulster with the torn lapel.

Hugh Ritson followed Drayton's movements, and laughed slightly. "Men like you are always cautious in the wrong place," he said. "Let them lay hands on you, and they won't be long finding your—coat." The last word had a contemptuous dig of emphasis.

"Damme if I won't burn it, for good and all," muttered Drayton. His manner was dogged and subdued.

"No, you won't do that," said Hugh, and he eyed him largely. The garret was empty save for the mattress and the blanket that lay on it, and two or three plates, with the refuse of food, on the floor. It was a low room, with a skylight in the rake of the roof, which sloped down to a sharp angle. There was no window. The walls were half timbered, and had once been plastered, but the laths were now bare in many places.

"Heard anything?" said Drayton, doggedly.

"Yes; I called and told the police sergeant that I thought I was on the scent."

"What? No!"

The two men looked at each other—Drayton suspicious, Hugh Ritson with amused contempt.

"Tell you what, you don't catch me hobnobbing with them gentry," said Drayton, recovering his composure.

Hugh Ritson made no other answer than a faint smile. As he looked into the face of Drayton, he was telling himself that no man had ever before been at the top of such a situation as that of which he himself was then the master. Here was a man who was the half-brother of Greta, and the living image of her husband. Here was a man who, despite vague suspicions, did not know his own identity. Here was a man over whom hung an inevitable punishment. Hugh Ritson smiled at the daring idea he had conceived of making this man personate himself.

"Drayton," he said, "I mean to stand your friend in this trouble."

"Tell you again, the best friend to me is the man as helps me to make my lucky."

"You shall do it, Drayton, this very night. Listen to me. That man, my brother, as they call him—Paul Ritson, as his name goes—is not my father's son. He is the son of my mother by another man, and his true name is Paul Lowther."

"I don't care what his true name is, nor his untrue, neither. It ain't nothing to me, say I, and no more is it."

"Would it be anything to you to inherit five thousand pounds?"

"What?"

"Paul Lowther is the heir to as much. What would you say if I could put you in Paul Lowther's place, and get you Paul Lowther's inheritance?"

"Eh? A fortune out of hand—how?"

"The way I described before."

There was a slight scraping sound, such as a rat might have made in burrowing behind the partition.

"What's that?" said Drayton, his face whitening, and his watchful eyes glancing toward the door. "A key in the lock?" he whispered.

"Tut! isn't your own key on the inside?" said Hugh Ritson.

Drayton hung his head in shame at his idle fears.

"I know—I haven't forgot," he muttered, covering his discomfiture.

"It's a pity to stay here and be taken, when you might as easily be safe," said Hugh.

"So it is," Drayton mumbled.

"And go through penal servitude for life, when another man might do it for you," added Hugh, with a ghostly smile.

"I ain't axing you to say it over. What's that?" Drayton cowered down. The bankrupt garret had dropped a cake of its rotten plaster. Hugh Ritson moved not a muscle; only the sidelong glance told of his contempt for the hulking creature's cowardice.

"The lawyer who has charge of this legacy is my friend and comrade," he said, after a moment's silence. "We should have no difficulty in that quarter. My mother is—Well, she's gone. There would be no one left to question you. If you were only half shrewd the path would be clear."

"What about her?"

"Greta? She would be your wife."

"My wife?"

"In name. You would go back, as I told you, and say: 'I, whom you have known as Paul Ritson, am really Paul Lowther, and therefore the half-brother of the woman with whom I went through the ceremony of marriage. This fact I learned immediately on reaching London. I bring the lady back as I found her, and shall ask that the marriage—which is no marriage—be annulled. I deliver up to the rightful heir, Hugh Ritson, the estates of Allan Ritson, and make claim to the legacy left me by my father, Robert Lowther.' This is what you have to say and do, and every one will praise you for an honest and upright man."

"Very conscientious, no doubt; but what about him?"

"He will then be Paul Drayton, and a felon."

Drayton chuckled. "And what about her?"

"If he is in safe keeping, she will count for nothing."

"So I'm to be Paul Lowther."

"You are to pretend to be Paul Lowther."

"I told you afore, as it won't go into my nob, and no more it will," said Drayton, scratching his head.

"You shall have time to learn your lesson; you shall have it pat," said Hugh Ritson. "Meantime—"

At that instant Drayton's eyes were riveted on the skylight with an affrighted stare.

"Look yonder!" he whispered.

"What?"

"The face on the roof!"

Hugh Ritson plucked up the candle and thrust it over his head and against the glass. "What face?" he said, contemptuously.

Again Drayton's head fell in shame at his abject fear.

There was a shuffling footstep on the ladder outside. Drayton held his head aside, and listened. "The old woman," he mumbled. "What now? Supper, I suppose."

CHAPTER XV.

At that moment there was a visitor in the bar down-stairs. He was an elderly man, with shaggy eyebrows and a wizened face; a diminutive creature with a tousled head of black and gray. It was Gubblum Oglethorpe. The mountain peddler had traveled south to buy chamois leather, and had packed a great quantity of it into a bundle, like a panier, which he carried over one arm.

Since the wedding at Newlands, three days ago, Gubblum's lively intelligence had run a good deal on his recollection of the man resembling Paul Ritson, whom he had once seen in Hendon. He had always meant to settle for himself that knotty question. So here, on his first visit to London, he intended to put up at the very inn about which the mystery gathered.

"How's ta rubbun on?" he said, by way of salute on entering. When Mrs. Drayton had gone upstairs she had left the pot-boy in charge of the bar. He was a loutish lad of sixteen, and his name was Jabez.

Jabez slowly lifted his eyes from the pewters he was washing, and a broad smile crossed his face. Evidently the new-comer was a countryman.

"Cold neet, eh? Sharp as a step-mother's breath," said Gubblum, throwing down the panier and drawing up to the fire.

The smile on the face of Jabez broadened perceptibly, and he began to chuckle.

"What's ta snertan at, eh?" said Gubblum. "I say it's hot weather varra. Hasta owt agenn it?"

Jabez laughed outright. Clearly the countryman must be crazy.

"What's yon daft thingamy aboot?" thought Gubblum. Then aloud, "Ay, my lad, gie us a laal sup o' summat."

Jabez found his risible faculties sorely disturbed by this manner of speech. But he proceeded to fill a pewter. The pot-boy's movements resembled those of a tortoise in celerity.

"He's a stirran lad, yon," thought Gubblum. "He's swaddering like a duck in a puddle."

"Can I sleep here to-neet?" he asked, when Jabez had brought him his beer.

Then the sapient smile on the pot-boy's face ripened into speech.

"I ain't answering for the sleeping," said Jabez, "but happen you may have a bed—he, he, he! I'll ask the missis—he, he, haw!"

"The missis? Hasta never a master, then?" said Gubblum.

Now, Jabez had been warned, with many portentous threats, that in the event of any one asking for the master he was to be as mute as the grave. So in answer to the peddler's question he merely shook his wise head and looked grave and astonishingly innocent.

"No? And how lang hasta been here?"

"Three years come Easter," said Jabez.

"And how lang dusta say 'at missis has been here?"

"Missis? I heard father say as Mistress Drayton has kep' the Hawk and Heron this five-and-twenty year."

"Five-and-twenty! Then I reckon that master would be no'but a laal wee barn when she coomt first," said Gubblum.

"Happen he were," said Jabez. Then, recovering the caution so unexpectedly disturbed, Jabez protested afresh that he had no master.

"It's slow wark suppen buttermilk wi' a pitchfork," thought Gubblum, and he proceeded to employ a spoon.

"Sista, my lad, wadsta like me to lend thee a shilling?"

Jabez grinned, and closed his fat fist on the coin thrust into his palm.

"I once knew a man as were the varra spitten picter of your master," said Gubblum. "In fact, his varra sel', upsett'n and doon thross'n. I thowt it were hissel', that's the fact. But when I tackled him he thrept me down, and I was that vexed I could have bitten the side out of a butter-bowl."

"But I ain't got no master," protested Jabez.

"I were riding by on my laal pony that day, but now I'm going shankum naggum," continued Gubblum, unmindful of the pot-boy's mighty innocent look. "'A canny morning to you, Master Paul,' I shouted, and on I went."

"Then you know his name?" said Jabez, opening wide his drowsy eyes.

"'Master Paul's half his time frae home,' says the chap on t'road. 'Coorse he is,' I says: 'it's me for knowing that,' Ah, I mind it same as it were yesterday. I looked back, and there he was standing at the door, and he just snitit his nose wi' his finger and thoom. Ey, he did, for sure."

Jabez found his conscience abnormally active at that moment. "But I ain't got none," he protested afresh.

"None what?"

"No master."

"That's a lie, my lad, for I see he's been putten a swine ring on yer snout to keep ye frae rooting up the ground."

After this Gubblum sat a good half-hour in silence. Mrs. Drayton came down-stairs and arranged that Gubblum should sleep that night in the house. His bedroom was to be a little room at the back, entered from the vicinity of the ladder that led to the attics.

Gubblum got up, said he was tired, and asked to be shown to his room. Jabez lighted a candle, and they went off together.

"Whereiver does that lead to?" said Gubblum, pointing to the ladder near his bedroom door.

"I dunno," said Jabez, moodily. He had been ruminating on Gubblum's observation about the swine ring.

"He's as sour as vargis," thought Gubblum.

There was the creak of a footstep overhead.

"Who sleeps in the pigeon loft?" Gubblum asked, tipping his finger upward.

"I dunno," repeated Jabez.

"His dander's up," thought Gubblum.

Just then the landlady in the bar heard the sound of wheels on the road, and the next moment a carriage drew up at the open door.

"I say there, lend a hand here, quick!" shouted the driver.

Mrs. Drayton hobbled up. The flyman was leaning through the door of the fly, helping some one to alight.

"Take a' arm, missy; there, that's the size of it. Now, sir, down, gently."

The person assisted was a man. The light from the bar fell on his face, and the landlady saw him clearly. It was Paul Ritson. He was flushed, and his eyes were bloodshot. Behind him was Mercy Fisher, with recent tears on her cheeks.

"Oh, he's ill, Mrs. Drayton," said Mercy.

Paul freed one of his arms from the grasp of the girl, waved with a gesture of deprecation, smiled a jaunty smile, and said:

"No, no, no; let me walk; I'm well—I'm well."

With this he made for the house, but before he had taken a second step he staggered and fell against the door-jamb.

"Deary me, deary me, the poor gentleman's taken badly," said Mrs. Drayton, fussing about.

Paul Ritson laughed a little, lifted his red eyes, and said:

"Well, well! But it's nothing. Just dizzy, that's all. And thirsty—very—give me a drink, good woman."

"Bring that there bench up, missy, and we'll put him astride it," said the driver. "Right; that's the time o' day. Now, sir, down."

"Deary me, deary me, drink this, my good gentleman. It'll do you a mort o' good. It's brandy."

"Water—bring me water," said Paul Ritson, feebly; "I'm parched."

"How hot his forehead is," said Mercy.

"And no light 'un to lift, neither," said the driver. "Does he live here, missis?"

Mrs. Drayton brought a glass of water. Paul drained it to the last drop.

"No, sir; I mean yes, driver," said the landlady, confusedly.

"He warn't so bad getting in," the driver observed.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear! where is Mr. Christian—Parson Christian?" said Mercy, whose distracted eyes wandered around.

"The gentleman's come, sir; he's upstairs, sir," said the landlady, and, muttering to herself, Mrs. Drayton hobbled away.

Paul Ritson's head had fallen on his breast. His hat was off, and his hair tumbled over his face. The strong man sat coiled up on the bench. Then he shook himself and threw up his head, as if trying to cast off the weight of stupor that sat on him.

"Well, well! who'd have thought of this? Water—more water!" he mumbled in a thick voice.

Mercy stood before him with a glass in her hand.

"Is it good for him, I wonder?" she said. "Oh, where is Mr. Christian?"

Paul Ritson saw the glass, clutched at it with both hands, then smiled a poor, weak smile, as if to atone for his violence, and drank every drop.

"Well, well!—so hot—and dizzy—and cold!" he muttered, incoherently.

Then he relapsed into silence. After a moment, the driver, who was supporting him at the back, looked over at his face. The eyes were closed, and the lips were hanging.

"He's gone off unconscious," said the flyman. "Ain't ye got a bed handy?"

At that moment Mrs. Drayton came hastily down-stairs, in a fever of agitation.

"You've got to get him up to his room," she said, between gusts of breath.

"That's a job for two men, ain't it, missis?" said the driver.

Mercy had loosened Paul's collar, and with a nervous hand she was bathing his burning forehead.

"Oh, tell Mr. Christian," she said; "say he has fainted."

Mrs. Drayton hobbled back. In another instant there was a man's step descending the stairs. Hugh Ritson entered the bar. He looked down at the unconscious man and felt his pulse. "When did this happen?" he asked, turning to Mercy.

"He said he was feeling ill when I met him; then he was worse in the train, and when we reached Hendon he was too dizzy to stand," said Mercy.

"His young woman, ain't it?" said the flyman, aside, to Hugh.

Hugh nodded his head slightly. Then, turning toward Mrs. Drayton, with a significant glance, "Your poor son is going to be ill," he said.

The landlady glanced back with a puzzled expression, and began in a blundering whimper, "The poor gentleman—"

"The old lady's son?" said the flyman, tipping his finger in the direction of the landlady.

"Paul Drayton," said Hugh.

Mercy saw and heard all. The tears suddenly dried in her eyes, which opened wide in amazement. She said nothing.

Hugh caught the altered look in her face.

"Mrs. Drayton," he said, "didn't you say you had something urgent for Mercy to do? Let her set about it at once. Now, driver, lend a hand—upstairs; it's only a step."

They lifted Paul Ritson between them, and were carrying him out of the bar.

"Where's the boy?" asked Hugh. "Don't let him get in the way. Boys are more hindrance than help," he added, in an explanatory tone.

They had reached the foot of the stair. "Now, my man, easy—heavy, eh? rather."

They went up. Mercy stood in the middle of the floor with a tearless and whitening face.

Half a minute later Hugh Ritson and the flyman had returned to the bar. The phantom of a smile lurked about the flyman's mouth. Hugh Ritson's face was ashen, and his lips quivered.

The boxes and portmanteaus which Paul and Greta had left in the bar three nights ago still lay in one corner. Hugh pointed them out to the driver. "Put them on top of the cab," he said. The flyman proceeded to do so.

When the man was outside the door, Hugh Ritson turned to Mrs. Drayton. The landlady was fussing about, twitching her apron between nervous fingers. "Mrs. Drayton," said Hugh, "you will go in this fly to the Convent of St. Margaret, Westminster. There you will ask for Mrs. Ritson, the lady who was here on Friday night. You will tell her that you have her luggage with you, and that she is to go with you to St. Pancras Station to meet her husband, and return to Cumberland by

the midnight train. You understand?"

"I can't say as I do, sir, asking pardon, sir. If so be as the lady axes why her husband didn't come for her hisself—what then?"

"Then say what is true—nothing more, Mrs. Drayton."

"And happen what may that be, sir?"

"That her husband is ill—but mind—not seriously."

"Oh, well, I can speak to that, sir, being as I saw the poor gentleman."

Mrs. Drayton was putting on her bonnet and shawl. The flyman had fixed the luggage on top of the cab, and was standing in the bar, whip in hand.

"A glass for the driver," said Hugh. Mrs. Drayton moved toward the counter. "No, you get into the cab, Mrs. Drayton; Mercy will serve."

Mercy went behind the counter and served the liquor in an absent manner.

"It's now ten-thirty," said Hugh, looking at his watch. "You will drive first to the convent, Westminster, and from there to St. Pancras, to catch the train at twelve."

Saying this, he walked to the door and put his head through the window of the cab. The landlady was settling herself in her seat. "Mrs. Drayton," he whispered, "you must not utter a syllable about your son when you see the lady. Mind that. You understand?"

"Well, sir, I can't say—being as I saw the gentleman—wherever's Paul?"

"Hush!"

The driver came out. He leaped to his seat. In another moment the cab rattled away.

Hugh Ritson walked back into the house. The boy Jabez had come down-stairs. "When do you close the house?" Hugh asked.

"Eleven o'clock, sir," said Jabez.

"No one here—you might almost as well close now. No matter—go behind the bar, my lad. Mercy, your eyes are more inflamed than ever; get away to bed immediately."

Mercy's eyes were not more red than their expression was one of bewilderment. She moved off mechanically. When she reached the foot of the stairs she turned and tried to speak. The words would not come. At length she said, in a strange voice: "You did not tell me the truth."

"Mercy!"

"Where's Parson Christian?" said Mercy, and her voice grew stern.

"You must not use that tone to me. Come, get away to bed, little one."

Her eyes dropped before his. She turned away. He watched her up the stairs. So sure of hand was he that not even at that moment did he doubt his hold of her. But Mercy did not go to bed. She turned in at the open door of Drayton's room. The room was dark; only a fitful ray of bleared moonlight fell crosswise on the floor; but she could see that the unconscious figure of Paul Ritson lay stretched upon the bed.

"And I have led you here with a lie!" she thought. Then her head swam and fell on to the counterpane. Some minutes passed in silence. She was aroused by footsteps in the passage outside. They were coming toward this room. The door, which stood ajar, was pushed open. There was no time for Mercy to escape, so she crept back into the darkness of a narrow space between the foot of the bed and the wall.

Two men entered. Mercy realized their presence in the dark room rather by the sense of touch than by the sense of hearing or sight. They walked lightly, the darkness hid them, but the air seemed heavy with their hot breath. One of them approached the bedside; Mercy felt the bed quiver. The man leaned over it, and there was a pause. Only the scarcely perceptible breathing of the insensible man fell on the silence.

"He's safe enough still," said a voice that thrilled her through and through. "Now for it—there's no time to lose!"

The girl crouched down and held her breath.

"Damme if I ain't wishing myself well out of it!" muttered another voice.

Mercy knew both men. They were Hugh Ritson and Paul Drayton.

Hugh closed the door. "What simpleton says fortune favors the brave?" he said, in a low, derisive tone. "Here is fortune at the feet of a man like you!"

Drayton growled, and Mercy heard the oath that came from beneath his breath. "I'm wanting to be out of this, and I ain't ashamed for you to know it."

Hugh Ritson's light laugh came from the bedside. He was still standing by Paul Ritson's head. "If

the lord mayor came for you in his carriage, with a guard of flunkies, you would leave this house in less safety," he said. Then he added, impatiently: "Come, waste no words; strip off that tell-tale coat."

With this he leaned over the bed, and there was a creak of the spring mattress.

"What's that?" said Drayton, in an affrighted tone.

"For God's sake, be a man!" said Hugh, bitterly.

"D'ye call this a man's work?" muttered Drayton.

The light laugh once more. "Perhaps not so manly as robbing the dead and dying," said Hugh Ritson, and his voice was deep and cold.

Mercy heard another muttered oath. Dear God! what was about to be done? Could she escape? The door was closed. Still, if she could but reach it, she might open it and fly away.

At that instant, Hugh Ritson, as if apprehending her thought, said, "Wait," and then stepped back to the door and drew the snap bolt. Mercy leaned against the wall, and heard the beating of her heart. In the darkness she knew that Paul Drayton had thrown off his coat. "A good riddance!" he muttered, and the heavy garment fell with a thud.

Hugh Ritson had returned to the bed-head. "Give me a hand," he said; "raise him gently—there, I'll hold him up—now draw off his coat—quietly, one arm at a time. Is it free? Then, lift—away."

Another heavy garment fell with a thud.

"What's the fence got in his other pockets, eh?"

"Come, lend your hand again—draw off the boots—they're Cumberland make, and yours are cockney style—quick!"

Drayton stepped to the bottom of the bed and fumbled at the feet of the insensible man. He was then within a yard of the spot where the girl stood. She could feel his proximity, and the alcoholic fumes of his breath rose to her nostrils. She was dizzy, and thought she must have fallen. She stretched out one hand to save herself, and it fell on to the bed-rail. It was within a foot of Drayton's arm.

"Take off his stockings—they're homespun—while I remove the cravat. The pin was a present; it has his name engraved on the plate behind."

The slant of the moonlight had died off the floor, and all was dark.

Drayton's craven fears seemed to leave him. He laughed and crowed. "How quiet the fence is—very obliging, I'm sure—just fainted in the nick of time. Will it last?"

"Quick! strip off your own clothes and put them where these have come from. The coat with the torn lapel—where is it? Make no mistake about that."

"I'll pound it, no!" Drayton laughed a short, hoarse laugh.

There was some shuffling in the darkness. Then a pause.

"Hush!"

Mercy knew that Hugh Ritson had grasped the arm of Drayton, and that both held their breath. At that moment the moonlight returned, and the bleared shaft that had once crossed the floor now crossed the bed. The light fell on the face of the prostrate man. His eyes were open.

"Water—water!" said Paul Ritson, very feebly.

Hugh Ritson stepped out of the moonlight and went behind his brother. Then Mercy saw a hand before Paul's face, putting a spirit flask to his mouth.

When the hand was raised the face twitched slightly, the eyes closed with a convulsive tremor, and the half-lifted head fell back on to the pillow.

"He'll be quieter than ever now," said Hugh Ritson, softly. Mercy thought she must have screamed, but the instinct of self-preservation kept her still. She stirred not a limb. Her head rested against the wall, her eyes peered into the darkness, her parched tongue and parted lips burned like fire.

"Quick! put his clothes on to your own back, and let us be gone."

Drayton drew on the garments and laughed hoarsely. "And a good fit, too—same make of a man to a T—ex—act—ly!"

The window and the door stood face to face; the bed was on the left of the door, with the head at the door-end. The narrow alcove in which the girl stood was to the left of the window, and in front of the window there was a dressing-table. Drayton stepped up to this table to fix the cravat by the glass. The faint moonlight that fell on his grinning face was reflected dimly into the mirror.

At that moment Mercy's sickening eyes turned toward the bed. There, in repose that was like death itself, lay the upturned face of Paul Ritson. Two faces cast by nature in the same mold—one

white and serene and peaceful, the other bloated, red, smirking, distorted by passion, with cruel eyes and smoking lips.

"The very thing—the very thing—damme if his own mother wouldn't take me for her son!"

Hugh Ritson stepped to Drayton's side. When he spoke his voice was like a cold blast of wind.

"Now listen: From this moment at which you change your coat for his you cease to be Paul Drayton, and become Paul Ritson."

"Didn't you say I was to be Paul Lowther?"

"That will come later."

"As I say, it won't go into my nob."

"No matter; say nothing to yourself but this, 'I am to pretend to be Paul Ritson.'"

"Well, now for it!"

"Ready?" asked Hugh. He returned to the bed-head.

"Ready."

"Then give a hand here. We must put him up into your garret. When the police come for him he must seem to be in hiding and in drink. You understand?"

A low, hoarse laugh was the only answer.

Then they lifted the unconscious man from the bed, opened the door, and carried him into the passage.

Mercy recovered her stunned senses. When the men were gone she crept out on tiptoe and tripped down the passage to her own room. At the door she reeled and fell heavily. Then, in a vague state of consciousness, she heard these words passed over her—"Carry her back into her room and lock her in." At the same instant she felt herself being lifted in a strong man's arms.

CHAPTER XVI.

Before Gubblum Oglethorpe parted with Jabez, he tried to undo the mischief he had done. "Give us a shak' o' thy daddle," he said, holding out his hand. But Jabez had not forgotten the similitude of the swine ring. He made no response.

"Dang him for a fool!" thought Gubblum. "He's as daft as a besom." Then Gubblum remembered with what lavish generosity he had bribed the pot-boy to no purpose. "He cover't a shilling dammish," he thought; "I'll dang his silly head off!"

Jabez put down the candle and backed out of the room, his eyes fixed on the peddler with a ghostly stare.

"You needn't boggle at me. I'll none hurt ye," said Gubblum. Jabez pulled the door after him. "His head's no'but a lump of puddin' and a daub o' pancake," thought Gubblum.

Then the peddler sat on the bed and began to wonder what possible reason there might be for the lad's sudden change of temper. He sat long, and many crude notions trotted through his brain. At last he recalled the fact that he had said something about Jabez's snout carrying a swine ring. That was the rub, sure enough. "I mak' no doobt he thowt it was a by-wipe," thought Gubblum.

Just as the peddler had arrived at this sapient conclusion, he heard heavy footsteps ascending and descending the ladder that stood in the passage outside. Gubblum understood the sounds to mean that the inn was so full of visitors that some of them had to be lodged even in the loft. "Ey, I shouldn't wonder but this is a bonny paying consarn," he thought.

He undressed, got into bed, and blew out his light. He lay awhile waiting for sleep, and thinking of the failure of his plummets to sound the depths of Jabez. Then he remembered with vexation that the lad had even laughed at him in spite of the "shilling dammish."

"Shaf, it was no'but his guts crowkin'," thought Gubblum; and he rolled over, face to the wall, and began to pay nasal tribute to sleep.

From the slowly tightening grip of unconsciousness Gubblum was roused to sudden wakefulness. There was a noise as of heavy shuffling feet outside his door. The peddler raised himself and listened.

"Too dark in this corner," said a voice. "Get a light."

Gubblum crept out of bed, held his head to the door, and listened.

There were retreating steps. Then the man who had spoken before spoke again. "Quick, there! we must catch the train at eleven fifteen."

The voice pealed in Gubblum's memory. He knew it. It was the voice of the last man he should have looked for in this house—Hugh Ritson.

Presently the footsteps approached, and thin fingers of light shot over Gubblum's head into his dark room. He looked up at the door. Three small round holes had been pierced into the styles for ventilation.

"Put the candle on the floor and take the feet—I'll go up first," said the same voice.

Gubblum raised himself on tiptoe and tried to peer through the perforations. He was too small a man to see through. There was a chair by the side of his bed, and his extinguished candle stood on it. He removed the candlestick, lifted the chair cautiously, placed its back to the door, and mounted it. Then he saw all.

There were two men, and he knew both—the brothers Ritson. Ah! had he not said that Paul Ritson kept this inn? "I'll shut up the whole boilin' of 'em next time," thought the peddler, "Wait! what are they lugging into the pigeon loft?"

"Easy!—damme, but the fence is a weight!"

It was the hoarse voice of the other man. The candle was behind him and on the floor. It cast its light on his back. "If I could no'but get a blink frae the cannel, I'd see what's atween them," thought Gubblum.

The men with their burden were now at the top of the ladder.

"Twist about, and go in sideways," muttered the voice first heard.

The man below twisted. This movement brought the full light of the candle on to the faces of all three.

"Lord A'mighty, whatever's this?" Gubblum thought.

The burden was a man's body. But it was the face that startled the peddler—the face of Paul Ritson.

Gubblum's eyes passed over the group in one quick glance. He saw two Paul Ritsons there, and one of them lay as still as the dead.

A minute more of awful tension, and the door of the loft above was slammed and shut, the heavy feet of the two men descended the ladder quickly, and went down the stairs into the bar.

Gubblum listened as if with every sense. He knew that the outer door to the road had opened and closed. He heard footsteps dying away in the distance without. All was silent within the house.

Two men hastening in the night to the Hendon railway station paused at that turn of the road which leads to the police offices and jail.

"You go on and take care of yourself—I'll follow in five minutes," said one.

"You ain't going to give a man away?" said the other.

There was only a contemptuous snort for answer. The first speaker had turned on his heel. When he reached the police offices, he rang the bell. The door was answered by a sergeant in plain clothes. "I've found your man for you," said Hugh Ritson.

"Where, sir?"

"At the Hawk and Heron."

"Who is he?"

"Paul Drayton. You'll find him lying in the garret at the west end of the gable—drunk. Lose not an hour. Go at once."

"Is the gentleman who struggled with him still staying there—Mr. Paul Ritson?"

"No; he goes back home to-night."

"What's his address in the country?"

"The Ghyll, Newlands, Cumberland."

"And yours, sir?"

"I am his brother, Hugh Ritson, and my address is the same."

"We'll go this instant."

"Well, take your piece of frieze with you and see if it fits. It was by the torn ulster that I recognized your man. Good-night."

CHAPTER XVII.

As soon as the noise of the retiring steps had died away on Gubblum's ear, he dressed himself partially, opened the door of his bedroom cautiously, and stepped into the passage. He was still in the dark, and groping with one hand, he felt for the ladder by which the two men had carried their burden to the loft above. He had grasped the lowest rungs of it, and was already some steps up, when he heard a singular noise. It was something between the cry of a child and the deep moan of a sick man. Did it come from the loft? Gubblum held his head in that direction and listened. No; the sound was from the other end of the passage. Now it was gone, and all was quiet. What a strange house was this!

"Can't see a styme," thought Gubblum. "I'll away for the cannel."

Back in his bedroom he struck a match, and then stepped afresh into the passage, guarding the newly lighted candle with the palm of his hand. Then there came a shrill cry. It seemed to be before him, above him, behind him, everywhere about him. Gubblum's knees gave way, but the stubborn bit of heart in him was not to be shaken.

"A rayder queerly sort of a house," he thought; and at that instant there were heavy lunges at a door at the further end of the passage, and a cry of "Help! help!"

Gubblum darted in the direction of the voice.

"Let me out!" cried the voice from within.

Gubblum tried the door. It was locked.

"Help! help!" came again.

"In a sniffer; rest ye a bit!" shouted Gubblum, and putting the light on the floor, he planted his shoulder against the door, and one foot against the opposite wall.

"Help! help! let me out! quick, quick!" came once more from within.

"Sec a skrummidge!" shouted Gubblum, panting for breath.

Then the lock gave way and the door flew open. In the midst of the bad light Gubblum saw nothing at first. Then a woman with wild eyes and a face of anguish came out on him from the dark room. It was Mercy Fisher.

When they recognized each other there was a moment of silence. But it was only a moment, and that moment was too precious to be lost. In a flood of tears the girl told him what had happened.

Gubblum understood no more than that villainy had been at work. Mercy saw nothing but that she had been deceived and had been herself the instrument of deception. This was enough.

"The raggabrash! I'd like to rozzle their backs with an ash stick," said Gubblum.

"Oh, where have they taken him—where, where?" cried Mercy, wringing her hands.

"Don't put on wi' thee—I know," said Gubblum. "I questit them up the stairs. Come along wi' me, lass, and don't slobber and yowl like a barn."

Gubblum whipped up his candle, and hurried along the passage and up the ladder like a monkey, Mercy following at his heels.

"Belike they've locked this door forby," he said.

But no, the key was in the lock. Gubblum turned it and pushed it open. Then he peered into the garret, holding the candle above his head. When the light penetrated the darkness, they saw a man's figure outstretched on a mattress that lay on the bare floor of the empty room. They ran up to it, and raised the head.

"It's his fadder's son, I'll uphod thee," said Gubblum. "And yon riff-raff, his spitten picter, is no'but some wastrel merry-begot."

Mercy was down on her knees beside the insensible man, chafing his hands. There was a tremulous movement of the eyelids.

"Sista, he's coming tul't. Slip away for watter, lass," said Gubblum.

Mercy was gone and back in an instant.

"Let a be, let a be—he'll come round in a crack. Rub his forehead—stir thy hand, lass—pour the watter—there, that's enough—plenty o' butter wad sto a dog. Sista, he's coming tul't fast."

Paul Ritson had opened his eyes.

"Slip away for mair watter, lass—there, that's summat like—rest ye, my lad—a drink?—ey, a sup o' watter."

Paul looked around him. His filmy eyes were full of questions. But at first his tongue would not speak. He looked up at the bare skylight and around at the bleached walls, and then back into the face of the peddler. He noticed Mercy, and smiled.

"Where are we, my girl?" he said, faintly.

"This is the Hawk and Heron," she answered.

"How do I come to be here?" he asked.

Mercy covered her face, and sobbed.

"I brought you," she said, at length.

Paul looked at her a moment with bewildered eyes. Then the tide of memory flowed back upon his mind.

"I remember," he said, quietly; "I was feeling dizzy—hadn't slept two nights—not even been in bed—walked the streets the long hours through."

Everything had rushed over him in a moment, and he closed his eyes with a deep groan. At his feet Mercy buried her face and sobbed aloud.

Paul drew himself feebly up on his elbow.

"Where is Parson Christian?" he asked, and gazed around, with a faint smile.

The girl's anguish overflowed.

"That was a lie I told you," she sobbed.

The smile fled away.

"A lie! Why a lie?"

He was struggling with a dazed sense.

"I told you that Parson Christian was here and wanted you. He is not here."

And Mercy's weeping seemed to choke her.

"My good girl, and why?"

"They brought you to this room and left you, and now they are gone."

"They! Who?"

"Your brother Hugh and Mr. Drayton."

Paul looked deadly sick at heart.

"Who is this Drayton?"

"The spitten picter of yourself, my lad," said Gubblum; "the man I telt ye of lang ago—him as keeps this house."

Paul's eyes wandered vacantly. His nervous fingers twitched at the ulster that he wore.

"What's this?" he said, and glanced down at his altered dress.

"When you were insensible they stripped you of your clothes and put others on you," said Mercy.

"Whose clothes are these?"

"Mr. Drayton's."

Paul Ritson rose to his feet.

"Where are the men?" he said, in a husky voice.

"Gone."

"Where?"

"To the station—that was all I heard."

Paul gazed about with hazy eyes. Mercy flung herself at his feet and wept bitterly.

"Forgive me! oh, forgive me!"

He looked down at her with a confused expression. His brain was benumbed. He drew one arm across his face as though struggling to recover some lost link of memory.

"Why, my good lass, what's this?" he said, and then smiled faintly and made an attempt to raise her up.

"Who is at the convent at Westminster?" she asked.

Then all his manner changed.

"Why?—what of that?" he said.

"Mrs. Drayton was sent there in a cab to tell Mrs. Ritson to be at St. Pancras Station at midnight to meet her husband and return to Cumberland."

The face that had been pale became suddenly old and ghastly. There was an awful silence.

"Is this the truth?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," cried the girl.

"I think I see it all now—I think I understand," he faltered.

"Forgive me!" cried the girl.

He seemed hardly to see her.

"I have been left in this room insensible, and the impostor who resembles me—where is he now?"

He struggled with the sickness that was mastering him. His brain reeled. The palms of his hands became damp. He staggered and leaned against the wall.

"Rest ye a bit, my lad," said Gubblum. "You'll be gitten stanch agen soon."

He recovered his feet. His face was charged with new anger.

"And the wicked woman who trapped me to this house is still here," he said, in a voice thick with wrath.

"Forgive me! forgive me!" wept the girl at his feet.

He took her firmly by the shoulders, raised her to her knees, and turned her face upward till her eyes met his.

"Let me look at her," he said, hoarsely. "Who would have believed it?"

"Forgive me! forgive me!" cried the girl.

"Woman, woman! what had I done to you—what, what?"

The girl's sobs alone made answer.

In his rage he took her by the throat. A fearful purpose was written in his face.

"And this is the woman who bowed down the head of her old father nigh to the grave," he said, bitterly, and flung her from him.

Then he staggered back. His little strength had left him. There was silence. Only the girl's weeping could be heard.

The next instant, strangely calm, without a tear in his sad eyes, he stepped to her side and raised her to her feet.

"I was wrong," he said; "surely I was wrong. You could not lie to me like that, and know it. No, no, no!"

"They told me what I told you," said the girl.

"And I blamed you for it all, poor girl."

"Then you forgive me?" she said, lifting her eyes timidly.

"Forgive you?—ask God to forgive you, girl. I am only a man, and you have wrecked my life."

There was a foot on the ladder, and Jabez, the boy, stepped up, a candle in his hand. He had been waiting for the landlady, when he heard voices overhead.

"The varra man!" shouted Gubblum. "Didsta see owt of thy master down-stairs?"

Jabez grinned, and glanced up at Paul Ritson.

"Hark ye, laal man, didsta see two men leaving the house a matter of fifteen minutes ago?"

"Belike I did," said Jabez. "And to be sure it were the gentleman that come here afore—and another one."

"Another one—your master, you mean?"

Jabez grinned from ear to ear.

"Didsta hear owt?"

"I heard the gentleman say they had to be at St. Pancras at midnight."

Paul fumbled at his breast for his watch. It was gone.

"What's o'clock?" he asked.

"Fifteen after eleven, master," said Jabez. "I've just bolted up."

Paul's face was full of resolution.

"I'll follow," he said; "I've lost time enough already."

"What, man! you'll never manish it—and you as weak as watter forby. You'll be falling swat in the road like a wet sack."

Paul had pulled the door open. Excitement lent him strength. The next moment he was gone.

"Where's the master off to? St. Pancras?" asked Jabez.

"Fadge-te-fadge, gang out of my gate! Away, and lig down your daft head in bed!" said Gubblum.

Jabez did not act on the peddler's advice. He returned to the bar to await the return of Mrs. Drayton, whose unaccustomed absence gave rise to many sapient conjectures in the boy's lachrymose noddle. He found the door to the road open, and from this circumstance his swift intelligence drew the conclusion that his master had already gone. His hand was on the door to close and bolt it, when he heard rapid footsteps approaching. In an instant two men pushed past him and into the house.

"Where's Mr. Drayton," said one, panting from his run.

"He's this minute gone," said Jabez.

"Is that true, my lad?" the man asked, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"He's gone to St. Pancras, sir. He's got to be there at midnight," said Jabez.

The boy had recognized the visitors, and was trembling.

The men glanced into each other's faces.

"That was Drayton—the man that ran past us down the road," said one.

"Make sure of it," said the other. "Search the place; I'll wait for you here."

In two minutes more the men had left the house together.

A quarter of an hour later the night porter at the Hendon railway station saw a man run across the platform and leap into the up train just as the carriages were moving away. He remarked that the man was bareheaded, and wore his clothes awry, and that a rent near the collar of his long frieze ulster exposed a strip of red flannel lining. He thought he knew him.

The train had barely cleared the platform when two men ran up and came suddenly to a stand in front of the porter.

"Gone!" said one of them, with vexation.

"That would be the 11:35," said the other, "to King's Cross. Did any one get into it here, porter?"

"Yes, sergeant—Drayton, of the Hawk and Heron," said the porter.

"Your next up is 11:45 to St. Pancras?"

"Yes, sir, due at twelve."

"Is it prompt?"

"To the second."

The two men faced about.

"Time enough yet," said one.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The cab that drove Mrs. Drayton into London carried with it a world of memories. Thought in her old head was like the dip of a sea-bird in the sea—now here, now there, now a straight flight, and now a backward swirl. As she rattled over the dark roads of Child Hill and the New End, she puzzled her confused brain to understand the business on which she had been sent. Why had the gentleman been brought out to Hendon? Why, being ill, was he so soon to be removed? Why, being removed, was he not put back into this cab, and driven to the station for Cumberland? What purpose could be served by sending her to the convent for the gentleman's wife, when the gentleman himself might have been driven there? Why was the lady in a convent? The landlady pursed up her lips and contracted her wrinkled brows in a vain endeavor to get light out of the gloom of these mysteries.

The thought of the gentleman lying ill at her house suggested many thoughts concerning her son. Paul was not her son, and his name was not Drayton. Whose son he was she never knew, and what his name was she had never heard. But she had fixed and done for him since he was a baby, and no mother could have loved a son more than she had loved her Paul. What a poor, puling little one he was, and how the neighbors used to shake their heads and say:

"You'll never rear it; there's a fate on it, poor, misbegotten mite!"

That was thirty long years ago, and now Paul was the lustiest young man in Hendon. Ah! it was not Hendon then, but London, and her husband, the good man, was alive and hearty.

"It'll thrive yet, Martha," he would say, and the little one would seem to know him, and would smile and crow when he cracked his fingers over its cot.

Then the landlady thought of the dark days that followed, when bread was scarce and the gossips would say:

"Serve you right. What for do you have an extra mouth to feed?—take the brat to the foundling."

But her husband, God bless him, had always said:

"What's bite and sup for a child? Keep him, Martha; he'll be a comfort to ye yet, old woman."

Mrs. Drayton wiped her eyes as she drove in the dark.

Then the bad times changed, and they left the town and took the inn at Hendon, and then the worst times of all came on them, for as soon as they were snug and comfortable the good man himself died. He lay dying a week, and when the end came he cried for the child.

"Give me the boy," he said, and she lifted the child into his arms in bed. Then he raised his thin white hand to stroke the wavy hair, but the poor hand fell into the little one's face.

Mrs. Drayton shifted in her seat, and tried to drive away the memories that trod on the heels of these recollections; but the roads were still dark, and nothing but an empty sky was to be seen, and the memories would not be driven away. She recalled the days when young Paul grew to be a lusty lad—daring, reckless, the first in mischief, the deepest in trouble. And there was no man's hand to check him, and people shook their heads and whispered, "He'll come to a bad end; he has the wickedness in his blood." Poor lad, it was not his fault if he had turned out a little wild and wayward and rough, and cruel to his own mother, as you might say, jostling her when he had a drop to drink, and maybe striking her when he didn't know what he was doing, and never turning his hand to honest work, but always dreaming of fortunes coming some day, and betting and racing, and going here and there, and never resting happy and content at home. It was not his fault: he had been led astray by bad companions. And then she didn't mind a blow—not she. Every woman had to bear the like of that. You want a world of patience if you have men creatures about you—that's all.

Thinking of bad companions suggested to the landlady's mind, by some strange twist of which she was never fully conscious, the idea of Hugh Ritson. The gentleman who had come so strangely among them appeared to have a curious influence over Paul. He seemed to know something of Paul's mother. Paul himself rummaged matters up long ago, and found that the lady had escaped from the asylum, and been lost. And now the strange gentleman came with her portrait and said she was dead.

Poor soul, how well Mrs. Drayton remembered her! And that was thirty years ago! She had never afterward set eyes on the lady, and never heard of her but once, and even that once must be five-and-twenty years since. One day she went for coal to the wharf at Pimlico, and there she met an old neighbor, who said: "Mrs. Drayton, your lodger, she that drowned herself, came back for the babby, but your man and you were shifted away." And to think that the poor young thing was dead and gone now, and she herself, who had thought she was old even in those days, was alive and hearty still!

By this time the cab was rattling through the busy streets of London, and the train of the landlady's thoughts was broken. Only in a vague way did she know where she was going. The cab was taking her there, and it would take her back again. When they reached the convent she had to ask for Mrs. Ritson, and say she was sent to take her to St. Pancras Station to meet her husband there, and return to Cumberland by the train at midnight. That was all.

The clock of the abbey was marking the half-hour after eleven as the cab passed into Parliament Square. In another minute they drew up before the convent in Abbey Gardens.

The cabman jumped from the box, rang the bell, and helped Mrs. Drayton to alight. The iron gate and the door in the portico swung open together, and a nun stood on the threshold, holding a lamp in her hand. Mrs. Drayton hobbled up the steps and entered the hall. A deep gloom pervaded the wide apartment, in which there were but two wicker chairs and a table. The nun wore a gray serge gown, with a wimple cut square on her chest, a girdle about her waist, and a rosary hanging by her side.

"Can I see a lady boarder—Mrs. Ritson?" said the landlady.

The nun started a little, and then answered in a low, melancholy voice, in which the words she spoke were lost. Mrs. Drayton's eyes were now accustomed to the gloom, and she looked into the nun's face. It was a troubled and clouded face, and when it was lifted for an instant to her own, Mrs. Drayton felt chilled, as if a death's-hand had touched her.

It was the face of the mother of Paul! Older, sadder, calmer, but the same face still.

The nun dropped her eyes, and made the sign of the cross. Then she walked with a quick and noiseless step to the other end of the hall, and sounded a deep gong. In a moment this summoned

a sister—a novice, dressed like the first, except all in white. Mrs. Drayton was now trembling from head to foot, but she repeated her question, and was led into a bare, chill room, and left alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

When Greta parted from Hugh Ritson three hours before, she was in an agony of suspense. Another strange threat had terrified her. She had been asked to make choice of one of two evils; refusing to believe in Hugh Ritson's power, she had rejected both. But the uncertainty was terrible. To what lengths might not passion, unrequited passion, defeated passion, outraged passion, lead a man like Hugh Ritson? Without pity, without remorse, with a will that was relentless and a heart that never knew truth, he was a man to flinch at no extremity. What had he meant?

Greta's first impulse had been to go in search of her husband, but this was an idle and a foolish thought. Where should she look? Besides this, she had promised to remain in the convent until her husband should come for her, and she must keep her word. She did not go to supper when the gong sounded, but crept up to her room. The bell rang for vespers, and Greta did not go to the chapel. She lay down in anguish and wept scalding tears. The vesper hymn floated up to her where she lay, and she was still weeping. There was no light in this dark place; there was no way out of this maze but to wait and suffer.

And slowly the certainty stole upon her that Hugh Ritson had made no idle threat. He was a resolute man; he had given her a choice of two courses, and had she not taken a selfish part? If Paul, her husband, were indeed in danger, no matter from what machination of villainy—was it much to ask that she, his wife, should rescue him by a sacrifice that fell heaviest upon herself? Hugh Ritson had been right—her part had been a selfish one. Oh, where was Mr. Christian? She had telegraphed for him, and he had answered that he would come; yet hour had followed hour, and still he had not arrived.

Three hours she tossed in agony. She heard the sisters pass up the echoing stone staircase to their dormitories, and then the silent house became as dumb as a vault. Not a ripple flowed into this still tarn from the great stream of the world that rushed and surged and swelled with the clangor of a million voices around its incrustated sides.

Her window overlooked the Abbey Gardens. All was quiet beneath. Not a step sounded on the pavement. Before her the blank wall was black, and the dark, leafless trees stood out from the vague green of the grass beyond. Against the sky were the dim outlines of the two towers of the old abbey—by day a great rock for the pigeons that wheeled above the tumbling sea of the city, by night a skull of stone from which the voice of the bell told of the flight of time.

Out of the calm of a moment's stupefaction Greta was awakened by a knock at her door. The novice entered and told her that a woman waited below to speak with her. Greta betrayed no surprise, and she was beyond the reach of fresh agitation. Without word or question she followed the novice to the room where Mrs. Drayton sat.

She recognized the landlady and heard her story. Greta's heart leaped up at the thought of rejoining her husband. Here was the answer to the prayer that had gone up she knew not how often from her troubled heart. Soon she would be sure that Hugh Ritson's threat was vain. Soon she would be at Paul's side and hold his hand, and no earthly power should separate them again. Ah, thank God, the merciful Father, who healed the wounded hearts of His children, she should very soon be happy once more, and all the sorrows of these past few days would fade away into a dim memory.

"Twelve o'clock at St. Pancras, and you have the luggage in a cab at the door, you say?"

"Yes; and there's no time to lose, for, to be sure, the night is going fast," said Mrs. Drayton.

"And he will be there to meet me?" asked Greta. Her eyes, still wet with recent tears, danced with a new-found joy.

"Yes, at St. Pancras," said the landlady.

Greta's happiness overflowed. She took the old woman in her arms and kissed her wizened cheeks.

"Wait a minute—only a minute," she said, and tripped off with the swift glide of a lapwing. But when she was half-way up the stairs her ardor was arrested, and she returned with drooping face and steps of lead.

"But why did he not come for me himself?" she asked.

"The gentleman is not well—he is ill," said Mrs. Drayton.

"Ill? You say he is ill? Then he could not come. And I blamed him for not coming!"

"The gentleman is weak, but noways worse; belike he will go straight off and meet you at the

station."

Greta turned away once again, and went upstairs slowly. At a door on the first landing she tapped lightly, and when a voice answered from within she entered the room.

The superior was on her knees at a table. She lifted a calm and spiritual face as Greta approached.

"Reverend mother," said Greta, "I am leaving you this moment."

"So soon, my daughter?"

"My husband has sent for me; he will meet me at the railway station at twelve."

"Why did he not come himself?"

"He is ill; he has gone direct."

"The hour is late and the message is sudden. Are you satisfied?"

"I am anxious, reverend mother—"

"What is it, my daughter?"

"An old gentleman, a clergyman, Mr. Christian, is coming from Cumberland. I have expected him hourly, but he is not yet arrived. I cannot wait; I must rejoin my husband. Will you order that a message be left for the clergyman?"

"What is the message, my child?"

"Simply that I have returned with my husband by the train leaving St. Pancras at midnight."

"The lay sister in the hall shall deliver it."

"Who is the sister?"

"Sister Grace."

There was a silence.

"Reverend mother, has Sister Grace ever spoken of the past?"

The superior told a few beads.

"The past is as nothing to us here, my daughter. Within these walls the world does not enter. In the presence of the Cross the past and the future are one."

Greta drew a long breath. Then she stooped and kissed the hand of the superior, and turned softly away.

Greta and the landlady passed out through the deep portico, and the same nun who had opened the door closed it behind them. Mrs. Drayton clung to Greta's arm as they went through, and her hand trembled perceptibly.

"Who is she?" whispered the landlady, when they were seated in a cab.

"Sister Grace," said Greta, and turned her head aside.

"I could ha' sworn as she were the mother of my Paul," murmured Mrs. Drayton.

Greta faced about, but the landlady saw nothing of the look of inquiry; her eyes, like her thoughts, were far away.

CHAPTER XX.

Though the hour was late, the streets were thronged. The people were trooping home from the theaters; and the Strand, as Greta and the landlady crossed it, was choked with cabs and omnibuses. The cab drove through the Seven Dials, and there the public-houses were disgorging at every corner their poor ruins of men and women. Shouts, curses, quarreling, and laughter struck upon the ear above the whirl of the wheels. Unshaven men and unwashed women, squalid children running here and there among the oyster and orange stalls, thieves, idlers, vagabonds of all conditions, not a few honest people withal, and among them the dark figures of policemen.

Greta's heart beat high that night. Her spirit was full of a new alacrity. Every inch of the way, as they flew over the busy streets, seemed to awake in her soul some fresh sensibility. She wondered where the multitudes of people came from, and whither they were going—vast oceans on oceans of humanity, flowing and ebbing without tide.

She wanted to alight a hundred times, and empty her pockets of all her money. A blind man, playing a tin whistle, and leading a small dog held by a long string, awoke her special pity; the plaintive look in the eye of the cur was an object of peculiar sympathy. A filthy woman, reeling drunk and bareheaded across the street, almost under the feet of the horses, her discolored

breast hanging bare, and a puny infant crying feebly in her arms, was another occasion for solicitude. A tiny mite that might have been a dirty boy, coiled up in a ball on a doorstep like a starved cat, was an object of all but irresistible attraction. But she dare not stop for an instant; and, at last, with this certainty, she lay back and shut her eyes very resolutely, and wondered whether, after all, it were not very selfish to be very happy.

The cab stopped with a jolt; they were at St. Pancras station.

"Has he come?" asked Greta, eagerly, and looked about her with eyes that comprehended everything at a glance.

She could not see Paul, and when a porter opened the cab and helped her to alight, it was on her tongue to ask the man if he had seen her husband. But no, she would not do that. She must look for him herself, so that she might be the first to see him. Oh, yes, she must be the very first to see him, and she was now obstinately determined to ask no one.

The porter brought round the truck, and wheeled the luggage onto the platform, and Greta and Mrs. Drayton followed it. Then the wide eyes that half smiled and looked half afraid beneath their trembling lids glanced anxiously around. No, Paul was not there.

"What is the time?" she asked, her eyes still wandering over the bustling throng about her.

"Ten to twelve, miss," announced the porter.

"Oh," she said, with a sigh of relief, "then he will soon be here."

"Will you sit in the waiting-room, miss?" asked the porter; and almost unconsciously she followed him when he led the way. Mrs. Drayton hobbled behind her.

"What did he say about being ill?" she asked, when they were left together.

"That he was only a bit dizzy. Mayhap he's nowadays 'customed to illness," said the landlady.

"That is true. And what did you say then?"

"I coaxed him to rest him a bit, and take a drop o' summat, and he smiled and said, 'Thank you, my good woman.'

"You were in the right, you dear old soul," said Greta. And she put her arms about the landlady and hugged her. "I'm sure you've been very good to my husband, and watched him tenderly, while I, who should have nursed him, have been away. Thank you, thank you!"

Mrs. Drayton was feeling uneasy. "Well, d'ye know, I can't bear to see a fellow creatur' suffer. It goes agen me someways."

Greta had risen to her feet. "Stay here, Mrs. Drayton—Drayton, isn't it?—stay here while I go on to the platform. He might come and not see me. Ah, yes, he may be looking everywhere for me now."

She went out and elbowed her way among the people who were hurrying to and fro; she dodged between the trucks that were sliding luggage on to the weighing machine and off to the van. The engines were puffing volumes of smoke and steam up to the great glass roof, where the whistle of the engine-man echoed sharp and shrill. Presently she returned to the waiting-room.

"Oh, Mrs. Drayton," she said, "I dreamed a fearful dream last night. What do you think? Will he be well enough to come?"

"Coorse, coorse, my dear. 'Tell her to meet her husband at twelve.' Them's the gentleman's own words."

"How happy I shall be when we are safe at home! And if he is ill, it will be for me to nurse him then."

The light in the dove-like eyes at that moment told plainly that to the poor soul even illness might bring its compensating happiness.

"And as to dreams, to be sure, they are on'y dreams; and what's dreams, say I?"

"You are right, Mrs. Drayton," said Greta, and once more she shot away toward the platform. Her mind had turned to Parson Christian. Could it be possible that he had arrived? The porter who had brought in her luggage was still standing beside it, and with him there was another porter. Their backs were toward Greta as she came out of the waiting-room, and, tripping lightly behind them, she overheard a part of their conversation before they were aware that she was near.

"See the old file in the gaiters by the eleven up?" said one.

"Rather. A reg'lar grandmother's great-grandfather just out of the year one. Talk about swallows, eh?—and the buckles—and the stockings!"

"Good sort, how-an'-ever."

"Good for a tip, eh? Wouldn't ha' thought it."

"No, but a real good-hearted 'un an' if he is a Pape."

"Never?"

"To be sure. Got me to put him in a fly for the Catholic Convent up Westminster way."

Greta could restrain herself no longer, but burst in upon them with twenty questions. When had the parson arrived? When had he left? Was it in a fly? Would it go quickly? Could there be time for it to get back?

"What's your train, miss—twelve to the north?"

"Yes; will he catch it?"

"Scarce get back at twelve," said the porter. But, in spite of this discouraging prophecy, Greta was so elated at the fresh intelligence that she drew out her purse and gave the man five shillings. She had no other change than two half crowns and two pennies, and in her present elevation of soul there could be no choice, between the silver and the copper, as to which the bearer of such news deserved.

The man stared, and then smiled, but he quickly reconciled himself to the unexpected. With extraordinary alacrity he labeled the luggage, and bowled off to the north train, which was already at the platform.

It was now within three minutes of midnight, and Mrs. Drayton had joined Greta in the bustling throng on the platform.

"Oh, I feel as if a thousand hearts were all swelling and beating in my breast at once," said Greta. "Mrs. Drayton, is it certain that he will come? Porter, have you put the luggage in the van? Which is the train—the left?"

"No, miss, the left's going out to make room for the local train up from Kentish Town and Hendon. The right's your train, miss. Got your ticket, miss?"

"Not yet. Must I get it, think you? Is the time short? Yes, I will get two tickets myself," she added, turning to the landlady. "Then when he comes he will have nothing to do but step into the carriage."

"You'll have to be quick, miss—train's nigh due out—only a minute," said the porter.

Greta's luminous eyes were peering over the heads of the people that were about her. Then they brightened, with a flash more swift than lightning, and all her face wore in an instant a heavenly smile. "Ah, he is there—there at the back—at the booking-office—run to him, run my good, dear creature; run and tell him I am here! I'll find a compartment and have the door open."

Greta tripped along the platform with the foot of a deer. In another moment she had a carriage door open, and she stood there with the handle in her hand. She saw him coming who was more than all the world to her. But she did not look twice. No, she would not look twice. She would wait until they were within, alone, together.

Side by side with him walked Hugh Ritson. Could it be possible? And was it he who had brought her husband? Ah! he had repented, and it was only she who had been bitter to the end. How generous of him! how cruel of her!

Her eyes fell, and a warm flush overspread her cheeks as he who came first stepped into the carriage. She did not look again at him, nor did he look again at her. She knew he did not, though her eyes were down. "Oh, when we are alone!" she thought, and then she turned to Hugh Ritson.

The heavenly smile was still on her beautiful face, and the deep light in her eyes spoke of mingled joy and grief.

"Hugh, I fear, I fear," she faltered, "I have been hard and cruel. Let us be friends; let me be your dearest sister."

He looked at her in silence. His infirm foot trailed a pace. He saw what was in her heart, and he knew well what was in his own heart, too; he thought of the blow that he was about to strike her.

She held out her hand, and took in hers his own unresisting fingers. Ay, he knew that there and then he was about to break that forgiving heart forever. He knew who had stepped into that carriage.

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. The man in him could bear up no longer. He broke down; he could not speak; he was choked with emotion.

She turned to the landlady, who stood near, twitching at the ribbons of her bonnet and peering into the carriage.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Drayton, and God bless you for what you have done for my husband!"

The landlady muttered something that was inaudible; she was confused; she stammered, and then was silent.

Greta stepped into the carriage. The guard was standing at the door. The bell had been rung. The train had been signaled. The whistle had sounded. The clocks were striking midnight.

"Wait! Wait!"

It was a voice from the end of the platform. The guard turned with a smile to see who called on a train to wait. An old gentleman in silk stockings and gaiters, with long white hair flowing under the broad brim of a low-crowned hat, came panting to the only door that was still open.

"Quick, sir, it's moving; in with you!"

"Mr. Christian!" cried Greta, and throwing her arms about him, she drew him into the carriage. Then the train began to move away.

At that instant another train—the local train from Kentish Town and Hendon—steamed up to the opposite side of the platform. Before it had stopped two men leaped out. They were the two police-sergeants. Instantly—simultaneously—a man burst through the barrier and ran on to the platform from the street. He was bareheaded, and his face was ghastly white. In one moment the police-sergeants had laid hands upon him. The train to the north had not yet cleared the platform. He saw it passing out. He took hold of the hands by which he was held and threw them off, as if their grasp had been the grasp of a child. Then he bounded away toward the retreating train. It was now moving rapidly. It was gone; it was swallowed up in the dark mouth beyond, and the man stood behind, bareheaded, dripping with perspiration, yet white as ashes, his clothes awry, the collar of his frieze ulster torn away, and a strip of red flannel lining exposed.

It was Paul Ritson.

The police-sergeants hurried up with the re-enforcement of two porters to recover their man. But he was quiet enough now. He did not stir a muscle when they handcuffed him. He looked around with vague, vacant eyes, hardly seeming to realize where he was or what was being done with him. His frenzy was gone.

They led him down the platform. Hugh Ritson was standing on the spot where Greta had left him one minute before. When the company neared that spot the prisoner stopped. He looked across at Hugh Ritson in silence, and for an instant the dazed look died off his face. Then he turned his head aside, and allowed himself to be led quietly away.

CHAPTER XXI.

A morning paper, of November—, contained the following paragraph:

"It will be remembered that in the reports of the disastrous railway collision, which occurred at Hendon on Friday last, it was mentioned as a ghastly accessory to the story of horror that an injured passenger, who had been lifted from the debris of broken carriages, and put to lie out of harm's way in a field close at hand, was brutally assaulted and (apparently) robbed by some unknown scoundrel, who, though detected in the act itself, tore himself from the grasp of Police-Sergeant Cox, of the Hendon division of the metropolitan police force, and escaped in the darkness. The authorities were determined that their vigilance should not be eluded, and a person named Paul Drayton is now in custody, and will be brought up at Bow Street this morning. It turns out that Drayton is an innkeeper at Hendon, where he has long borne a dubious character. He was arrested at midnight in St. Pancras Station, in a daring and mad attempt to escape by the north-bound train, and it is understood that the incident of his capture is such as reflects the highest credit on the resolution, energy, and intrepidity of the force."

The same paper, of the day after, contained this further paragraph:

"The man Drayton, who was yesterday formally committed to take his trial at the Central Criminal Court, will be brought up at the Old Bailey to-morrow; and as the evidence is said to be of a simple and unconflicting character, it is not expected that the hearing will extend over a single day. It is stated that the accused, who observed a rigid silence during yesterday's proceedings, will, on his trial, set up the extraordinary defense of mistaken identity."

An evening paper of Friday, November—, contained the following remarks in the course of a leading note:

"It is a familiar legal maxim that a plea of alibi that breaks down is the worst of all accusations. The scoundrel that attempted to rob a dying man, who lay helpless and at his mercy amid the confusion of Friday night's accident at Hendon, was audacious enough to put forth the defense that he was not the man he was taken for. Cases of mistaken identity are, of course, common enough in the annals of jurisprudence, but we imagine the instances are rare indeed of evidence of identity so exceptional and conclusive as that which convicted the Hendon innkeeper being susceptible of error. The very clothes he wore in the dock bore their own witness to his guilt, and the court saw the police-sergeant produce a scrap of cloth torn from the guilty man's back, which exactly fitted a rent in the prisoner's ulster. The whole case would be a case of criminality too gross and palpable to merit a syllable of comment but for the astounding assurance with which the accused adhered to his plea in the face of evidence that was so complete as to make denial

little more than a farce. He denied that he was Paul Drayton, and said his name was Paul Ritson. He was identified as Drayton by several witnesses who have known him from infancy; among others by his old mother, Martha Drayton, whose evidence (given with reluctance, and with more tears than a son so unnatural deserved) was at once damning and as painful as anything of the kind ever heard in a court of justice. The claim to be Paul Ritson was answered by the evidence of Mr. Hugh Ritson, mine-owner in Cumberland, and brother of the gentleman whom the prisoner wished to personate. Mr. H. Ritson admitted a resemblance, but had no hesitation in saying that the accused was not his brother. The prisoner thereupon applied to the court that the wife of Paul Ritson should be examined, but, as it was explained that both husband and wife were at present ill in Cumberland, the court wisely ruled against the application. As a final freak of defense, the prisoner asked for the examination of one Mercy Fisher, who, he said, would be able to say by what circumstances he came to wear the clothes of the guilty man. The court adjourned for an hour in order that this person might be produced, but on reassembling it was explained that the girl, who turned out to be a mistress whom Drayton had kept at his mother's house, had disappeared. Thus, with a well-merited sentence of three years' penal servitude, ended a trial of which the vulgarity of detail was only equalled by the audacity of defense."

A week passed, and the public had almost forgotten the incidents of the trial, when the following paragraph appeared in a weekly journal:

"I have heard that the man who was sentenced to three years' penal servitude for robbery at the scene of the Hendon accident was seized with an attack of brain fever immediately upon his arrival at Millbank. The facts that transpire within that place of retirement are whispered with as much reserve as guards the secrets of another kind of confessional, but I do hear that since the admission of the man who was known on his trial as Paul Drayton, and who is now indicated by a numerical cognomen, certain facts have come to light which favor the defense he set up of mistaken identity."

CHAPTER XXII.

The chapter room of St. Margaret's Convent was a chill, bare chamber containing an oak table and four or five plain oak chairs. On the painted walls, which were of dun gray, there was an etching by a Florentine master of the flight into Egypt, and a symbolic print of the Sacred Heart. Besides these pictures there was but a single text to relieve the blindness of the empty walls, and it ran: "Where the tree falls, there it must lie."

Four days after Greta's departure from the house wherein she had been received as a temporary boarder, the superior sat in the chapter room, and a sister knelt at her feet. The sister's habit was gray and her linen cape was plain. She wore no scapular, and no hood above the close cap that hid her hair and crossed her forehead. She was, therefore, a lay sister; she was Sister Grace.

"Mother, hear my sin," she said in a trembling whisper.

"Speak on, daughter."

"We were both at Athlone in the year of the great famine. He was an officer in a regiment quartered there. I was a novice of the choir in the Order of Charity. We met in scenes sanctified by religion. Oh, mother, the famine was sore, and he was kind to the famished people! 'The hunger is on us,' they would cry, as if it had been a plague of locusts. It was thus, with their shrill voices and wan faces, that the ragged multitudes followed us. Yes, mother, he was very, very kind to the people."

"Well?"

The penitent bowed her head yet lower. "My mother, I renounced the vows, and—we were married."

The lips of the superior moved in silent prayer.

"What was his name, my daughter?"

"Robert Lowther. We came from Ireland to London. A child was born, and we called him Paul. Then my husband's love grew chill and died. I grieved over him. Perhaps I was but a moody companion. At last he told me—"

The voice faltered; the whole body quivered.

"Well, my child?"

"Oh, mother, he told me I was not his wife; that I was a Catholic, but that he was a Protestant; that a Catholic priest had married us in Ireland without question or inquiry. That was not a valid marriage by English law."

"Shame on the English law! But what do we know of the law at the foot of the Cross? Well?"

"He left me. Mother, I flung God's good gift away. I tried to drown myself, and my little child with me; but they prevented me. I was placed in an asylum for the insane, and my baby—my Paul—was given into the care of a woman with whom I had lodged. Have I not sinned deeply?"

"Your sins are great, my daughter, but your sufferings have also been great. What happened then?"

"I escaped from the asylum and returned for my child. It was gone. The woman had removed to some other part of London, none knew where, and my Paul, my darling, was lost to me forever. My mother, it was then that I sinned deepest of all."

Her head was bowed to her trembling knees, and her voice was all but suspended in an agony of shame.

"Mother, I flung away God's better gift than life! Oh, how shall I tell you? Your foot trembles, reverend mother. You are a holy woman, and know nothing of the world's temptations."

"Hush, my daughter; I am as great a sinner as yourself."

"I cannot tell you. Mother, mother, you see I cannot."

"It is for your soul's weal, my daughter."

"I had tried to serve God, and He had seen my shame. What was left to me but the world, the world, the world! Perhaps the world itself would have more mercy. My kind mother, have I not told you yet?"

The superior made the sign of the cross.

"Ah, my daughter! the enemy of your soul was with you then. You should not have ceased to lift your hands to Heaven in supplication and prayer. You should have prostrated yourself three days and nights in the tribune before the Holy Sacrament."

The penitent raised her pale face.

"In less time I was a lost and abandoned woman."

The superior told a few beads with trembling fingers. Then she lifted the cross that hung from her girdle, and held it out to the sister.

"I thought of my child, and prayed that he might be dead. I thought of him who was not my husband, and my heart grew cold and hard. Mother, my redemption came. Yes, but with it came the meaning of the fearful words, too late. Amid the reeling madness of the life that is mocked with the name of gay, I met a good man. Yes, holy mother, a good man. Mother, he now sleeps there!"

Her pale face, serene and solemn, was lifted again, and the hand that held the crucifix was raised above her head.

"I loathed my life. He took me away from it—to the mountains—to Scotland, and a child was born. Mother, it was only then that I awoke as from a trance. It seemed as if a ring of sin begirt me. Tears—ah, me! what tears were shed. But rest and content came at last, and then we were married."

"My daughter, my daughter, little did I think when I received your vows that the enemy of your soul had so mastered you."

"Listen a little longer, holy mother. The child grew to be the image of my darling, my Paul—every feature, every glance the same. And partly to remind me of my lost one, and partly to make me forget him forever, I called the second child Paul. Mother, the years went by in peace. The past was gone from me. Only its memory lay like a waste in my silent heart. I had another son, and called him Hugh. After many years my husband died." The penitent paused.

"Mother, another thing comes back to me; but I have confessed it already. Shall I repeat it?"

"No, my daughter, not if it touches the oath that lay heavy on your heart."

"I thought my first child was dead. For thirty years I had not seen him. But the pathways of our lives crossed at last, and the woman who nursed him came to this house four days ago."

"Here?"

"Mother, my son, the child of that first false union, my darling, for whom I wept scalding tears long, long years ago; my Paul, whose loss was all but the loss of his mother's soul, my son is a thief and an outcast."

The lips of the superior moved again in prayer.

"He is the man known to the world as Paul Drayton—to me as Paul Lowther."

"My dear daughter, humble yourself in the midst of so awful a judgment. Do you say Drayton?—Drayton, who, as I hear, was to-day tried and sentenced?"

"No—yes—how shall I tell you?—the same and not the same. Mother, the crime was committed by my son Paul Lowther, the sentence was pronounced on my son Paul Ritson."

"My dear daughter—"

"I was in the court and heard all; and I alone knew all—I alone, alone! Bear with me that I transgressed the law of this holy order. Think, oh! my kind mother, think that the nun was yet the woman, and, above all, the mother. Yes, I heard all. I heard the charge that convicted my son Paul Lowther. He was guilty before God and man. But the prisoner in the dock was my son Paul Ritson. I knew him, and believed him when he denied the name they gave him. Ah, me, my heart bled!"

"What did you do, my daughter?"

"Mother, I was weak, very weak. I could not see my duty clearly. An awful conflict was rife within me. I could not justify the one man without condemning the other. And both were the children of my bosom."

"Fearful, fearful! But, my daughter, the one was guilty and the other innocent."

"Yes, yes; a thousand times yes; but then there was myself. How could I punish the guilty without revealing the secret sin that had been thirty years hidden in my heart? And my poor, weak spirit shrunk within me, and I sat silent amid all."

"My daughter, we must crucify our spiritual pride."

"Yes, yes; but there was the love of my son, Paul Ritson—he thought me a good woman even yet. How could I confess to that sinful past and not lose the love of the only human soul that held me pure and true? Mother, it is very sweet to be loved."

"Oh, my daughter, my daughter, a terrible situation, terrible, terrible!"

"Mother, I have told you everything. Tell me now what hope is left. Give me your direction."

"My daughter, let us humble ourselves before God, and pray that He may reveal the path of duty. Come."

The superior rose, took her crozier in her hand, and walked out of the room. The sister followed her. They passed through the sacristy into the empty church.

It was evening. The glow of a wintery sunset came through the windows to the west, and fell in warm hues on the altar. There was the hush of the world's awe here as day swooned into night. Without these walls were turmoil and strife. Within was the balm of rest—the rest that lies in the heart of the cyclone.

And the good mother and the sister went down on their knees together, and prayed for light and guidance. The mother rose, but the sister knelt on; darkness fell, and she was still kneeling, and when the east was dabbled with the dawn, the gray light fell on her bowed head and uplifted hands.

BOOK IV.

THE WATERS OF MARAH ARE BITTER.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE YEAR 1877.

The dale lay green in the morning sunlight; the river that ran through its lowest bed sparkled with purple and amber; the leaves prattled low in the light breeze that souched through the rushes and the long grass; the hills rose sheer and white to the smooth blue lake of the sky, where only one fleecy cloud floated languidly across from peak to peak. Out of unseen places came the bleating of sheep and the rumble of distant cataracts, and above the dull thud of tumbling waters far away was the thin caroling of birds overhead.

But the air was alive with yet sweeter sounds. On the breast of the fell that lies over against Cat Bells a procession of children walked, and sung, and chattered, and laughed. It was St. Peter's Day, and they were rush-bearing: little ones of all ages, from the comely girl of fourteen, just ripening into maidenhood, who walked last, to the sweet boy of four in the pinafore braided with epaulets, who strode along gallantly in front. Most of the little hands carried rushes, but some were filled with ferns, and mosses, and flowers. They had assembled at the school-house, and now, on their way to the church, they were making the circuit of the dale.

They passed over the road that crosses the river at the head of Newlands, and turned down into the path that follows the bed of the valley. At that angle there stands a little group of cottages

deliciously cool in their white-wash, nestling together under the heavy purple crag from which the waters of a ghyll fall into a deep basin that reaches to their walls. The last of the group is a cottage with its end to the road, and its open porch facing a garden shaped like a wedge. As the children passed this house an old man, gray and thin and much bent, stood by the gate, leaning on a staff. A colly, with the sheep-dog's wooden bar suspended from its shaggy neck, lay at his feet. The hum of voices brought a young woman into the porch. She was bareheaded and wore a light print gown. Her face was pale and marked with lines. She walked cautiously, stretching one hand before her with an uncertain motion, and grasping a trailing tendril of honeysuckle that swept downward from the roof. Her eyes, which were partly inclined upward and partly turned toward the procession, had a vague light in their bleached pupils. She was blind. At her side, and tugging at her other hand, was a child of a year and a half—a chubby, sunny little fellow with ruddy cheeks, blue eyes, and fair curly hair.

Prattling, laughing, singing snatches, and waving their rushes and ferns above their happy, thoughtless heads, the children rattled past. When they were gone the air was empty, as it is when the lark stops in its song.

The church of Newlands stands in the heart of the valley, half hidden by a clump of trees. By the lych-gate Parson Christian stood that morning, aged a little, the snow a thought thicker on his bushy hair, the face mellowed, the liquid eyes full of the sunlight behind which lies the shower. Greta stood beside him; quieter of manner than in the old days, a deeper thoughtfulness in her face, her blue eyes more grave and less restless, her fair hair no longer falling in waves behind her, but gathered up into a demure knot under her hat.

"Here they come, bless their innocent hearts!" said Parson Christian, and at that moment the children turned an angle of the road.

The pink and white of their frocks and pinafores were all but hidden by the little forest of green that they carried before and above them.

"Till Birnam wood do come to Dunsinane," muttered Greta, smiling.

When the rush-bearers came up to the front of the church, the lych-gate was thrown open and they filed through.

"How tired he looks, the brave little boy!" said Greta, picking up the foremost of the company, the tiny man in the epaulets, now covered with the dust of the roads.

"The little ones first, and you great girls afterward," said the parson. "Those with flowers go up to the communion and lay them on the form, and those with mosses put them on the font, and those with rushes and ferns begin under the pulpit and come down the aisle to the porch."

The stalwart little tramp in Greta's arms wriggled his way to the ground. He had mosses in his hands and must go first. Then the children trooped into the church, and in an instant the rude old place was alive with the buzz of prattling tongues.

The floor covered many a tomb. Graven on the plain slabs that formed the pathway down the middle of the church were the names of the men and women who had lived and died in the dale generations gone by. In their own day they were children themselves; and now other children—their own children's children's children—with never a thought about what lay beneath, with only love in their eyes, and laughter on their lips, and life in their limbs—were strewing rushes down the path above them.

In ten minutes there was not an inch of the flagged aisle visible. All was green from the communion to the porch. Here and there an adventurous lad, turning to account the skill at climbing acquired at birds'-nesting, had clambered over the pews to the rude cross-trees, and hung great bunches of rushes from the roof.

"Now, children, let us sing," said the parson, and taking up the accordion, he started a hymn.

The leaded windows of the old church stood open, and the sweet young voices floated away, and far away, over the uplands and the dale. And the birds still sung in the blue sky, and the ghylls still rumbled in the distance, and the light wind still souched through the long grass, and the morning sunlight shone over all.

There was a cloud of dust on the road, and presently there came trooping down from the village a company of men, surrounded by a whole circuit of dogs. Snarls, and yaps, and yelps, and squawks, and guffaws, and sometimes the cachinnation and crow of cocks, broke upon the clear air. The roystering set would be as many as a dozen, and all were more or less drunk. First came John Proudfoot, the blacksmith, in his shirt-sleeves, with his leathern apron wrapped in a knot about his waist, and a silver and black game-cock imprisoned under his arm. Lang Geordie Moore, his young helper, carried another fowl. Dick o' the Syke, the miller, in a brown coat whitened with flour, walked abreast of Geordie and tickled the gills of the fowl with a straw. Job Sheepshanks, the letter-cutter, carried a pot of pitch and a brush, and little Tom o' Dint hobbled along with a handful of iron files. Behind these came the landlord of the Flying Horse, with a basket over one arm, from which peeped the corks of many bottles, and Natt, the stableman at the Ghyll, carried a wicker cage, in which sat a red bantam-cock with spurs that glittered in the light.

There was one other man who walked with the company, and he was the soul of the noisy crew;

his voice was the loudest, his laugh the longest, and half of all that was said was addressed to him. He was a lusty man with a florid face; he wore a suit of tweeds plaided in wide stripes of buff and black.

It was Paul Drayton.

"Burn my body, and what's on now?" he said, as the gang reached the church.

"Rush-bearing, I reckon," answered Tom o' Dint.

"And what's rush-bearing?"

"You know, Mister Paul," said the postman, "rush-bearing—the barns rush-bearing—St. Peter's Day, you know."

"Oh, ay, I know—rush-bearing. Let me see, ain't it once a year?"

"What, man, but you mind the days when you were a bit boy and went a-rushing yersel'?" said the blacksmith.

"Coorse, coorse, oh, ay, I ain't forgotten them days. Let me see, it's a kind of a harvest-home, ain't it?"

"Nowt o' the sort," said Dick, the miller, testily. "Your memory's failing fast, Mister Ritson."

"And that's true, old fence. I'll never be the same man again after that brain fever I had up in London—not in the head-piece, you know."

The group of men and dogs had drawn up in front of the church just as Brother Peter crossed the church-yard to the porch, carrying a red paper in his hand.

"Who's that—the Methodee man?"

"It's the Methodee, for sure," said the blacksmith.

"Ey, it's the parson's Peter," added the postman, "and yon paper is a telegraph—it's like he's takin' it to somebody."

"Hold hard, my boys," said Drayton; and, leaving his cronies he strode through the lych-gate and down the path, the dogs yapping around him.

Brother Peter had drawn up at the door of the porch; the children were still singing.

"If that telegram is for my wife, you may hand it over to me," said Drayton, and reached out his hand to take it.

Brother Peter drew back.

"It'll be all right, old fellow—I'll see she gets it."

"Ey, thoo'll manish that, I's warn," said Peter, in a caustic voice.

"Come, don't you know that what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband?"

"Don't know as I do. I'se never been larn't sec daftness," said Peter.

"Hand it over. Come, be quick!"

"Get ower me 'at can," said Peter, with a decisive twinkle.

"Gi'e him a slab ower the lug," shouted the miller from the road.

"You hear what they say? Come, out with it."

"Eh, you've rowth o' friends, you're a teeran crew, but I cares laal for any on you."

Drayton turned away with a contemptuous snort.

"Damme, what a clatter!" he shouted, and leaped on to the raised mound of a grave to look in at an open window. As he did so he kicked a glass for flowers that lay upon it, and the broken frame tumbled in many pieces. "I've done for somebody's money," he said with a loud guffaw.

"What, man, but it were thy awn brass as bought it," said the blacksmith.

"Ey, it's thy fadder's grave," said Job Sheepshanks.

Drayton glanced down at the headstone.

"Why, so it is!" he said; "d'ye see, I hain't been here since the day I buried him."

"Nay, that's all stuff and nonsense," said Job. "I mind the morning I found ye lying wet and frostit on the top of that grave."

"D'ye say so? Well, I ain't for denying it; and now I think of it, I was—yes, I was here that morning."

"Nay, you warn't nowt o' the sort," said the blacksmith. "That were the varra morning as Giles Raisley saw you at the Pack Horse sleeping. I mind the fratch Job had with laal Gubblum about it

long ago."

"It's all stuff and nonsense," replied Job. "He were here."

"The Pack Horse? Well, now, I remember, I was there, too."

The singing had ceased, and Greta came out into the porch on tiptoe, carrying in her arms a tiny mite, who was crying. Peter handed her the telegram, and turned up the path.

Drayton had rejoined his companions, and was in the act of knocking the neck off a bottle by striking it against the wall, when Peter walked through the lych-gate.

"Tee a pint o' yal down the Methodee's back," shouted Dick, the miller, and in another moment Brother Peter was covered with the contents of the broken bottle.

A loud, roystering laugh filled the air, and echoed from the hills.

"What a breck!" tittered the postman.

"What a breck!" shouted the blacksmith.

"What a breck!" roared the miller.

"Get ower me 'at can!" mimicked Natt.

"He's got a lad's heart, has Mister Paul," said the landlord of the Flying Horse.

"Ey, he's a fair fatch," echoed little Tom o' Dint.

Leaving Peter to shake himself dry of the liquor that dripped from him in froth, the noisy gang reeled down the road, the yelping dogs careering about them, and the cocks squawking with the hugs they received from the twitching arms of the men convulsed with laughter.

At the head of the Vale of Newlands there is a clearing that was made by the lead miners of two centuries ago. It lies at the feet of an ampitheater of hills that rise peak above peak, and die off depth beyond depth. Of the old mines nothing remains but the level cuttings in the sides of the fells, and here and there the washing-pits cut out of the rock at your feet. Fragments of stone lie about, glistening with veins of lead, but no sound of pick or hammer breaks the stillness, and no cart or truck trundles over the rough path. It is a solitude in which one might forget that the world is full of noise.

To this spot Drayton and his cronies made their way. At one of the old washing troughs they drew up, and sat in a circle on its rocky sides. They had come for a cock fight. It was to be the bantam (carried by Natt and owned by his master) against all comers. Drayton and the blacksmith were the setters-on. The first bout was between the bantam and Lang Geordie's ponderous black Spanish. Geordie's bird soon squawked dolorously, and made off over the heads of the derisive spectators, whereupon Geordie captured it by one of its outstretched wings, and forthwith screwed its neck. Then came John Proudfoot's silver and black, and straightway steel gaffs were affixed to the spurs. When the cocks felt their feet they crowed, and then pecked the ground from side to side. An exciting struggle ensued. Up and down, over and under, now beating the breast, now trailing the comb, now pecking at the gills. And the two men at opposite sides of the pit—the one in his shirt-sleeves rolled up to the elbows, the other in his sporting plaid—stooped with every lunge and craned their necks at every fall, and bobbed their heads with every peck, their eyes flashing, their teeth set.

At one moment they drew off their birds, called for the files, and sharpened up the spurs. Later on they seized the cocks by the necks, shouted for the pitch-pot and patched up the bleeding combs. The birds were equally matched, and fought long. At last their strength ebbed away. They followed each other feebly, stretching their long, lagging throats languidly, opening their beaks and hanging out their dry, white tongues, turning tail, then twisting about and fighting again, until both lay stretched out on the pit bottom.

As the energy of the cocks subsided, the ardor of the men waxed sensibly. They yelled excitedly, protested, reviled, swore, laughed, jeered, and crowed.

At length, when the bantam fell and gave no signs of speedy resurrection, the anger of Drayton could not be supported. He leaped across the pit, his face red as his cock's comb, and shouting, "Damme, what for did ye pick up my bird?" he planted a blow full on the blacksmith's chest.

A fight of yet fiercer kind followed. Amid shouts, and in the thick of a general scuffle, the blacksmith closed with his powerful adversary, gripped him about the waist, twisted him on his loins, and brought him to the ground with a crash. Then he stood over him with fierce eyes.

"I mak' no doubt you're not hankerin' for another of that sort!" he puffed.

"John's given him the cross-buttock," said the miller.

"The master's lost all his wrustling," said Natt, blinking out of his sleepy eyes.

"I mind the day when he could have put John down same as a bit boy," said the little postman.

Natt helped Drayton to his feet. He was quiet enough, now, but as black in the face as a thunder-cloud.

"This comes of a gentleman mixing with them as is beneath him," he muttered, and he mopped his perspiring forehead with a bandanna handkerchief.

The miller snorted, the mason grunted, the little postman laughed in his thin pipe.

Drayton's eyes flashed.

"I'm a gentleman, I am, if you want to know," he said, defiantly.

The blacksmith stood by, leisurely rolling down his shirt-sleeves.

"Ey, for fault of wise folk we call you so," he said, and laughed. "But when I leet of a man, I's rather have him nor a hundred sec gentlemen as you!"

"Thoo's reet for once, John!" shouted Dick o' the Syke, and there was some general laughter.

"Gentleman! Ax the women-folk what they mak' of sec a gentleman," continued the blacksmith with contemptuous emphasis. "Him as larn't folks to fill the public and empty the cupboard."

There was a murmur among the men as they twisted about.

"Ax them what they mak' of him 'at spent four days in Lunnon and came back another man—ax the women-folk; they're maistly reet, I reckon."

Another uneasy movement among the men.

"Burn my body! and what's the women to me?" said Drayton.

"Nay, nowt," answered the blacksmith. "Your awn wife seems nowadays powerful keen for your company."

Drayton's eyes were red, but the fire died out of them in an instant. He stepped up to the blacksmith and held out his hand.

"You've licked me," he said, in another tone, "but I ain't the man to keep spite, I ain't; so come along, old fence, and let's wet it."

"That's weel said," put in Tommy Lowthwaite, the landlord.

"It's no'but fair," said Dick, the miller.

"He's a reet sort, after all," said Job, the mason.

"He's his awn fadder's son, is Paul Ritson," said Tom o' Dint.

In two minutes more the soiled company were trampling knee-deep through rank beds of rushes on their way to the other side of the dale. They stopped a few yards from a pit shaft with its headgear and wheel.

"Let's take my brother's ken for it," said Drayton, and they turned into a one-story house that stood near.

It was a single capacious chamber, furnished more like a library than an office; carpets, rugs, a cabinet, easychairs, and a solid table in the middle of the floor. The cock-fighters filed in and sat down on every available chair, on the table, and at last on the floor.

"Squat and whiff," said Drayton, "and, Tommy, you out with the corks, quick."

"It must be a bonny money-making consarn to keep up the likes of this," said the miller, settling himself uneasily in an easy-chair.

Dick was telling himself what a fool he had been not to ask more than the fifty pounds he received for the damage once done by fire to his mill.

"Have you never heard as it ain't all gold as glitters?" said Drayton; and he struck a lucifer match on the top of the mahogany table.

"What, man, dusta mean as the pit's not paying?" said the blacksmith.

Drayton gave his head a sidelong shake of combined astuteness and reserve.

"I mak' no doubt now as you have to lend Master Hugh many a gay penny," said Tom o' Dint in an insinuating tone.

"Least said, soonest mended," said Drayton, sententiously, and smiled a mighty knowing smile.

Then the men laughed, and the landlord handed the bottles round, and all drank out of the necks, and puffed dense volumes of smoke from their pipes, and spat on the carpet.

And still the birds sung in the clear air without, and still the ghylls rumbled, and still the light wind souched through the grass, and still the morning sunlight shone over all.

The door opened, and Hugh Ritson entered, followed by the lawyer, Mr. Bonnithorne. There was a steely glimmer in his eyes as he stood just inside the threshold and looked round.

"Come, get out of this!" he said.

The men shuffled to their feet and were elbowing their way out. Drayton, who sat on the table, removed his pipe from between his teeth and called on them to remain.

Hugh Ritson stepped up to Drayton and touched him on the shoulder.

"I want to speak with you," he said.

"What is it?" demanded Drayton.

"I want to speak with you," repeated Hugh.

"What is it? Out with it. You've got the gift of the gab, hain't ye? Don't mind my friends."

Hugh Ritson's face whitened, and a cold smile passed over it.

"Your time is near," he muttered, and he turned on his heel.

As he stepped out of the noisesome chamber, a loud, hoarse laugh followed him. He drew a long breath.

"Thank God it will soon be over!" he said.

Bonnithorne was at his side.

"Is it to be to-morrow?" asked the lawyer.

"To-morrow," said Hugh Ritson.

"Have you told him?"

"Tell him yourself, Bonnithorne. I can bear with the man no longer. I shall be doing something that I may repent."

"Have you apprised Parson Christian?"

Hugh Ritson bent his head.

"And Greta?"

"She won't come," said Hugh. "The girl could never breathe the same air as that scoundrel for five minutes together."

"And yet he's her half-brother," said the lawyer, softly; and then he added, with the conventional smile: "Odd, isn't it?"

CHAPTER II.

When the procession of children had passed the little cottage at the angle of the roads, the old man who leaned on his staff at the gate turned about and stepped to the porch.

"Did the boy see them?—did he see the children?" said the young woman who held the child by the hand.

"I mak' na doot," said the old man.

He stooped to the little one and held out one long, withered finger. The soft baby hand closed on it instantly.

"Did he laugh? I thought he laughed," said the young woman.

A bright smile played on her lips.

"Maybe so, lass."

"Ralphie has never seen the children before, father. Didn't he look frightened—just a little frightened—at first, you know? I thought he crept behind my gown."

"Maybe, maybe."

The little one had dropped the hand of his young mother, and, still holding the bony finger of his grandfather, he toddled beside him into the house.

Very cool and sweet was the kitchen, with white-washed walls and hard earthen floor. A table and a settle stood by the window, and a dresser that was an armory of bright pewter dishes, trenchers, and piggins crossed the opposite wall.

"Nay, but sista here, laal man," said the old charcoal-burner, and he dived into a great pocket at his side.

"Have you brought it? Is it the kitten? Oh, dear, let the boy see it!"

A kitten came out of the old man's pocket, and was set down on the rug at the hearth. The timid creature sat dazed, then raised itself on its hind legs and mewed.

"Where's Ralphie? Is he watching it, father? What is he doing?"

The little one had dropped on hands and knees before the kitten, and was gazing up into its face.

The mother leaned over him with a face that would have beamed with sunshine if the sun of sight had not been missing.

"Is he looking? Doesn't he want to coddle it?"

The little chap had pushed his nose close to the nose of the kitten, and was prattling to it in various inarticulate noises.

"Boo—loo—lal-la—mamma."

"Isn't he a darling, father?"

"It's a winsome wee thing," said the old man, still standing with drooping head over the group on the hearth.

The mother's face saddened, and she turned away. Then from the opposite side of the kitchen, where she was making pretense to take plates from a plate-rack, there came the sound of suppressed sobs. The old man's eyes followed her.

"Nay, lass; let's have a sup of broth," he said in a tone that carried another message.

The young woman put plates and a bowl of broth on the table.

"To think that I can never see my own child, and everybody else can see him!" she said, and then there was another bout of tears.

The charcoal-burner sipped at his broth in silence. A glistening bead rolled slowly down his wizened cheek, and the interview on the hearth went on without interruption:

"Mew—mew—mew." "Boo—loo—lal-la—mamma."

There was a foot on the gravel in front.

"How fend ye, Mattha?" said a voice from without.

"Come thy ways, Gubblum," answered the old man.

Gubblum Oglethorpe entered, dressed differently than of old. He wore a suit of canvas stained deeply with iron ore.

"I's thinking maybe Mercy will let me warm up my poddish," said Gubblum.

"And welcome," said Mercy, and took down from the dresser a saucepan and porridge thivel. "I'll make it for you while father sups his broth."

"Nay, lass, you're as thrang as an auld peat wife, I's warn. I'll mak' it myself. I's rather partic'lar about my poddish, forby. Dusta know how many faults poddish may have? They may be sour, sooty, sodden, and savorless, soat, welsh, brocken, and lumpy—and that's mair nor enough, thoo knows."

Gubblum had gone down on the hearth-rug.

"Why, and here's the son and heir," he said. "Nay, laddie, mind my claes—they'll dirty thy brand-new brat for thee."

"Is he growing, Gubblum?"

"Growing?—amain."

"And his eyes—are they changing color?—going brown?"

"Maybe—I'll not be for saying nay."

"Is he—is he very like me?"

"Nay—weel—nay—I's fancying I see summat of the stranger in the laal chap at whiles."

The young mother turned her head. Gubblum twisted to where Matthew sat.

"That man and all his raggabrash are raking about this morning. It caps all, it does, for sure."

The old charcoal-burner did not answer. He paused with the spoon half raised, glanced at Mercy, and then went on with his broth.

"Hasta heard of the lang yammer in the papers about yon matter?" said Gubblum.

"Nay," said Matthew, "I hears nowt of the papers."

"He's like to hang a lang crag when he hears about it."

"I mak' na doubt," said Matthew, showing no curiosity.

"It's my belief 'at the auld woman at Hendon is turning tail. You mind she was down last back end, and he wadn't have nowt to say to her."

"Ey, I mind her," said Matthew.

"Every dog has his day, and I reckon yon dog's day is nigh amaist done. And it wad have been a vast shorter on'y Mercy hadn't her eyes."

"Ey, ey," said Matthew, quietly.

"If the lass had no'but been able to say, 'Yon man is Drayton, and yon as you've got in prison is Ritson, and I saw the bad wark done,' that would have settled it."

"Na doot," said Matthew, his head in the bowl.

"They warn't for hearing me. When the parson took me up to Lunnon mair nor a twelvemonth ago, they sent us baith home with our tails atween our legs. 'Bring us the young woman,' they said; 'your evidence will stand aside hers, but not alone. Bring the young woman to 'dentify,' they says. 'She's gone blind,' we says. 'We can't help that,' they says. And that's what they call justice up in Lunnon."

"Ey, ey," said Matthew.

"But then thoo has to mak' 'lowances for them gentry folk—they've never been larn't no better, thoo sees."

Gubblum's porridge was bubbling, and the thivel worked vigorously. Matthew had picked up the child from the hearth. The little fellow was tugging at his white beard.

"It were bad luck that me and Mercy didn't stay a day or so langer in Hendon yon time. She had her eyes then. But the lass was badly, and" (dropping his voice) "that way, thoo knows, and I warn't to prophesy what was to happen to poor Paul Ritson. So I brought her straight away home."

"So thoo did, Gubblum," said Matthew, stroking the child's head.

"It's that Hugh as is at the bottom of it all, I reckon. I'm not afraid to say it, if he is my master. I allus liked Paul Ritson—the reet one, thoo knows, not this taistrel that calls hisself Paul Ritson—but I cared so laal for Hugh that I could have taken him and wrowk't the fire with him."

The porridge was ready, and Mercy set a wooden bowl on the table. "I's fullen thy bicker, my lass," said Gubblum. "I's only a laal man, but I's got a girt appetite, thoo sees." Then turning to Matthew he continued: "But he's like to pay for it. He brought his raggabash here, and now the rascal has the upper hand—that's plain to see."

"So it be," said Matthew.

"Deemoralizin' all the country-side, what with his drinkin' and cock-fightin' and terriers, an' I don't know what. Theer's Dick o' the Syke, he's a ruined man this day, and John, the blacksmith, he's never had a heat on the anvil for a week, and as for Job, the mason, he's shaping to be mair nor ever like his Bible namesake, for he won't have nowt but his dunghill to sit on soon."

"Dusta think they dunnot ken he's the wrong man?" asked Matthew.

"Nay, Mattha, but a laal bit of money's a wonderful thing, mind ye."

"It is for sure."

"One day he went to clogger Kit to be measur't for new shoes. 'What, Master Ritson,' says Kit, 'your foot's langer by three lines nor when I put the tape on it afore.'"

"Ah!"

"Next day Kit had an order for two pairs, forby a pair of leggins and clogs for Natt. That's the way it's manish'd."

Mercy had taken her child from her father's knee, and was sitting on the sconce bench with it, holding a broken piece of a mirror before its face, and listening for its laugh when it saw itself in the glass.

"But he's none Cummerland—hearken to his tongue," said Matthew.

Gubblum put down his spoon on his plate, now empty.

"That minds me," he said, laughing, "that I met him out one day all dressed in his brave claes—them as might do for a nigger that plays the banjo. 'Off for a spogue?' I says. 'What's a spogue?' he says, looking thunder. 'Nay,' I says, 'you're no'but a dalesman—ax folks up Hendon way,' I says. I was peddling then, but Master Hugh 'counters me another day, and he says, 'Gubblum,' he says, 'I's wanting a smart laal man, same as you, to weigh the ore on the bank-top—pund a week,' he says."

"Ey, I mak' no doot they thowt to buy thee ower," said Matthew.

"They've made a gay canny blunder if they think they've put a swine ring on Gubblum's snout. Buy or beat—that's the word. They've bought most of the folk and made them as lazy as libbed bitches. But they warn't able to buy the Ritson's bitch itself."

"What dusta mean, Gubblum?"

"What, man! thoo's heard how the taistrel killed poor auld Fan? No? Weel, thoo knows she was Paul Ritson's dog, Fan was; and when she saw this man coming up the lonnin, she frisk't and wag't her tail. But when she got close to him she found her mistake, and went slenken off. He made shift to coax her, but Fan wad none be coaxed; and folks were takin' stock. So what dusta think the taistrel does, but ups with a stone and brains her."

"That's like him, for sure," said Matthew. "But don't the folk see that his wife as it might be, Miss Greta as was, won't have nowt to say to him?"

"Nay, they say that's no'but a rue-bargain, and she found out her mind after she wedded—that's all the clot-heads think about it."

"Hark!" said Mercy, half rising from the sconce. "It's Mrs. Ritson's foot."

The men listened. "Nay, lass, there's no foot," said Gubblum.

"Yes, she's on the road," said Mercy. Her face showed that pathetic tension of the other senses which is peculiar to the blind. A moment later Greta stepped into the cottage. The telegram which Brother Peter gave her at the church was still in her hand.

"Good-morning, Matthew; good-morning, Gubblum; I have news for you, Mercy. The doctors are coming to-day."

Mercy's face fell perceptibly. The old man's head drooped lower.

"There, don't be afraid," said Greta, touching her hand caressingly. "It will soon be over. The doctors didn't hurt you before, did they?"

"No; but this time it will be the operation," said Mercy. There was a tremor in her voice.

Greta had lifted the child from the sconce. The little fellow cooed close to her ear, and babbled his inarticulate nothings.

"Only think, when it's all over you will be able to see your darling Ralphie for the first time!"

Mercy's sightless face brightened. "Oh, yes," she said, "and watch him play, and see him spin his tops and chase the butterflies. Oh, that will be very good!"

"Dusta say to-day, Mistress Ritson?" asked Matthew, the big drops standing in his eyes.

"Yes, Matthew; I will stay to see it over, and mind baby, and help a little."

Mercy took the little one from Greta's arms and cried over it, and laughed over it, and then cried and laughed again. "Mamma and Ralphie shall play together in the garden, darling, and Ralphie shall see the horses—and the flowers—and the birdies—and mamma—yes, mamma shall see Ralphie. Oh, Mrs. Ritson, how selfish I am!—how can I ever repay you?"

The tears were trickling down Greta's cheeks. "It is I who am selfish, Mercy," she said, and kissed the sightless orbs. "Your dear eyes shall give me back my poor husband."

CHAPTER III.

Two hours later the doctors arrived. They had called at the vicarage in driving up the valley, and Parson Christian was with them. They looked at Mercy's eyes, and were satisfied that the time was ripe for the operation. At the sound of their voices, Mercy trembled and turned livid. By a maternal instinct she picked up the child, who was toddling about the floor, and clasped it to her bosom. The little one opened wide his blue eyes at sight of the strangers, and the prattling tongue became quiet.

"Take her to her room, and let her lie on the bed," said one of the doctors to Greta.

A sudden terror seized the young mother. "No, no, no!" she said, in an indescribable accent, and the child cried a little from the pressure to her breast.

"Come, Mercy, dear, be brave for your darling's sake," said Greta.

"Listen to me," said the doctor, quietly but firmly. "You are now quite blind, and you have been in total darkness for a year and a half. We may be able to restore your sight by giving you a few minutes' pain. Will you not bear it?"

Mercy sobbed, and kissed the child passionately.

"Just think, it is quite certain that without an operation you will never regain your sight," continued the doctor. "You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Are you satisfied? Come, go away to your room quietly."

"Oh, oh, oh!" sobbed Mercy.

"Just imagine, only a few minutes' pain, and even of that you will scarcely be conscious. Before you know what is doing, it will be done."

Mercy clung closer to her child, and kissed it again and yet more fervently.

The doctors turned to each other. "Strange vanity!" muttered the one who had not spoken before. "Her eyes are useless, and yet she is afraid she may lose them."

Mercy's quick ears caught the whispered words. "It is not that," she said passionately.

"No, gentlemen," said Greta, "you have mistaken her thought. Tell her she runs no danger of her life."

The doctors smiled and laughed a little. "Oh, that's it, eh? Well, we can tell her that with certainty."

Then there was another interchange of half-amused glances.

"Ah, we that be men, sirs, don't know the depth and tenderness of a mother's heart," said Parson Christian. And Mercy turned toward him a face that was full of gratitude. Greta took the child out of her arms and hushed it to sleep in another room. Then she brought it back and put it in its cradle that stood in the ingle.

"Come, Mercy," she said, "for the sake of your boy." And Mercy permitted herself to be led from the kitchen.

"So there will be no danger," she said. "I shall not leave my boy. Who said that? The doctor? Oh, good gracious, it's nothing. Only think, I shall live to see him grow to be a great lad!"

Her whole face was now radiant.

"It will be nothing. Oh, no, it will be nothing. How silly it was to think that he would live on, and grow up, and be a man, and I lie cold in the church-yard, and me his mother! That was very childish, wasn't it? But, then, I have been so childish since Ralphie came."

"There, lie and be quiet, and it will soon be over," said Greta.

"Let me kiss him first. Do let me kiss him! Only once. You know it's a great risk, after all. And if he grew up—and I wasn't here, if—if—"

"There, dear Mercy, you must not cry again. It inflames your eyes, and that can't be good for the doctors."

"No, no, I won't cry. You are very good; everybody is very good. Only let me kiss my little Ralphie—just for the last."

Greta led her back to the side of the cot, and she spread herself over it with outstretched arms, as the mother-bird poises with outstretched wings over her brood. Then she rose, and her face was peaceful and resigned.

The Laird Fisher sat down before the kitchen fire, with one arm on the cradle-head. Parson Christian stood beside him. The old charcoal-burner wept in silence, and the good parson's voice was too thick for the words of comfort that rose to his lips.

The doctors followed into the bedroom. Mercy was lying tranquilly on her bed. Her countenance was without expression. She was busy with her own thoughts. Greta stood by the bedside; anxiety was written in every line of her beautiful, brave face.

"We must give her the gas," said one of the doctors, addressing the other.

Mercy's features twitched.

"Who said that?" she asked, nervously.

"My child, you must be quiet," said the doctor in a tone of authority.

"Yes, I will be quiet, very quiet; only don't make me unconscious," she said. "Never mind me; I will not cry. No; if you hurt me I will not cry out. I will not stir. I will do everything you ask. And you shall say how quiet I have been. Only don't let me be insensible."

The doctors consulted aside, and in whispers.

"Who spoke about the gas? It wasn't you, Mrs. Ritson, was it?"

"You must do as the doctors wish, dear," said Greta in a caressing voice.

"Oh, I will be very good. I will do every little thing. Yes, and I will be so brave. I am a little childish sometimes, but I can be brave, can't I?"

The doctors returned to the bedside.

"Very well, we will not use the gas," said one. "You are a brave little woman, after all. There, be still—very still."

One of the doctors was tearing linen into strips for bandages, while the other fixed Mercy's head to suit the light.

There was a faint sound from the kitchen. "Wait," said Mercy. "That is father—he's crying. Tell him not to cry. Say it's nothing."

She laughed a weak little laugh.

"There, he will hear that; go and say it was I who laughed."

Greta left the room on tiptoe. Old Matthew was still sitting over a dying fire, gently rocking the sleeping child. Parson Christian's eyes were raised in prayer.

When Greta returned to the bedroom, Mercy called her, and said very softly—"Let me hold your hand, Greta—may I say Greta?—there," and her fingers closed on Greta's with a convulsive grasp.

The operation began. Mercy held her breath. She had the stubborn north-country blood in her. Once only a sigh escaped. There was a dead silence.

In two or three minutes the doctor said: "Just another minute, and all will be over."

At the next instant Greta felt her hand held with a grasp of iron.

"Doctor, doctor, I can see you!" cried Mercy, and her words came in gusts.

"Be quiet," said the doctor in a stern voice. In half a minute more the linen bandages were being wrapped tightly over Mercy's eyes.

"Doctor, dear doctor, let me see my boy," cried Mercy.

"Be quiet, I say," said the doctor again.

"Dear doctor, my dear doctor, only one peep—one little peep—I saw your face—let me see my Ralphie's!"

"Not yet, it is not safe."

"But only for a moment. Don't put the bandage on for one moment. Just think, doctor, I have never seen my boy; I've seen other people's children, but never once my own, own darling. Oh, dear doctor—"

"You are exciting yourself. Listen to me; if you don't behave yourself now you may never see your child."

"Yes, yes, I will behave myself; I will be very good. Only don't shut me up in darkness again until I see my boy. Greta, bring him to me. Listen: I hear his breathing. Go for my darling. The kind doctor won't be angry with you. Tell him that if I see my child it will cure me. I know it will."

Greta's eyes were swimming in tears.

"Rest quiet, Mercy. Everything may be lost if you disturb yourself now, my dear."

The doctors were wrapping bandage over bandage, and fixing them firmly at the back of their patient's head.

"Now listen again," said one of them. "This bandage must be kept over your eyes for a week."

"A week—a whole week? Oh, doctor, you might as well say forever!"

"I say a week. And if you should ever remove it—"

"Not for an instant? Not raise it a little?"

"If you ever remove it for an instant, or raise it ever so little, you will assuredly lose your sight forever. Remember that."

"Oh, doctor, it is terrible! Why did you not tell me so before? Oh, this is worse than blindness! Think of the temptation, and I have never seen my boy!"

The doctor had fixed the bandage, and his voice was less stern, but no less resolute.

"You must obey me," he said; "I will come again this day week, and then you shall see your child, and your father, and this young lady, and everybody. But, mind, if you don't obey me you will never see anything. You will have one glance of your little boy, and then be blind forever, or perhaps—yes, perhaps die."

Mercy lay quiet for a moment. Then she said in a low voice:

"Dear doctor, you must forgive me. I am very willful, and I promised to be so good. I will not touch the bandage. No, for the sake of my little boy, I will never, never touch it. You shall come yourself and take it off, and then I shall see him."

The doctors went away. Greta remained all night in the cottage.

"You are happy now, Mercy?" said Greta.

"Oh, yes," said Mercy. "Just think, only a week! And he must be so beautiful by this time."

When Greta took the child to her at sunset, there was an ineffable joy in her pale face, and next morning, when Greta awoke, Mercy was singing softly to herself in the sunrise.

CHAPTER IV.

There was a gathering of miners near the pit-head that morning. It was pay day. The rule was that the miners on the morning shift should pass through the pay-office before going down the shaft at eight o'clock; and that those on the night shift should pass through on their way home a few minutes afterward. When the morning men passed through the office they had found the pay-door shut, and a notice posted over it, saying, "All wages due at eight o'clock to-day will be paid at the same hour to-morrow."

Presently the men on the night shift came up in the cages, and after a brief explanation both gangs, with the banksmen and all top-ground hands, except the engine-man, trooped away to a place suitable for a conference. There was a worked-out open cutting a hundred yards away. It was a vast cleft dug into the side of the mountain, square on its base, vertical in its three gray walls, and sweeping up to a dizzy height, over which the brant sides of the green fell rose sheer into the sky. It was to this natural theatre that the two hundred miners made their way in groups of threes and fours, their lamps and cans in their hands, their red-stained clothes glistening in the morning sun.

It was decided to send a deputation to the master, asking that the order might be revoked and payment made as usual. The body of the men remained in the clearing, conversing in knots, while two miners, buirdly fellows, rather gruffer of tongue than the rest, went to the office to act as spokesmen.

The deputation were approaching the pit-head when the engine-man shouted that he had just heard the master's knock from below, and in another moment Hugh Ritson, in flannels and fustian, stepped out of the cage.

He heard the request, and at once offered to go to the men and give his answer. The miners made way for him respectfully, and then closed about him when he spoke.

"Men," he said, with a touch of his old resolution, "let me tell you frankly, as between man and man, that I can not pay you this morning, because I haven't got the money. I tried to get it, and failed. This afternoon I shall receive much more than is due to you, and to-morrow you shall be promptly paid."

The miners twisted about and compared notes in subdued voices.

"That's no'but fair," said one.

"He cannut say na fairer," said another.

But there were some who were not so easily appeased; and one of these crushed his way through the crowd, and said:

"Mr. Ritson, we're not same as the bettermer folk, as can get credit for owt 'at they want. We ax six days' pay because we have to do six days' payin' wi' it. And if we're back a day in our pay we're a day back in our payin'; and that means clemmin' a laal bit—and the wife and barns forby."

There were murmurs of approval from the crowd, and then another malcontent added:

"Times has changed to a gay tune sin' we could put by for a rainy day. It's hand to mouth now, on'y the mouth's allus ready and the hand's not."

"It's na much as we ha' gotten to put away these times," said the first speaker. "Not same as the days when a pitman's wife, 'at I ken on, flung a five-pound note in his face and axed him what he thowt she were to mak' o' that."

"Nay, nay," responded the others in a chorus.

"Men, I'm not charging you with past extravagance," said Hugh Ritson; "and it's not my fault if the pit hasn't done as well for all of us as I had hoped."

He was moving away, when the crowd closed about him again.

"Mates," shouted one of the miners, "there's another word as some on us wad like to say to the master, and that's about the timber."

"What is it?" asked Hugh Ritson, facing about.

"There be some on us 'at think the pit's none ower safe down the bottom working, where the seam of sand runs cross-ways. We're auld miners, maistly, and we thowt maybe ye wadna tak' it wrang if we telt ye 'at it wants a vast mair forks and upreets."

"Thank you, my lads, I'll see what I can do," said Hugh Ritson; and then added in a lower tone: "But I've put a forest of timber underground already, and where this burying of money is to end God alone knows."

He turned away this time and moved off, halting more noticeably than usual on his infirm foot.

He returned to his office near the pit-bank, and found Mr. Bonnithorne awaiting him.

"The day is young, but I'm no sluggard, you know," said the lawyer. "I thought we might want a

word or two before the meeting at the Ghyll."

Hugh Ritson did not notice the explanation. He looked anxious and disturbed. While stripping off his pit flannels, and putting on his ordinary clothes, he told Mr. Bonnithorne what had just occurred, and then added:

"If anything had been necessary to prove that this morning's bad business is inevitable, I should have found it in this encounter with the men."

"It comes as a fillip to your already blunted purpose," said the lawyer with a curious smile. "Odd, isn't it?"

"Blunted!" said Hugh Ritson, and there was a perceptible elevation of the eyebrows.

Presently he drew a long breath, and said with an air of relief:

"Ah, well, if she suffers who has suffered enough already, he, at least, will be out of the way forever."

Bonnithorne shifted slightly on his seat.

"You think so?" he asked.

Something cynical in the tone caught Hugh Ritson's ear.

"It was a bad change, wasn't it?" added the lawyer; "this one is likely to be a deal more troublesome."

Hugh Ritson went on with his dressing in silence.

"You see, by the interchange your positions were reversed," continued the lawyer.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, not to put too fine a point on it, the other was in your hands, while you are in the hands of this one."

Hugh Ritson's foot fell heavily at that instant, but he merely said, with suppressed quietness:

"There was this one's crime."

"Was—precisely," said Mr. Bonnithorne.

Hugh Ritson looked up with a look of inquiry.

"When you gave the crime to the other, this one became a free man," the lawyer explained.

There was a silence.

"What does it all come to?" said Hugh Ritson, sullenly.

"That your hold of Paul Drayton is gone forever."

"How so?"

"Because you can never incriminate him without first incriminating yourself," said the lawyer.

"Who talks of incrimination?" said Hugh Ritson, testily. "To-day, this man is to take upon himself the name of Paul Lowther—his true name, though he doesn't know it, blockhead as he is. Therefore, I ask again: What does it all come to?"

Mr. Bonnithorne shifted uneasily.

"Nothing," he said, meekly, but the curious smile still played about his downcast face.

Then there was silence again.

"Do you know that Mercy Fisher is likely to regain her sight?" said Hugh.

"You don't say so? Dear me, dear me!" said the lawyer, sincere at last. "In all the annals of jurisprudence there is no such extraordinary case of identity being conclusively provable by one witness only, and of that witness becoming blind. Odd, isn't it?"

Hugh Ritson smiled coldly.

"Odd? Say providential," he answered. "I believe that's what your church folk call it when the Almighty averts a disaster that is made imminent by your own short-sightedness."

"A disaster, indeed, if her sight ceases to be so providentially short," said the lawyer.

"Get the man out of the way, and the woman is all right," said Hugh. He picked a letter out of a drawer, and handed it to Mr. Bonnithorne. "You will remember that the other was to have shipped to Australia."

Mr. Bonnithorne bowed his head.

"This letter is from the man for whom he intended to go out—an old friend of my father. Answer it, Bonnithorne."

"In what terms?" asked the lawyer.

"Say that a long illness prevented, but that Paul Ritson is now prepared to fulfill his engagement."

"And what then?"

"What then?" Hugh Ritson echoed. "Why, what do you think?"

"Send him?" with a motion of the thumb over the shoulder.

"Of course," said Hugh.

Again the cynical tone caught Hugh Ritson's ear, and he glanced up quickly, but made no remark. He was now dressed.

"I am ready," and on reaching the door and taking a last look round the room, he added: "I'll have the best of this furniture removed to the Ghyll to-morrow. The house has been unbearable of late, and I've been forced to spend most of my time down here."

"Then you don't intend to give him much grace?" asked Bonnithorne.

"Not an hour."

The lawyer bent his forehead very low at that moment.

CHAPTER V.

The sun was high over the head of Hindscarth, but a fresh breeze was blowing from the north, and the walk to the Ghyll was bracing. Mr. Bonnithorne talked little on the way, but Hugh Ritson's spirits rose sensibly, and he chatted cheerfully on indifferent subjects. It was still some minutes short of nine o'clock when they reached the house. The servants were bustling about in clean aprons and caps.

"Have the gentlemen arrived?" asked Hugh.

"Not yet, sir," answered one of the servants—it was old Dinah Wilson.

The two men stepped up to Hugh Ritson's room. There the table was spread for breakfast. The lawyer glanced at the chairs, and said:

"Then you have invited other friends?"

Hugh nodded his head, and sat down at the organ.

"Three or four neighbors of substance," he said, opening the case. "In a matter like this it is well to have witnesses."

Bonnithorne replied with phlegm:

"But what about the feelings of the man who is so soon to be turned out of the house?"

Hugh Ritson's fingers were on the keys. He paused and faced about.

"I had no conception that you had such a delicate sense of humor, Bonnithorne," he said, with only the shadow of a smile. "Feelings! His feelings!"

There was a swift glide up the notes, and other sounds were lost. The window was half open; the lawyer walked to it and looked out. At that moment the two men were back to back. Hugh Ritson's head was bent over the keyboard. Mr. Bonnithorne's eyes were on the tranquil landscape lying in the sun outside. The faces of both wore curious smiles.

Hugh Ritson leaped from his seat.

"Ah, I feel like another man already," he said, and took a step or two up and down the room, his infirm foot betraying no infirmity. There was the noise of fresh arrivals in the hall. A minute later a servant entered, followed by three gentlemen, who shook hands effusively with Hugh Ritson.

"Delighted to be of service, I'm sure," said one.

"Glad the unhappy connection is to be concluded—it was a scandal," said the other.

"You could not go on living on such terms—life wasn't worth it, you know," said the first.

The third gentleman was more restrained, but Hugh paid him marked deference. They had a short, muttered conference apart.

"Get the other mortgages wiped off the deeds and I have no objection to lend you the money on the security of the house and land," said the gentleman. At that remark Hugh Ritson bowed his head and appeared satisfied.

He rang for breakfast.

"Ask Mr. Paul if he is ready," he said, when Dinah brought the tray.

"Master Paul is abed, sir," said Dinah; and then she added for herself: "It caps all—sec feckless wark. It dudn't use to be so, for sure. I'll not say but a man may be that changed in a twelvemonth—"

"Ah, I'll go to him myself," said Hugh; and begging to be excused, he left the room.

Mr. Bonnithorne followed him to the other side of the door.

"Have you counted the cost?" he asked. "It will be a public scandal."

Hugh smiled, and answered with composure:

"Whose will be the loss?"

"God knows!" said the lawyer, with sudden energy.

Hugh glanced up quickly. There was the murmur of voices from within the room they had just left.

"Is it that you are too jealous of your good name to allow it to be bruited abroad in a scandal, as you say?"

Mr. Bonnithorne's face wore a curious expression at that moment.

"It's not my good name that is in question," he said, quietly, and turned back to the door.

"Whose then? His?"

But the lawyer already held the door ajar, and was passing into the room.

Hugh Ritson made his way to the bedroom occupied by Paul Drayton. He opened the door without knocking. It was dark within. Thin streaks of dusty sunlight shot from between a pair of heavy curtains. The air was noisome with dead tobacco smoke and the fumes of stale beer. Hugh's gorge rose, but he conquered his disgust.

"Who's there?" said a husky voice from behind the dark hangings of a four-post bed that was all but hidden in the gloom.

"The friends are here," said Hugh Ritson, cheerily. "How long will you be?"

There was a suppressed chuckle.

"All right."

"We will begin breakfast," said Hugh. He was turning to go.

"Is that lawyer man back from Scotland?" asked Drayton.

"Bonnithorne? He's here—he didn't say that he'd been away," said Hugh.

"All right."

Hugh Ritson returned to the bed-head. "Have you heard," he said in a subdued voice, "that the doctors have operated on the girl Mercy, and that she is likely to regain her sight?"

"Eh? What?" Drayton had started up in bed. Then rolling down his sleeves and buttoning them leisurely, he added: "But that ain't nothing to me."

Hugh Ritson left the room. He was in spirits indeed, for he had borne even this encounter with equanimity. As he passed through the house, Brother Peter entered at the porch with a letter in his hand.

"Is Parson Christian coming?" said Hugh.

"Don't know 'at I've heard," said Peter. "He's boddered me to fetch ye a scribe of a line. Here 'tis."

Hugh Ritson opened the envelope. The note ran:

"I cannot reconcile it to my conscience to break bread with one who has broken the peace of my household; nor is it agreeable to my duty as a minister of Christ to give the countenance of my presence to proceedings which must be a sham, inasmuch as the person concerned is an imposter—with the which name I yet hope to brand him when the proper time and circumstances arrive."

Hugh smiled as he read the letter; then he thrust a shilling into Peter's unyielding hand, and shot away.

"The parson will not come," said Hugh, drawing Bonnithorne aside; "but that can not matter. If he is Greta's guardian, you are her father's executor." Then, raising his voice, "Gentlemen," he said, "my brother wishes us to begin breakfast; he will join us presently."

The company was soon seated; the talk was brisk and cheerful.

"Glorious prospect," said a gentleman sitting opposite the open window. "Often wonder you don't

throw out a bay, Mr. Ritson."

"I've thought of it," said Hugh, "but it's not worth while to spend such money until one is master of one's own house."

"Ah, true, true!" said several voices in chorus.

Drayton entered, his eyes red, his face sallow. "Morning, gents," he said in his thick guttural.

Two of the gentlemen rose, and bowed with frigid politeness. "Good morning, Mr. Ritson," said the third.

The servant had followed Drayton into the room with a beefsteak underdone. "Post not come?" he asked, shifting his plates.

"It can't be long now," said Bonnithorne, consulting his watch.

"Sooner the better," Drayton muttered. He took some papers from a breast-pocket and counted them; then fixed them in his waistcoat, where his watch would have been if he had worn one.

When breakfast was done, Hugh Ritson took certain documents from a cabinet. "Be seated, gentlemen," he said. All sat except Drayton, who lighted a pipe, and rang to ask if the postman had come. He had not. "Then go and sharpen up his heels."

"My duty would be less pleasant," said Hugh Ritson, "if some of the facts were not already known."

"Then we'll take 'em as read, so we will," put in Drayton, perambulating behind a cloud of smoke.

"Paul, I will ask you to be seated," said Hugh, in an altered tone.

Drayton sat down with a snort.

"I have to tell you," continued Hugh Ritson, "that my brother known to you as Paul Ritson, is now satisfied that he was not the heir of my father, who died intestate."

There were sundry nods of the grave noddles assembled about the table.

"Fearful shock to any man," said one. "No wonder he has lost heart and grown reckless," said another.

"On becoming aware of this fact, he was anxious to relinquish the estate to the true heir."

There were further nods, and some muttered comments on the requirements of honor.

"I show you here a copy of the register of my father's marriage, and a copy of the register of my own birth, occurring less than a year afterward. From these, in the absence of extraordinary testimony, it must be the presumption that I am myself my father's rightful heir."

The papers were handed about and returned with evident satisfaction.

"So far, all is plain," continued Hugh Ritson. "But my brother has learned that he is not even my father's son."

Three astonished faces were lifted from the table. Bonnithorne sat with head bent. Drayton leaned an elbow on one knee and smoked sullenly.

"It turns out that he is the son of my mother by another man," said Hugh Ritson.

The guests twisted about. "Ah, that explains all," they whispered.

"You will be surprised to learn that my mother's husband by a former invalid marriage was no other than Robert Lowther, and that he who sits with us now as Paul Ritson is really Paul Lowther."

At this, Hugh placed two further documents on the table.

Drayton cleared his throat noisily.

"Dear me, dear me! yet it's plain enough!" said one of the visitors.

"Then what about Mrs. Ritson—Miss Greta, I mean?" asked another.

"She is Paul Lowther's half-sister, and therefore his marriage with her must be annulled."

The three gentlemen turned in their seats and looked amazed, Drayton still smoked in silence. Bonnithorne did not raise his head.

"He will relinquish to me my father's estates, but he is not left penniless," continued Hugh Ritson. "By his own father's will he inherits five thousand pounds."

Drayton snorted contemptuously, then spat on the floor.

"Friends," said Hugh Ritson again, "there is only one further point, and I am loath to touch on it. My brother—I speak of Paul Lowther—on taking possession of the estates, exercised what he believed to be his legal right to mortgage them. I am sorry to say he mortgaged them deeply."

There was an interchange of astute glances.

"If I were a rich man, I should be content to be the loser, but I am a poor man, and am compelled to ask that those mortgages stand forfeit."

"Is it the law?"

"It is—and, as you will say, only a fair one," Hugh answered.

"Who are the mortgagees?"

"That is where the pity arises—the chief of them is no other than the daughter of Robert Lowther—Greta."

Sundry further twists and turns. "Pity for her." "Well, she should have seen to his title. Who was her lawyer?"

"Her father's executor, our friend Mr. Bonnithorne."

"How much does she lose?"

"I'm afraid a great deal—perhaps half her fortune," said Hugh.

"No matter; it's but fair, Mr. Ritson is not to inherit an estate impoverished by the excesses of the wrong man."

Drayton's head was still bent, but he scraped his feet restlessly.

"I have only another word to say," said Hugh. "In affairs of this solemn nature, it is best to have witnesses, or perhaps I should have preferred to confer with Paul and Mr. Bonnithorne in private." He dropped his voice and added: "You see, there is my poor mother; and though, in a sense, she is no longer of this world, her good name must ever be sacred with me."

The astute glances again, and two pairs of upraised hands. The lawyer had twisted toward the window.

"But our friend Bonnithorne will tell you that the law in effect compelled me to evict my brother. You may not know that there is a condition of English law in which a bastard becomes a permanent heir; that is when he is called, in the language of the law, the bastard eigne." There was a tremor in his voice as he added softly: "Believe me, I had no choice."

Drayton stamped his heavy foot, threw down his pipe, and jumped to his feet. "It's a lie, the lot of it!" he blurted. Then he fumbled at his watch-pocket, and pulled out a paper. "That's my register, straight and plain."

He stammered it aloud:

"Ritson, Paul; father, Allan Ritson; mother, Grace Ritson. Date of birth, April 6, 1847; place, Crieff, Scotland."

Hugh Ritson, a little pale, smiled. The others turned to him in their amazement. In an instant he had regained an appearance of indifference.

"Where does it come from?" he asked.

"The registrar's at Edinburgh. D'ye say it ain't right?"

"No; but I say, what is it worth? Gentlemen," said Hugh, turning to the visitors, "compare it with the register of my father's marriage. Observe, the one date is April 6, 1847; the other is June 12, 1847. Even if genuine, does it prove legitimacy?"

Drayton laid his hand on the lawyer's arm. "Here you, speak up, will ye?" he said.

Mr. Bonnithorne rose, and then Hugh Ritson's pale face became ghastly.

"This birth occurred in Scotland," he said. "Now, if the father happened to hold a Scotch domicile, and the mother lived with him as his wife, the child would be legitimate."

"Without a marriage?"

"Without a ceremony."

Natt pushed into the room, his cap in one hand, a letter in the other. He had knocked twice, and none had heard. "The post, sir; one letter for Master Paul."

"Good lad!" Drayton clutched it with a cry of delight.

"But my father had no Scotch domicile," said Hugh, with apparent composure.

"Oh, but he had," said Drayton, tearing open his envelope.

"He was a Scotsman born," said Bonnithorne, taking another document from Drayton's hand. "See, this is his register. Odd, isn't it?"

Hugh Ritson's eyes flashed. He looked steadily into the face of the lawyer, then he took the paper.

The next moment he crushed it in his palm and flung it out of the window. "I shall want proof both of your facts and your law," he said.

"Eh, and welcome," said Drayton, shouting in his agitation. "Listen to this," and he proceeded to read.

"Wait! From whom?" asked Hugh Ritson. "Some pettifogger?"

"The solicitor-general," said Bonnithorne.

"Is that good enough?" asked Drayton, tauntingly.

"Go on," said Hugh, rapping the table with his finger-tips.

Drayton handed the letter to the lawyer. "Do you read it," he said; "I ain't flowery. I'm a gentleman, and—" He stopped suddenly and tramped the floor, while Bonnithorne read:

"If there is no reason to suppose the father lost his Scotch domicile, the son is legitimate. If the husband recognized his wife in registering his son's birth, the law of Scotland would presume that there was a marriage, but whether of ceremony or consent would be quite indifferent."

There was a pause, Drayton took the letter from the lawyer's hands, folded it carefully, and put it in his fob-pocket. Then he peered into Hugh Ritson's face with a leer of triumph. Bonnithorne had slunk aside. The guests were silent.

"D'ye hear?" said Drayton, "the son is legitimate." He gloated over the words, and tapped his pocket as he repeated them. "What d'ye say to it, eh?"

At first Hugh Ritson struggled visibly for composure, and in an instant his face was like marble. Drayton came close to him.

"You were going to give me the go-by, eh? Turn me out-o'-doors, eh? Damme, it's my turn now, so it is!"

So saying, Drayton stepped to the door and flung it open.

"This house is mine," he said; "go, and be damned to you!"

At this unexpected blow, Hugh Ritson beat the ground with his foot. He looked round at the strangers, and felt like a wretch who was gagged and might say nothing. Then he halted to where Drayton stood with outstretched arm.

"Let me have a word with you in private," he said in a voice that was scarcely audible.

Drayton lifted his hand, and his fist was clinched.

"Not a syllable!" he said. His accent was brutal and frenzied.

Hugh Ritson's nostrils quivered, and his eyes flashed. Drayton quailed an instant, and burst into a laugh.

There was a great silence. Bonnithorne was still before the window, his face down, his hands clasped behind him, his foot pawing the ground. Hugh Ritson walked to his side. He contemplated him a moment, and then touched him on the shoulder. When he spoke, his face was dilated with passion, and his voice was low and deep.

"There is a Book," he said, "that a Churchman may know, which tells of an unjust steward. The master thought to dismiss him from his stewardship. Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do?'"

There was a pause.

"What did he do?" continued Hugh Ritson, and every word fell on the silence like the stroke of a bell. "He called his master's debtors together, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe?' 'One hundred measures.' Then he said, 'Write a bill for fifty.'"

There was another pause.

"What did that steward mean? He meant that when the master should dismiss him from his stewardship, the debtor should take him into his house."

Hugh Ritson's manner was the white heat of calm. He turned half round to where Drayton stood, and raised his voice.

"That debtor was henceforth bound hand and foot. Let him but parley with the steward, and the steward cried, 'Thief,' 'Forger,' 'Perjurer.'"

Bonnithorne shuffled uneasily. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but the words would not come. At last he gulped down something that had seemed to choke him, smiled between his teeth a weak, bankrupt smile, and said:

"How are we to read your parable? Are you the debtor bound hand and foot, and is your brother the astute steward?"

Hugh Ritson's foot fell heavily.

"Is it so?" he said, catching at the word. "Then be it so;" and his voice rose to a shrill cry. "That steward shall come to the ground, and his master with him!"

At that he stepped back to where Drayton stood with eyes as full of bewilderment as frenzy.

"Paul Lowther—" he said.

"Call me Paul Ritson," interrupted Drayton.

"Paul Lowther—"

"Ritson!" Drayton shouted, and then, dropping his voice, he said, rapidly: "You gave it me, and by God I'll keep it!"

Hugh Ritson leaned across the table and tapped a paper that lay on it.

"That is your name," he said, "and I'll prove it."

Drayton burst into another laugh.

"You daren't try," he chuckled.

Hugh turned upon him with eyes of fire.

"So you measure my spirit by your own. Man, man!" he said, "do you know what you are doing?"

There was another brutal laugh from Drayton, but it died suddenly on his lips.

Then Hugh Ritson stepped to the door. He took a last look round. It was as if he knew that he had reached the beginning of the end—as if he realized that he was never again to stand in the familiar room. The future, that seemed so near an hour ago, was gone from him forever; the cup that he had lifted to his lips lay in fragments at his feet. He saw it all in that swift instant. On his face there were the lines of agony, but over them there played the smile of resolve. He put one hand to his forehead, and then said in a voice so low as to be no more than a whisper:

"Wait and see."

When the guests, who stood huddled together like sheep in a storm, had recovered their stunned senses, Hugh Ritson was gone from the room. Drayton had sunk into a chair near where Bonnithorne stood, and was whining like a whipped hound.

"Go after him! What will he do? You know I was always against it!"

But presently he stood up and laughed, and bantered and crowed, and observed that it was a pity if a gentleman could not be master in his own house, and that what couldn't be cured must be endured.

"Precisely," interposed one of the guests, "and you have my entire sympathy, Mr. Ritson. A more cruel deception was never more manfully exposed."

"I fully agree with you, neighbor," said another, "and such moral tyranny is fearful to contemplate. Paul Lowther, indeed! Now, that is a joke."

"Well, it is rather, ain't it?" said Drayton. And then he laughed, and they all laughed and shook hands, and were excellent good friends.

CHAPTER VI.

Greta stayed with Mercy until noon that day, begging, entreating, and finally commanding her to lie quiet in bed, while she herself dressed and fed the child, and cooked and cleaned, in spite of the Laird Fisher's protestations. When all was done, and the old charcoal-burner had gone out on the hills, Greta picked up the little fellow in her arms and went to Mercy's room. Mercy was alert to every sound, and in an instant was sitting up in bed. Her face beamed, her parted lips smiled, her delicate fingers plucked nervously at the counterpane.

"How brightsome it is to-day, Greta," she said. "I'm sure the sun must be shining."

The window was open, and a soft breeze floated through the sun's rays into the room. Mercy inclined her head aside, and added, "Ah, you young rogue you; you are there, are you? Give him to me, the rascal!" The rogue was set down in his mother's arms, and she proceeded to punish his rascality with a shower of kisses. "How bonny his cheeks must be; they will be just like two ripe apples," and forthwith there fell another shower of kisses. Then she babbled over the little one, and lisped, and stammered, and nodded her head in his face, and blew little puffs of breath into his hair, and tickled him until he laughed and crowed and rolled and threw up his legs; and then she kissed his limbs and extremities in a way that mothers have, and finally imprisoned one of his feet by putting it ankle deep into her mouth. "Would you ever think a foot could be so tiny, Greta?" she said. And the little one plunged about and clambered laboriously up its mother's breast, and more than once plucked at the white bandage about her head. "No, no; Ralpie must

not touch," said Mercy with sudden gravity. "Only think, Ralphie pet, one week—only one—ay, less—only six days now, and then—oh, then—" A long hug, and the little fellow's boisterous protest against the convulsive pressure abridged the mother's prophecy.

All at once Mercy's manner changed. She turned toward Greta, and said: "I will not touch the bandage, no, never; but if Ralphie tugged at it, and it fell—would that be breaking my promise?"

Greta saw what was in her heart.

"I'm afraid it would, dear," she said; but there was a tremor in her voice.

Mercy sighed audibly.

"Just think, it would be only Ralphie. The kind doctors could not be angry with my little child. I would say, 'It was the boy,' and they would smile and say, 'Ah, that is different.'"

"Give me the little one," said Greta with emotion.

Mercy drew the child closer, and there was a pause.

"I was very wrong, Greta," she said in a low tone. "Oh! you would not think what a fearful thing came into my mind a minute ago. Take my Ralphie. Just imagine, my own innocent baby tempted me."

As Greta reached across the bed to lift the child out of his mother's lap, the little fellow was struggling to communicate, by help of a limited vocabulary, some wondrous intelligence of recent events that somewhat overshadowed his little existence. "Puss—dat," many times repeated, was further explained by one chubby forefinger with its diminutive finger-nail pointed to the fat back of the other hand.

"He means that the little cat has scratched him," said Greta, "but bless the mite, he is pointing to the wrong hand."

"Puss—dat," continued the child, and peered up into his mother's sightless face. Mercy was all tears in an instant. She had borne yesterday's operation without a groan, but now the scratch on her child's hand went to her heart like a stab.

"Lie quiet, Mercy," said Greta; "it will be gone to-morrow."

"Go-on," echoed the little chap, and pointed out at the window.

"The darling, how he picks up every word!" said Greta.

"He means the horse," explained Mercy.

"Go-on—man—go-on," prattled the little one, with a child's indifference to all conversation except his own.

"Bless the love, he must remember the doctor and his horse," said Greta.

Mercy was putting her lips to the scratch on the little hand.

"Oh, Greta, I am very childish; but a mother's heart melts like butter."

"Batter," echoed the child, and wriggled out of Greta's arms to the ground, where he forthwith clambered on to the stool, and possessed himself of a slice of bread which lay on the table at the bedside. Then the fair curly head disappeared like a glint of sunlight through the door to the kitchen.

"What shall I care if other mothers see my child? I shall see him, too," said Mercy, and she sighed. "Yes," she added softly, "his hands and his eyes and his feet and his soft hair."

"Try to sleep an hour or two, dear," said Greta, "and then perhaps you may get up this afternoon—only perhaps, you know, but we'll see."

"Yes, Greta, yes. How kind you are."

"You will be far kinder to me some day," said Greta, very tenderly.

"No—ah, yes, I remember. How very selfish I am—I had quite forgotten. But then it is so hard not to be selfish when you are a mother. Only fancy, I never think of myself as Mercy now. No, never. I'm just Ralphie's mamma. When Ralphie came, Mercy must have died in some way. That's very silly, isn't it? Only it does seem true."

"Man—go-on—batter," was heard from the kitchen, mingled with the patter of tiny feet.

"Listen to him. How tricksome he is! And you should hear him cry, 'Oh!' You would say, 'That child has had an eye knocked out.' And then, in a minute, behold! he's laughing once more. There, I'm selfish again; but I will make up for it some day, if God is good."

"Yes, Mercy, He is good," said Greta.

Her arms rested on the door-jamb, and her head dropped on to it; her eyes swam. Did it seem at that moment as if God had been very good to these two women?

"Greta," said Mercy, and her voice fell to a whisper, "do you think Ralphie is like—anybody?"

"Yes, dear, he is like you."

There was a pause. Then Mercy's hand strayed from under the bedclothes and plucked at Greta's gown.

"Do you think," she asked, in a voice all but inaudible, "that father knows who it is?"

"I can not say—we have never told him."

"Nor I—he never asked, never once—only, you know, he gave up his work at the mine, and went back to the charcoal-pit when Ralphie came. But he never said a word."

Greta did not answer. There was another pause. Then Mercy said, in a stronger voice, "Will it be soon—the trial?"

"As soon as your eyes are better," said Greta, earnestly; "everything depends on your recovery."

At that moment the bedroom door was pushed open with a little lordly bang, and the great wee man entered with his piece of bread stuck rather insecurely on one prong of a fork.

"Toas," he explained complacently, "toas," and walked up to the empty grate and stretched his arm over the fender at the cold bars.

"Why, there's no fire for toast, you darling goose," said Greta, catching him in her arms, much to his masculine vexation.

Mercy had risen on an elbow, and her face was full of the yearning of the blind. Then she lay back.

"Never mind," she said to herself in a faltering voice, "let me lie quiet and think of all his pretty ways."

CHAPTER VII.

Greta returned to the vicarage toward noon, and overtook Parson Christian and Peter in the lonnin, the one carrying a scythe over his shoulder, the other a bundle of rushes under his one arm. The parson was walking in silence under the noontide sun, his straw hat tipped back from his forehead and his eyes on the ground. He was busy with his own reflections. It was not until Greta had tripped up to his side and slipped his scythe-stone from its strap in the pole that the parson was awakened from his reverie.

"Great news, Greta—great news, my lass!" he said in answer to her liberal tender in exchange for his thoughts. "How well it's said, that he that diggeth a pit for another should look that he fall not into it himself."

"What news, Mr. Christian?" said Greta, and her color heightened.

"Well, we've been mowing the grass in the church-yard, Peter and I, and the scythe is old like ourselves, and it wanted tempering. So away we went to the smithy to have it ground, and who should come up but Robbie Atkinson, leading hassocks from Longridge. And Robbie would fain have us go with him and be cheerful at the Flying Horse. Well, we'd each had a pot of ale and milk, when in came Natt, the stableman at Ritson's, all lather like one of his horses after his master has been astride her. And Natt was full of a great quarrel at the Ghyll, wherein young Mr. Hugh had tried to turn yonder man out of the house in the way I told you of before, but the man denied that he was what Hugh called him, and clung to it that he was Paul Ritson, and brought documents to show that Paul was his father's rightful heir, after all."

"Well, well?" asked Greta, breathlessly.

Peter had shambled on to the house.

"Well, Natt is no very trustworthy chronicler, I fear, but one thing is plain, and that is, that Mr. Hugh, who thought to turn yon man out of the house, has been turned out of it himself."

Greta stood in the road, trembling from head to foot.

"My poor husband!" she said in a whisper. Then came a torrent of questions. "When did this happen? What think you will come of it? Where will Hugh go? What will he do? Ah, Mr. Christian, you always said the cruel instrument would turn in his hand!"

There was a step behind them. In their anxiety they had not noticed it until it was close at their heels. They turned, and were face to face with Mr. Bonnithorne.

The lawyer bowed, but before they had exchanged the courtesies of welcome, a horse's tramp came from the road, and in a moment Drayton rode up the lonnin. His face was flushed, and his manner noisy as he leaped from the saddle into their midst.

Greta lifted one hand to her breast, and with the other hand she clasped that of the parson. The old man's face grew rigid in an instant, and all the mellowness natural to it died away.

Drayton made up to Greta and the parson with an air of braggadocio.

"I've come to tell you once for all that my wife must live under my roof."

No one answered. Drayton took a step near, and slapped his boot with his riding-whip.

"The law backs me up in it, and I mean to have it out."

Still there was no answer, and Drayton's braggadocio gathered assurance from the silence.

"Not as I want her. None of your shrinking away, madame." A hoarse laugh. "Burn my body! if I wouldn't as soon have my mother for a wife."

"What then?" said the parson in a low tone.

"Appearances. I ain't to be a laughing-stock of the neighborhood any longer. My wife's my wife. A husband's a husband, and wants obedience."

"And what if you do not get it?" asked the parson, his old face whitening.

"What? Imprisonment—that's what." Drayton twisted about and touched the lawyer with the handle of his whip. "Here, you, tell 'em what's what."

Thus appealed to, Mr. Bonnithorne explained that a husband was entitled to the restitution of connubial rights, and, in default, to the "attachment" of his spouse.

"The law," said Mr. Bonnithorne, "can compel a wife to live with her husband, or punish her with imprisonment for not doing so."

"D'ye hear?" said Drayton, slapping furiously at the sole of his boot. "Punish her with imprisonment."

There was a pause, and then the parson said, quietly but firmly:

"I gather that it means that you want to share this lady's property."

"Well, what of it? Hain't I a right to share it, eh?"

"You have thus far enjoyed the benefit of her mortgages, on the pretense that you are her husband; but now you are going too far."

"We'll see. Here, you," prodding the lawyer, "take proceedings at once. If she won't come, imprison her. D'ye hear—imprison her!"

He swung about and caught the reins from the horse's mane, laughing a hollow laugh. Greta disengaged her hand from the hand of the parson, and stepped up to Drayton until she stood before him face to face, her eyes flashing, her lips quivering, her cheeks pale, her whole figure erect and firm.

"And what of that?" she said. "Do you think to frighten me with the cruelties of the law?—me?—me?" she echoed, with scorn in every syllable. "Have I suffered so little from it already that you dare to say, 'Imprison her,' as if that would drive me to your house?"

Drayton tried to laugh, but the feeble effort died on his hot lips. He spat on the ground, and then tried to lift his eyes back to the eyes of Greta, but they fell to the whip that he held in his hand.

"Imprison me, Paul Drayton! I shall not be the first you've imprisoned. Imprison me, and I shall be rid of you and your imposture!" she said, raising her voice.

Drayton leaped to the saddle.

"I'll do it!" he muttered; and now, pale, crushed, his braggadocio gone, he tugged his horse's head aside and brought down the whip on its flank.

Parson Christian turned to Mr. Bonnithorne.

"Follow him," he said, resolutely, and lifted his hand.

The lawyer made a show of explanation, then assumed an air of authority, but finally encountered the parson's white face, and turned away.

In another moment Greta was hanging on Parson Christian's neck, sobbing and moaning, while the good old Christian, with all the mellowness back in his wrinkled face, smoothed her hair as tenderly as a woman.

"My poor Paul, my dear husband!" cried Greta.

"Ah! thanks be to God, things are at their worst now, and they can't move but they must mend," said the parson.

He took her indoors and bathed her hot forehead, and dried with his hard old hand the tears that fell from eyes that a moment before had flashed like a basilisk's.

Toward five o'clock that evening a knock came to the door of the vicarage, and old Laird Fisher entered. His manner was more than usually solemn and constrained.

"I's coom't to say as ma lass's wee thing is taken badly," he said, "and rayder sudden't."

Greta rose from her seat and put on her hat and cloak. She was hastening down the road while the charcoal-burner was still standing in the middle of the floor.

CHAPTER VIII.

When Greta reached the old charcoal-burner's cottage, the little one was lying in a drowsy state in Mercy's arms. Its breathing seemed difficult; sometimes it started in terror; it was feverish and suffered thirst. The mother's wistful face was bent down on it with an indescribable expression. There were only the trembling lips to tell of the sharp struggle that was going on within. But the yearning for a sight of the little flushed countenance, the tearless appeal for but one glimpse of the drowsy little eyes, the half-articulate cry of a mother's heart against the fate that made the child she had suckled at her breast a stranger, whose very features she might not know—all this was written in that blind face.

"Is he pale?" said Mercy. "Is he sleeping? He does not talk now, but only starts and cries, and sometimes coughs."

"When did this begin?" asked Greta.

"Toward four o'clock. He had been playing, and I noticed that he breathed heavily, and then he came to me to be nursed. Is he awake now? Listen."

The little one in its restless drowsiness was muttering faintly, "Man—go-on—batter—toas."

"The darling is talking in his sleep, isn't he?" said Mercy.

Then there was a ringing, brassy cough.

"It is croup," thought Greta.

She closed the window, lighted a fire, placed the kettle so that the steam might enter the room, then wrung flannels out of hot water, and wrapped them about the child's neck. She stayed all that night at the cottage, and sat up with the little one and nursed it. Mercy could not be persuaded to go to bed, but she was very quiet. It had not yet taken hold of her that the child was seriously ill. He was drowsy and a little feverish, his pulse beat fast and he coughed hard sometimes, but he would be better in the morning. Oh, yes, he would soon be well again, and tearing up the flowers in the garden.

Toward midnight the pulse fell rapidly, the breathing become quieter, and the whole nature seemed to sink. Mercy listened with her ear bent down at the child's mouth, and a smile of ineffable joy spread itself over her face.

"Bless him, he is sleeping so calmly," she said.

Greta did not answer.

"The 'puss' and the 'man' don't darken his little life so much now," continued Mercy, cheerily.

"No, dear," said Greta, in as strong a voice as she could summon.

"All will be well with my darling boy soon, will it not?"

"Yes, dear," said Greta, with a struggle.

Happily Mercy could not read the other answer in her face.

Mercy had put her sensitive fingers on the child's nose, and was touching him lightly about the mouth.

"Greta," she said in a startled whisper, "does he look pinched?"

"A little," said Greta, quietly.

"And his skin—is it cold and clammy?"

"We must give him another hot flannel," said Greta.

Mercy sat at the bedside, and said nothing for an hour. Then all at once, and in a strange, harsh voice, she said:

"I wish God had not made Ralphie so winsome."

Greta started at the words, but made no answer.

The daylight came early. As the first gleams of gray light came in at the window, Greta turned to where Mercy sat in silence. It was a sad face that she saw in the mingled yellow light of the dying lamp and the gray of the dawn.

Mercy spoke again.

"Greta, do you remember what Mistress Branthet said when her baby died last back-end gone twelvemonth?"

Greta looked up quickly at the bandaged eyes.

"What?" she asked.

"Well, Parson Christian tried to comfort her, and said, 'Your baby is now an angel in Paradise,' and she turned on him with 'Shaf on your angels—I want none on 'em—I want my little girl.'"

Mercy's voice broke into a sob.

Toward ten o'clock the doctor came. He had been detained. Very sorry to disoblige Mrs. Ritson, but fact was old Mr. de Broadthwaite had an attack of lumbago, complicated by a bout of toothache, and everybody knew he was most exacting. Young person's baby ill? Feverish, restless, starts in its sleep, and cough?—Ah, croupy cough—yes, croup, true croup, not spasmodic. Let him see; how old? A year and a half? Ah, bad, very. Most frequent in second year of infancy. Dangerous, highly so. Forms a membrane that occludes air passages. Often ends in convulsions, and child suffocates. Sad, very. Let him see again. How long since the attack began? Yesterday at four. Ah, far gone, far. The great man soon vanished, leaving behind him a harmless preparation of aconite and ipecacuanha.

Mercy had heard all, and her pent-up grief broke out in sobs.

"Oh, to think I shall hear my Ralphie no more, and to know his white cold face is looking up from a coffin, while other children are playing in the sunshine and chasing the butterflies! No, no, it can not be; God will not let it come to pass; I will pray to Him and He will save my child. Why, He can do anything, and He has all the world. What is my little baby boy to Him? He will not let it be taken from me!"

Greta's heart was too full for speech. But she might weep in silence, and none there would know. Mercy stretched across the bed and, tenderly folding the child in her arms, she lifted him up, and then went down on her knees.

"Merciful Father," she said in a childish voice of sweet confidence, "this is my baby, my Ralphie, and I love him so dearly. You would never think how much I love him. But he is ill, and doctor says he may die. Oh, dear Father, only think what it would be to say, 'His little face is gone.' And then I have never seen him. You will not take him away until his mother sees him. So soon, too. Only five days more. Why, it is quite close. Not to-morrow, nor the next day, nor the next, but the day after that!"

She put in many another child-like plea, and then rose with a smile on her pale lips and replaced the little one on his pillow.

"How patient he is," she said. "He can't say 'Thank you,' but I'm sure his eyes are speaking. Let me feel." She put her finger lightly on the child's lids. "No, they are shut; he must be sleeping. Oh, dear, he sleeps very much. Is he gaining color? How quiet he is! If he would only say, 'Mamma!' How I wish I could see him!"

She was very quiet for awhile, and then plucked at Greta's gown suddenly.

"Greta," she said eagerly, "something tells me that if I could only see Ralphie I should save him."

Greta started up in terror. "No, no, no; you must not think of it," she said.

"But some one whispered it. It must have been God Himself. You know we ought to obey God always."

"Mercy, it was not God who said that. It was your own heart. You must not heed it."

"I'm sure it was God," said Mercy. "And I heard it quite plain."

"Mercy, my darling, think what you are saying. Think what it is you wish to do. If you do it you will be blind forever."

"But I shall have saved my Ralphie."

"No, no; you will not."

"Will he not be saved, Greta?"

"Only our heavenly Father knows."

"Well, He whispered it in my heart. And, as you say, He knows best."

Greta was almost distraught with fear. The noble soul in her would not allow her to appeal to Mercy's gratitude against the plea of maternal love. But she felt that all her happiness hung on that chance. If Mercy regained her sight, all would be well with her and hers; but if she lost it the future must be a blank.

The day wore slowly on, and the child sunk and sunk. At evening the old charcoal-burner returned, and went into the bedroom. He stood a moment, and looked down at the pinched little face, and when the child's eyes opened drowsily for a moment he put his withered forefinger into its palm; but there was no longer a responsive clasp of the chubby hand.

The old man's lips quivered behind his white beard.

"It were a winsome wee thing," he said, faintly, and then turned away.

He left his supper untouched and went into the porch. There he sat on a bench and whittled a blackthorn stick. The sun was sinking over the head of the Eel Crag; the valley lay deep in a purple haze; the bald top of Cat Bells stood out bright in the glory of the passing day. A gentle breeze came up from the south, and the young corn chattered with its multitudinous tongues in the field below. The dog lay at the charcoal-burner's feet, blinking in the sun and snapping lazily at a buzzing fly.

The little life within was ebbing away. No longer racked by the ringing cough, the loud breathing became less frequent and more harsh. Mercy lifted the child from the bed and sat with it before the fire. Greta saw its eyes open, and at the same moment she saw the lips move slightly, but she heard nothing.

"He is calling his mamma," said Mercy, with her ear bent toward the child's mouth.

There was a silence for a long time. Mercy pressed the child to her breast; its close presence seemed to soothe her.

Greta stood and looked down; she saw the little lips move once more, but again she heard no sound.

"He is calling his mamma," repeated Mercy, wistfully, "and, oh, he seems such a long way off!"

Once again the little lips moved.

"He is calling me," said Mercy, listening intently; and she grew restless and excited. "He is going away. I can hear him. He is far off. Ralphie, Ralphie!" She had lifted the child up to her face. "Ralphie, Ralphie!" she cried.

"Give me the baby, Mercy," said Greta.

But the mother clung to it with a convulsive grasp.

"Ralphie, Ralphie, Ralphie!..."

There was a sudden flash of some white thing. In an instant the bandage had fallen from Mercy's head, and she was peering down into the child's face with wild eyes.

"Ralphie, Ralphie!... Hugh!" she cried.

The mother had seen her babe at last, and in that instant she had recognized the features of its father.

At the next moment the angel of God passed through that troubled house, and the child lay dead at the mother's breast.

Mercy saw it all, and her impassioned mood left her. She rose to her feet quietly, and laid the little one in the bed. There was never a sigh more, never a tear. Only her face was ashy pale, and her whitening lips quivered.

"Greta," she said, very slowly, "will you go for him?"

Greta kissed the girl's forehead tenderly. Her own calm, steadfast, enduring spirit sunk. All the world was dead to her now.

"Yes, dear," she whispered.

The next minute she was gone from the room.

CHAPTER IX.

The evening was closing in; now and then the shrill cries of the birds pealed and echoed in the still air; a long, fibrous streak of silver in the sky ebbed away over the head of Hindscarth. Greta hastened toward the pit-brow. The clank of the iron chain in the gear told that the cage in the shaft was working.

It was a year and a half since her life had first been overshadowed by a disaster more black and terrible than death itself, and never for an instant had the clouds been lifted until three days ago. Then, in a moment, the light had pierced through the empty sky, and a way had been wrought for her out of the labyrinth of misery. But even that passage for life and hope and love seemed now to be closed by the grim countenance of doom.

Mercy would be blind forever! All was over and done. Greta's strong, calm spirit sunk and sunk. She saw the impostor holding to the end the name and place of the good man; and she saw the good man dragging his toilsome way through life—an outcast, a by-word, loaded with ignominy, branded with crime. And that unhappy man was her husband, and he had no stay but in her love—no hope but in her faith.

Greta stopped at the door of Hugh Ritson's office and knocked. A moment later he and she were face to face. He was dressed in his pit flannels, and was standing by a table on which a lamp burned. When he recognized her, he passed one hand across his brow, the other he rested on the mantel-piece. There was a momentary twitching of her lips, and he involuntarily remarked that in the time that had passed since they last met she had grown thinner.

"Come with me," she said in a trembling whisper. "Mercy's child is dead, and the poor girl is asking for you in her great trouble."

He did not speak at once, but shaded his eyes from the lamp. Then he said, in a voice unlike his own:

"I will follow you."

She had held the door in her hand, and now she turned to go. He took one step toward her.

"Greta, have you nothing more to say to me?" he asked.

"What do you wish me to say?"

He did not answer; his eyes fell before her.

There was a slight wave of her hand as she added:

"The same room ought never to contain both you and me—it never should have done so—but this is not my errand."

"I have deserved it," he said, humbly.

"The cruel work is done—yes, done past undoing. You have not heard the last of it. Then, since you ask me what I have to say to you, it is this: That man, that instrument of your malice who is now your master, has been to say that he can compel me to live with him, or imprison me if I refuse. Can he do it?"

Hugh Ritson lifted his eyes with a blind, vacant stare.

"To live with him? Him? You to live with him?" he said, absently.

"To live under his roof—those were his words. Can he do it? I mean if the law recognizes him as my husband?"

Hugh Ritson's eyes wandered.

"Do it? Your husband?" he echoed, incoherently.

"I know well what he wants," said Greta, breathing heavily; "it is not myself he is anxious for—but he can not have the one without the other."

"The one without the other?" echoed Hugh Ritson in a low tone. Then he strode across the room in visible agitation.

"Greta, that man is—. Do you know who he is?"

"Paul Drayton, the innkeeper of Hendon," she answered, calmly.

"No, no; he is your—"

He paused, his brows knit, his fingers interlaced. Her bosom swelled.

"Would you tell me that he is my husband?" she said indignantly.

Hugh Ritson again passed his hand across his brow.

"Greta, I have deserved your distrust," he said, in an altered tone.

"What is done can never be undone," she answered.

His voice had regained its calmness, but his manner was still agitated.

"I may serve you even yet," he said; "I have done you too much wrong; I know that."

"What is your remorse worth now?" she asked. "It comes too late."

Then he looked her steadily in the face, and replied:

"Greta, it is well said that the most miserable man in all the world is he who feels remorse before he does the wrong. I was—I am—that man. I did what I did knowing well that I should repent it—ay, to the last hour of my life. But I was driven to it—I had no power to resist it—it mastered me then—it would master me now."

The finger-tips of Greta's right hand were pressed close against her cheek. Hugh Ritson took a step nearer.

"Greta," he said, and his voice fell to a broken whisper, "there are some men to whom love is a passing breath, a gentle gale that beats on the face and sports in the hair, and then is gone. To me it is a wound, a deep, corrosive, inward wound that yearns and burns."

Greta shuddered; it was as if his words stung her. Then with an impatient gesture she turned again toward the door, saying:

"This is the death-hour of your child, and, Heaven pardon you, it seems to be the death-hour of your brother's hopes too!" She faced about. "Do you think of him?" she added, lifting her voice. "When you see this man in his place, wasting his substance and mine, do you ever think of him where he is?"

Her voice trembled and broke. There was a moment's silence. She had turned her head aside, and he heard the low sound of sobs.

"Yes, I think of him," he answered, slowly. "At night, in the sleepless hours, I do think of him where he is; and I think of him as a happy man. Yes, a happy man! What if he wears a convict's dress?—his soul is yoked to no deadening burden. As for me—well, look at me!"

He smiled grimly.

"I have heard everything," said Greta; "you have sown the wind, and you are reaping the whirlwind."

Something like a laugh broke from him. It came from the waters of bitterness that lay deep in his heart.

"Not that," he said. "All that will pass away."

She was on the threshold; a force of which she knew nothing held her there.

"Greta, I am not so bad a man as perhaps I seem; I am a riddle that you may not read. The time is near when I shall trouble the world no more, and it will be but a poor wounded name I shall leave behind me, will it not? Greta, would it be a mockery to ask you to forgive me?"

"There are others who have more to forgive," said Greta. "One of them is waiting for you at this moment; and, poor girl! her heart is broken."

Hugh Ritson bent his head slightly, and Greta pulled the door after her.

CHAPTER X.

The evening had closed in; the watery veil that goes between day and night was hanging in the air; the wind had risen, and the trees were troubled. When Hugh Ritson reached the cottage, all was dark about the house save for the red glow from the peat fire which came out into the open porch. The old Laird Fisher was sitting there, a blackthorn stick at his feet, his elbows on his knees, his cheeks rested on his hands. The drowsy glow fell on his drooping white head. As Hugh Ritson passed into the kitchen, the old man lifted to his a countenance on which grief and reproach were stamped together. Hugh Ritson's proud spirit was rebuked by the speechless sorrow of that look. It was such a look as a wounded hound lifts to the eyes of a brutal master.

A sheep-dog was stretched at full length before the slumbering fire. The kitchen was empty, and silent too, except for the tick of the clock and the colly's labored breathing. But at the sound of Hugh's uncertain step on the hard earthen floor, the door of the bedroom opened, and Greta motioned him to enter.

A candle burned near the bed. Before a fire, Mercy Fisher sat with Parson Christian. Her head lay on a table that stood between, her face buried in her encircled arms. One hand lay open beside the long loose tresses of yellow hair, and the parson's hand rested upon it caressingly. Parson Christian rose as Hugh Ritson entered, and bowing coldly, he left the room; Greta had already gone out, and he rejoined her in the kitchen.

Mercy lifted her head and looked up at Hugh. There was not a tear in her weary, red, swollen eyes, and not a sigh came from her heaving breast. She rose quietly, and taking Hugh's hand in her own, she drew him to the bedside.

"See where he is," she said in a voice of piercing earnestness, and with her other hand she lifted a handkerchief from the little white face. Hugh Ritson shuddered. He saw his own features as if memory had brought them in an instant from the long past.

Mercy disengaged her hand, and silently hid her face. But she did not weep.

"My little Ralphie," she said, plaintively, "how quiet he is now! Oh, but you should have seen him when he was like a glistening ray of morning light. Why did you not come before?"

Hugh Ritson stood there looking down at the child's dead face, and made no answer.

"It is better as it is," his heart whispered at that moment. The next instant his whole frame quivered. What was the thought that had risen unbidden within him? Better that his child should lie there cold and lifeless than that it should fill this desolate house with joy and love? Was he, then, so black a villain? God forbid! Yet it was better so.

"All is over now," said Mercy, and her hands fell from her face. She turned her weary eyes full

upon him, and added: "We have been punished already."

"Punished?" said Hugh. "We?" There was silence for a moment; and then, dropping his voice until it was scarcely audible, he said: "Your burden is heavy to bear, my poor girl."

Her slight figure swayed a little.

"I could bear it no longer," she answered.

"Many a one has thought that before you," he said; "but God alone knows what we can not bear until we are tried."

"Well, all is over now," she repeated listlessly.

She spoke of herself as if her days were already ended and past; as if her orb of life had been rounded by the brief span of the little existence that lay finished upon the bed. Hugh Ritson looked at her, and the muscles of his face twitched. Her weary eyes were still dry; their dim light seemed to come from far away.

"How I prayed that I might see my Ralphie," she said. "I thought surely God had willed it that I should never see my child. Perhaps that was to be my punishment for—all that had taken place. But I prayed still. Oh, you would not think how much I pray! But it must have been a wicked prayer."

She hid her face once more in her hands, and added, with unexpected animation:

"God heard my prayer, and answered it—but see!" She pointed to the child. "I saw him—yes, I saw him—die!"

Hugh Ritson was moved, but his heart was bitter. At that moment he cursed the faith that held in bondage the soul of the woman at his side. Would that he could trample it underfoot, and break forever the chains by which it held the simple.

"Hugh," she said, and her voice softened, "we are about to part forever. Our little Ralphie—yours and mine—he calls me. I could not live without him. God would not make me do that. He has punished me already, and He is merciful. Only think, our Ralphie is in heaven!"

She paused and bit her lip, and drew her breath audibly inward. Her face took then a death-like hue, and all at once her voice overflowed with anguish.

"Do you know, something whispered at that instant that God had not punished us enough, that Ralphie was not in heaven, and that the sins of the fathers—Oh, my darling, my darling!"

With a shrill cry she stopped, turned to the bed, threw her outspread arms about the child, and kissed it fervently.

The tears came at length, and rained down on that little silent face. Hugh Ritson could support the strain no longer.

"Mercy," he said, and his voice had a deep tremor—"Mercy, if there is any sin, it is mine, and if there is to be any punishment hereafter, that will be mine too. As for your little boy, be sure he is in heaven." He had stepped to the door, and his thumb was on the wooden latch. "You say rightly, we shall never meet again," he said in a muffled voice. "Good-bye."

Mercy lifted her tearful face. "Give me your hand at parting," she said in an imploring tone. He was on the opposite side of the bed from where she stood, and she reached her hand across it. He took a step nearer, and his hand closed in hers. Between them and beneath their clasped hands lay the child. "Hugh, we could not love in this world—something went astray with us; but we shall meet again, shall we not?"

He turned his eyes away.

"Perhaps," he answered.

"Promise me," she said—"promise me."

He drew his breath hard.

"If there is a God and a judgment, be sure we shall meet," he said.

His voice broke. He turned abruptly aside and hurried out of the house.

CHAPTER XI.

The night was now dark; there was no moon, and there were no stars; the wind souged mournfully through the trees. In the occasional lull the rumble of the cataracts drifted heavily through the air.

Hugh Ritson walked in the darkness with drooping head. He was not making for the pit-brow; he had taken the opposite direction. When he reached the village, he stopped at the Flying Horse.

Loud peals of laughter came from the parlor, hidden by red blinds from the road.

He stood at the door that opened into the bar. The landlady, her face turned from him, was talking with obvious animation to a daleswoman who stood with a jug in her hand at the other side of the counter.

"What, woman, thoo's surely heard what happen't at the Ghyll this morning?"

"Nay, Bessie, I's been thrang as Throp wife, cleaning and tittivating."

"Well, lass, they've telt me as it were shocking. Two brothers, and such a fratch! It coom't to blows at last, and they do say 'at Master Hugh is nigh amaist dead with a bash the girt fellow gave him."

Hugh Ritson rapped sharply at the door.

"Tell your husband I wish to see him," he said.

The landlady looked up, fumbled with a napkin, and answered nervously, "Yes, sir." Then she hobbled to the door of the parlor and opened it. A wave of mingled noise, vapor, and foul odors came through the aperture. "Tommy!" she screamed above the babel.

The landlord appeared.

"Can you send me a dog-cart at half past four in the morning?" said Hugh.

"Maybe—it's a gay canny hour, I reckon," said the landlord.

He pulled at a long pipe as he spoke, and his face, which was flushed, wore an impudent smile.

"I have to catch the five-o'clock train," Hugh answered.

"To London?" One cheek was twisted into numerous wrinkles.

"I said the five train," said Hugh, sternly. "Can you do it?"

"I's niver said nay—it'll be three half-crowns."

Hugh put half a sovereign on the counter.

"Let it be sent at half past four promptly.

"To the Ghyll?"

The twist of the cheek was a shade less perceptible.

"To the pit-brow."

The parlor door opened again, and Natt stood on the threshold. The stableman's sleepy eyes awakened to a knowing twinkle. Then his flat face disappeared, and a thin titter mingled audibly with the clamor within. In another moment the door was thrown wide open, and Drayton came slouching out. His hair fell back over his forehead, from which his hat was tipped back. A cigar was perched between his teeth; the tips of his fingers were thrust into his waistcoat pockets.

"Come in; I've summat to show you," he said.

Hugh did not stir, but he lifted his head and looked into the room. Half a score of the riff-raff of the dale were seated amid clouds of smoke. On the wooden mantel-shelf above the wide ingle a large book stood open, and the leaves fluttered with the wind that came through the door.

"I hain't forgotten what you said long ago about the parson's book," said Drayton, "so here it is, and a mighty valuable thing I call it. You thought to frighten me with it, but bless yer soul, I like it, I do. Listen."

Drayton stepped back into the room, turned the leaves, and began to read in a lusty tone:

"1847.—November 18.—Thomas said Allan was fresh from Scotland, being Scottish born, and that his wife was Irish, and that they had a child called Paul, only a few months old, and not yet walking."

It was the parson's diary.

"That's good enough, ain't it, Master Hugh Ritson?" said Drayton, with an ungainly bow, and a vast show of civility, followed instantly by a sidelong leer at his cronies about him.

Hugh Ritson held himself stiffly, and merely said:

"Where did you get it?"

At this question there were sundry snorts and titters and muttered responses from the men at the tables. Hugh's eyes passed over them with a steely glance.

"Stolen it, I suppose," he said quietly.

"Ay," said Drayton, "and a neat job too. Natt 'ticed away the Methodee man while I borrowed it."

Drayton seemed to be proud of his share in the transaction, and his friends laughed loudly at the

adroit turn he had given to the matter. Natt's drowsy eyes were preternaturally bright at that great moment.

Hugh Ritson's forehead darkened with ire.

"This is your gratitude to the clergyman," he said.

Sundry further snorts and sniggers went round the tables.

"There's not a man of you who is not beholden to Parson Christian," said Hugh, sternly. He twisted sharply round upon one graybeard whose laugh still rumbled between his teeth. "Reuben Rae, who nursed your sick wife? John Proudfoot," to the blacksmith, "what about your child down with the fever?" His quick eye traversed the parlor, and more than one lusty crony was fain to bury his face in his breast. "Yet you laugh, brave fellows as you are, when the good man's house is broken into by a thief."

Drayton took a swift stride toward him.

"Drop it, and quick!" he shouted.

Hugh Ritson governed himself with an effort.

"I'm not here to brawl," he said quietly.

"Pigeon-livered blatherskite!—that's what I call ye—d'ye hear?" said Drayton.

Hugh's face flinched, but he turned on his heel, and was on the road at the next instant.

Drayton followed him out, laughing boisterously. Hugh made one quick step backward and shut the door; then he turned about on Drayton, whose cruel face could be dimly seen in the hazy red light that came through the blinds.

"You have tried to torture me," he said, "just as you would hang a dog by its tail, or draw the teeth of a rat. You have threatened with worse torture a good and loyal woman. You are a scoundrel, and you know it! But even you would hesitate if you knew for certain who or what you are. Let me tell you again, now, when we are alone, and while I have no personal interest to serve: You are the man whose name I gave you—Paul Lowther, son of Robert Lowther—and that lady, my brother's wife, whom for reason of profit you would compel to live under the same roof with you, is your own sister!"

Drayton's loud guffaw rang out above the wind's moan in the trees. His cronies within heard it and listened.

"It's a rare old story, that is. Let me see; you've told it before, I fancy."

"Then it was a lie; now it's God's truth!" said Hugh.

Drayton laughed again.

"And then it was believed, but now it's not. No, no, Master Hugh, it won't pass."

"We will see."

Hugh Ritson had swung about and was gone.

Drayton went back to his friends.

"Hasn't the pluck of a pigeon when it comes to the push," he muttered.

"Ey, he wears a bonny white feather in his cap, for sure," said old Reuben Rae.

"No fight in'im—no'but tongue lather," said John, the blacksmith.

Hugh Ritson walked through the darkness to the pit-brow. The glow of the furnace lighted up the air to the south, and showed vaguely the brant sides of the fell; the dull thud of the engine, the clank of the chain, and the sharp crack of the refuse tumbling down the bank from the banksman's barrow were the only sounds that rose above the wind's loud whistle.

Gubblum was at the mouth of the shaft.

"Oglethorpe," said Hugh, "how many of the gangs are below to-night?"

"All but two—auld Reuben's and Jim South'et's."

"Then they have chosen to work on?"

"Ey, another fortnight—trusting to get their wage afore that, please God."

"They shall not be disappointed."

Hugh Ritson turned away. Gubblum trundled his last wheelbarrow to the edge of the bank, and then rested and said to himself, "He takes it cool enough onyway."

But the outside tranquillity disappeared when Hugh Ritson reached his own room on the pit-

brow. He bathed his hot forehead again and again. His fingers twitched nervously, and he plunged his perspiring hands into cold water above the wrists, holding them there for several minutes. Not for long did he sit in one seat. He tramped the room uneasily, his infirm foot trailing heavily. Then he threw himself on the couch, tossed from side to side, rose, and resumed his melancholy walk. Thus an hour passed drearily.

His mind recalled one by one the events of the day. And one by one there came crowding back upon him the events of the two years that had passed since his father's death. A hurricane was upheaving every memory of his mind. And every memory had its own particular sting, and came up as a blight to fret his soul. He tried to guard himself from himself. What he had first thought to do was but in defense of his strict legal rights, and if he had gone further—if he had done more, without daring to think of it until it was done—then it was love that had led him astray. Was it so cruel a thing to be just? So foul a thing to love?

But above the shufflings of remorse, above the stiflings of regret, above the plea of a maddening love, was the voice of revenge speaking loudly in his soul. That man, his instrument, now his master, Paul Lowther, must be brought down, and his time-serving sponsor with him. But how? There was but one way—by denouncing himself. Yes, that was the sole outlet for his outraged and baffled spirit. He must go to the proper quarter and say, "I have perjured myself, and sworn away my brother's liberty. The man who was condemned as Paul Drayton is Paul Ritson. I did it all."

That would bring this vulgar scoundrel to the dust, but at what a price! The convict's dress now worn by his brother would soon be worn by him. And what solace would it be then that the same suit would be worn by the impostor also? Yet why prate of solace in a matter like this? What alternative was left to him? In what quarter of the sky was the light dawning for him? He was traveling toward the deepening night, and the day of his life was done.

What if he allowed everything to take its course? Well, he was a disgraced and ruined man, turned adrift from his father's house, and doomed to see a stranger living there. Did he lack gall to make such a climax bitter? Bitter, eh! and a thousand times the more bitter because he himself had, for ends of his own, first placed the scoundrel where he sat.

No, no, no; Paul Lowther must be brought down, and with him must fall the poor ruins of a better man. Yes a better man, let the world say what it would.

Could it occur that he would not be believed? that when he said "Take me, I am a perjurer," they would answer, "No, your self-denunciation is only a freak of revenge, a mad attempt to injure the relative who has turned you out of his house?" Hugh Ritson laughed as the grim irony of such a possible situation flashed upon him: a man self-condemned and saved from punishment by the defense of his enemy!

There was a knock at his door. In his stupor he was not at first conscious of what the knock meant. At length he recalled himself and cried:

"Come in."

Gubblum Oglethorpe entered.

"The men on the twelve o'clock shift are just about ganging down, and they want to tak' a few mair forks with them. They've telt me 'at the timber is splitting like matchwood under the sandy vein."

Hugh Ritson made an effort to gather the purport of Gubblum's message.

"Tell them to take the forks," he said in a low tone.

Gubblum was backing out, and stopped.

"I reckon thoo's not heard the last frae auld Mattha's," he said in another voice.

"What is it, Oglethorpe?" said Hugh, his head bent over the table.

"Robbie South'et's wife has been up to t' brow, and says that Mercy's laal thing is gone."

Hugh did not lift his eyes.

"Is that the last?" he said.

"Nay, but warse. The lass herself tore the bandage frae her eyes, and she's gone stone blind, and that's foriver."

Hugh's head bent closer over the table.

"Good-night, Oglethorpe," he said.

Gubblum backed out, muttering to himself as he returned to the shaft, "A cool hand, how-an'-iver."

The moment the door closed, Hugh Ritson tramped the floor in restless perambulations. What had he thought of doing? Delivering himself to justice as a perjurer? Had he, then, no duty left in life that he must needs gratify his revenge in a kind of death? What of the woman who had suffered for him? What of the broken heart and the wretched home? Were these as nothing against the humiliation of a proud spirit?

Never for an instant, never in his bitterest agony, did Hugh Ritson lie to his own soul and say that the resolution he had formed was prompted by remorse for what he had done to Paul Ritson; not revenge for what he had suffered from Paul Drayton. To be a saint when sick; to find the conscience active when defeat overwhelmed it—that was for the weak dregs of humanity. But such paltering was not for him.

On the one hand revenge, on the other duty—which was he to follow? The wretched man could come to no decision; and when the fingers of his watch pointed to one o'clock he lay down on the couch to rest.

It was not sleep that he wanted; sleep had of late become too full of terrors; but sleep overcame him, nevertheless. His face, when he slept, was the face of a man in pain; and dreams came that were the distorted reflections of his waking thoughts. He dreamed that he had died in infancy. Calm, serene, very sweet, and peaceful, his little innocent face of childhood looked up from the white pillow. He thought his mother bent over him, and shed many tears; but he himself belonged to another world of beings, and looked down on both.

"It is better so," he thought, "and the tears she weeps are blest."

At this he awoke, and rose to his feet. What soft nothings men had said of sleep! "Oh, sleep, it is a gentle thing, beloved from pole to pole!" Gentle! More tyrannous than death. The melancholy perambulation ended, and he lay down once more. He slept and dreamed again. This time he had killed his own brother. A moment before they had stood face to face—vigorous, wrathful, with eyes that flashed, and hands uplifted. Now his brother lay quiet and awful at his feet, and the great silence was broken by a voice from heaven crying, "A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be on the earth!"

He started to his feet in terror. "Mercy, mercy!" he cried.

Then he drew his breath hard and looked about him. "A dream—only another dream," he said to himself, and laughed between his close-set teeth. The lamp still burned on the table. He rose, drew a key from his pocket, opened a cupboard, and took out a small bottle. It contained an opiate. "Since I must sleep, let my sleep at least be dreamless," he said, and he measured a dose. He was lifting the glass to his lips, when he caught sight of his face in the glass. "Pitiful! pitiful! A mere dream unnerves me. Pitiful enough, forsooth! And so I must needs hide myself from myself behind a bulwark like this!" He held the drug to the light, and while his hand trembled he laughed. Then he drank it off, put out the light, and sat on the couch.

The dawn had fretted the sky, and the first streaks of day crept in at the window, when the lamp's yellow light was gone. Hugh Ritson sat in the gray gloom, his knees drawn close under his chin, his arms folded over his breast, his head bent heavily forward. He was crooning an old song. Presently the voice grew thick, the eye became clouded, and then the head fell back. He was asleep, and in his sleep he dreamed again. Or was it a vision, and not a dream, that came to him now? He thought he stood in a room which he had seen before. On the bed some white thing lay. It was a child, and the little soul had fled. Beside it a woman cowered, and moaned "Guilty, guilty!" Her eyes were fixed on the child, yet she saw nothing; the sightless orbs were bleached. But with her heart she saw the child; and she saw himself also as he entered. Then it seemed that she turned her blind face toward him, and called on him by name. The next instant she was gone. Her seat was vacant, the bed was empty; only a gray-bearded man sat by a cold grate. With an overpowering weight pressing him down, it seemed to Hugh that he threw up his head, and again he heard his name.

He leaped to his feet. Big beads of cold sweat stood on his forehead. "Mercy is dead," he whispered with awe. "She has gone to put in her plea of guilty. She is in God's great hand!"

The next moment a voice shouted, "Mr. Ritson!"

He listened, and in the gray light his stony countenance smiled grimly.

"Mr. Ritson!" once more, followed by the rap of a whip-handle against the door.

"Tommy the landlord," said Hugh, and he broke into a harsh laugh. "So you were my angel, Tommy, eh?"

Another harsh laugh. The landlord, sitting in the dog-cart outside, heard it, and thought to himself, "Some one with him."

Hugh Ritson plunged his head into the wash-basin, and rubbed himself vigorously with a rough towel. "My last sleep is over," he said, glancing aside with fearful eyes at the couch. "I'll do this thing that I am bent upon; but no more sleep, and no more dreams!"

He opened the door, threw a rug up to the landlord, put on an ulster, and leaped into the dog-cart. They started away at a quick trot. A chill morning breeze swept down the vale. The sun was rising above Cat Bells, but Hugh Ritson still felt as if he were traveling toward the deepening night. He sat with folded arms, and head bent on his breast.

"Hasta heard what happened at auld Laird Fisher's this morning?" said the landlord.

Hugh answered in a low voice:

"I've heard nothing."

"The lass has followed her barn rather sudden't. Ey, she's gone, for sure. Died a matter of half an hour ago. I heard it frae the parson as I coom't by."

Hugh Ritson bent yet lower his drooping head.

CHAPTER XII.

At 2 o'clock that day Hugh Ritson arrived at Euston. He got into a cab and drove to Whitehall. At the Home Office he asked for the Secretary of State. A hundred obstacles arose to prevent him from penetrating to the head of the department. One official handed him over to another, the second to a third, the third to a fourth.

Hugh Ritson was hardly the man to be balked by such impediments. His business was with the Secretary of State, and none other. Parliament was in session, and the Home Secretary was at the afternoon sitting of the House. Hugh Ritson sought and found him there. He explained his purpose in few words, and was listened to with a faint smile of incredulity.

The secretary was a stolid Yorkshireman, who affected whatever measure of bluffness had not been natural to him from birth. He first looked at his visitor with obvious doubts of his sanity; and when this suspicion had been set at rest by Hugh's incisive explanation, with an equally obvious desire to feel his bumps.

But the face of the Yorkshireman soon became complicated by other shades of expression than such as come of distrust of a man's reason or contempt of his sentimentality.

"Hadn't you better sleep on it, and come to see me at Whitehall in the morning?" he said, with more respect than he had yet shown. "Then if you are still of the same mind, I will send for the Public Prosecutor."

Hugh Ritson bowed his acquiescence.

"And can I have the order for Portland?" he said.

"Probably. It will be against the new regulation that none may visit a convict prison except prison officials and persons interested in prison discipline. But we'll see what can be done."

That night, Hugh Ritson called at the Convent of St. Margaret. It was late when he entered, and when he came out again, half an hour afterward, the lamps were lighted in the Abbey Gardens. The light fell on the face of the lay sister who opened the door to him. She wore a gray gown, but no veil or scapular, and beneath the linen band that covered her hair her eyes were red and swollen.

Hugh Ritson hailed a hansom in the Broad Sanctuary, and drove to Hendon. The bar of the Hawk and Heron was full of carriers, carters, road-menders, and farm-laborers, all drinking, and all noisy. But, despite this evidence of a thriving trade, the whole place had a bankrupt appearance as of things going to wreck. Jabez served behind the counter. He had developed a good deal of personal consequence, and held up his head, and repeatedly felt the altitude of a top-knot that curled there, and bore himself generally with the cockety air of the young rooster after the neck of the old one has been screwed. Mrs. Drayton sat knitting in the room where Mercy and the neighbor's children once played together. When Hugh Ritson went in to her, the old body started.

"Lor's a mercy, me, sir, to think it's you! I'm that fearsome, that I declare I shiver and quake at nothing. And good for nowt i' the world neither, not since my own flesh and blood, as you might say, disowned me."

"Do you mean at the trial?" asked Hugh Ritson.

"The trial, sir!" said the landlady, lifting bewildered eyes, while the click of the needles ceased. "My Paul weren't there. Cummerland, sir—and you heard him yourself what he said of me." A corner of her house-wife's apron went up to her face. "Me as had brought him up that tender! Well," recovering composure, "I've lost heart, and serve him right. I just lets the house and things go, I do. I trusts to Providence; and that Jabez, he's no better nor a babby in the public line."

When Hugh Ritson left the inn, the old body's agitation increased. She had set down the knitting, and was fidgeting, first with her cap and then her apron.

"Listen to me," said Hugh. "To-day is Friday. On Monday you must go to the convent where you saw the mother of Paul. Ask for Sister Grace. Will you remember—Sister Grace? She will tell you all."

It was hard on eleven o'clock when Hugh Ritson returned to town. The streets were thronged, and he walked for a long hour amid the crowds that passed through the Strand. In all that multitudinous sea of faces, there was not a countenance on which the mark of suffering was more indelibly fixed than on his own.

His sensibilities were wrought up to an unwonted pitch. He was like a waif adrift in unknown waters, a cloud without anchor in a tempestuous sky; yet he felt that night as he had never felt before, that he had suddenly become possessed of another and most painful sense. Not a face in

that sea of faces but he seemed to know its secret fear, its joy and sorrow, the watchful dread that seared the hidden heart, the fluttering hope that buoyed it up.

It was an awful thing to be turned adrift in a world of sin and suffering with this agonizing sense. He could look, whether he would or not, beneath the smiling and rubicund countenance of the hail-fellow-well-met to that corrosive spot within where the trust of the widow and fatherless had been betrayed; or see beyond the stolid and heavy appearance proper to the ox the quivering features of the man who had stood long years ago above the dead body of the woman who had thrown her death at his door as sole reward for the life he had wrecked.

Nay, not only did the past write its manual there, but the future wrote its sign. He knew that the young girl in pink ribbons who was hurrying along with a smile on her lips, from the shop in the west to that unknown home in the east where the child of her shame had laughed and crowed and climbed up her bosom to her chin, was doomed to find that the source of all her joy and half her sorrow lay cold and stiff in its crib.

He grew fearful of himself; he shuddered as the unsuspected murderer brushed his elbow; he shuddered yet more as a mirror flashed back the reflection of his own hard face, and the idea came to him that perhaps other eyes could see what his eyes saw.

He turned down Arundel Street and on to the Embankment. No! no! no! the merciful God had not willed it that any man should look so deeply into the heart of his fellow-man. That was indeed to know good and evil; and the thought stole over him that perhaps it was in degree as a man had eaten of the forbidden fruit of the tree of life that he was cursed with this bitter knowledge.

Here, on the quiet pavement that echoed to his footsteps, the air was free. He uncovered his head, and the light west wind played in his hair and cooled his temples. Not a star shone overhead, and the river that flowed in the bed below was dark. More dark to him was the sea of humanity that flowed above.

He had heard that the death-roll of the Thames was one of every day for the year, and he leaned over the granite wall and wondered if the old river had claimed its toll for the day that was now almost done. His hair seemed to rise from its roots as he thought that perhaps at that very instant, in the black waters beneath him, the day's sacrifice was washing past.

He walked on, and the dull buzz of the Strand fell on his ear. What, after all, was the old god of the river to the Juggernaut of the city? And it was now, when the fret of the day had worn down, that Hugh Ritson thought of all that he had left behind him in the distant north. There in the darkness and the silence, amid the mountains, by the waving trees and the rumbling ghylls, lay half the ruins of his ruined life. The glow of old London's many lights could not reach so far, but the shadow of that dark spot was here.

CHAPTER XIII.

The clocks struck midnight, and he returned to the hotel at which he had engaged a bed. He did not lie down to sleep, but walked to and fro the night through.

Next morning at ten he was at the Home Office again. He saw the secretary and some of the law officers of the Crown. When he came out he carried in his pocket an order to visit a convict in Portland, and was attended by a police-sergeant in plain clothes. They took train from Waterloo at two in the afternoon, and reached Weymouth at six. When they crossed the strip of sea, the best of the day was gone, and a fresh breeze blew across the breakwater.

The Saxon walls of the castle at the foot of the Vern Hill reflected the chill blue of the water; but far above, where the rocky coast dipped to the beach, the yellow stone, with the bluish clay in its crevices, shone in the glow of the sinking sun.

Hugh Ritson and his companion put up for the night at the Portland Arms Inn. A ruddy, round-faced man in middle life, clean shaven and dressed youthfully, was smoking in the parlor. He exchanged a salutation with the cordiality of one who was nothing loath for a chat; then he picked up the old Reeve staff, and explained the ancient method of computing tithes. But Hugh Ritson was in no humor for conversation, and after dinner he set out for a solitary walk. He took the road that turns from the beach through the villages of Chiswell and Fortune's Well. When he reached the top of the hill the sea lay around him; and beneath him, to the right and left of the summit, were the quarries where the convicts labored, with two branches of an inclined railway leading down to the breakwater. On the summit itself, known as the Grove, was a long, high granite wall, with a broad gate-way, and the lancet lights of a lodge at one side of it. This was the convict prison, and the three or four houses in front of it were the residences of governor, chaplain, and chief warder. A cordon of cottages at a little distance were the homes of the assistant warders. There were a few shops amid this little group of cottages, and one public house, the Spotted Dog.

Hugh Ritson strolled into the tavern and sat down in a little "snuggery," which was separated from a similar apartment by a wooden partition that stood no higher than a tall man's height, and left a space between the top stile and the ceiling. A company of men gossiped at the other side of the partition.

"Talk of B 2001," said a guttural voice (Hugh Ritson started at the sound), "I took the stiff'ning out of him first go off. When he'd done he separates and come on from the moor; I saw he wasn't an old lag, so says I to 'im, 'Green 'un,' I says, 'if you're leary, you'll fetch a easy lagging, and if you're not, it'll be bellows to mend with you.' 'What d'ye mean?' he says. 'It's bloomin' 'ard work here,' I says, 'and maybe you don't get shin-of-beef soup to do it on. Bread and water, for a word,' I says. 'You're in my gang, quarrying, and I won't work you 'ard except I'm druv to it, but I want wide men in my gang,' I says, 'and no putting the stick on agen the screw.' 'Don't understand,' he says. 'Then follow a straight tip,' I says; 'stand by your warder and he'll stand by you.' Blest if that lag as I'd give that good advice to didn't get me fined the very next day."

"Never!" said sundry incredulous voices.

"It was a hot afternoon, and I'd just whipped a quid in my mouth and leaned atop of my musket for forty winks after dinner. The second-timers was coddling afront of me, and 2001 and the young chap as was dying of the consumption was wheeling and filling ahead. Well, up comes the governor right in front of 2001, and shouts, 'Warder,' he shouts, 'you're fined for inattention.' Then off he goes. All right, Mr. 2001, I says, I'll not misremember."

"What did you do?"

"Do?" (a loud, hollow laugh). "That was when the barracks was building, and one day a bit of a newspaper blowed over from the officers' quarters, and 2001 came on it, and the botcher picked it up. He'd chucked hisself quick. 'Right about face—march.' He got seven stretch, a month's marks, and lost his bedding."

A hearty laugh followed this account of a "screw's" revenge on a "green" convict. Hugh Ritson listened and shuddered.

"I ain't surprised at anything from that lunny," said another voice. "He was in my gang at the moor, and I know'd 'im. They put 'im in the soap-suds gang first, but he got hisself shifted. Then they sent 'im botching with the tailors, but he put out his broom for the governor, and said a big lusty man same as 'im wasn't for sitting on a board all day. The flat didn't want to fetch a easy lagging, that's the fact."

There was a loud guffaw.

"So they put 'im in my turf gang out on the moor, and one day a old clergyman come in gaiters and a broad-brimmer, and a face as if the master of the house were a-shaking at his hand, and the missis flopping down-stairs to give him a smack of the lips. Well, 2001 saw him in Principal Warder Rennell's office, and not afore the bars. So next day I says, 'Got anybody outside as would like to send you summat by the Underground?' 'The what?' he says, reg'lar black in the face. 'The underground railway,' I says, tipping him a wink. 'Get away from me, you bloodsucker!' he says. But I pinched 'im. The old lags were laughing at one of the grave-digger's oyster-openers, when up comes Rennell. 'Who's laughing?' he says. 'It's 2001,' I says; 'he's always idling and malingering.'"

"Ha, ha, ha! what did he get?"

"Three days' bread and water, a week's marks, and loss of class privileges. He didn't mind the grub and the time, but Jack-in-the-box, who was warder on his landing, said he took it proper bad as he couldn't write home to the missis."

"What's his dose?"

"Three. One of the old lags would do it on his head, and fetch it easy, too. He's a scholar, and could get to be a wardsman in the infirmary, or medicine factotum for the croaker, or maybe book-keeper for the governor. But he's earned no remissions, and he'll fill his time afore he slings his hook again."

Hugh Ritson could support the gossip no longer. He got up to leave the house, but before doing so he pushed open the door that led to the adjoining room, and stood a moment on the threshold, comprehending everything and everybody in one quick glance. The air breathed fresh outside. He walked in the gathering gloom of evening to the ruins of the church by the cliff, and, passing through the lych-gate, he came on the beaten track to the rocks. The rocks lay a hundred feet beneath, torn from the mainland in craggy masses that seemed ready to slide from their base to the deep chasm between. Could it be possible that men who were the slaves of hinds like those in yonder tavern could cling to their little lives while a deliverance like this beetling cliff stood near? A cold smile played on Hugh Ritson's face as he thought that, come what would, such slavery was not for him.

The sycamore by the ruined chancel pattered in the breeze, and the wheatear's last notes came from its top-most bough. Far below the waves were rocking lazily. There were other waves at Hugh Ritson's feet—the graves of dead men. Some who were buried there long ago were buried in their chains. Under the earth the fettered men—on the ruins of the church the singing bird. Across the sea the light was every moment fading. In another hour the day would be done, and then the moon would look down peacefully on the fettered and the free.

Hugh Ritson returned to the Portland Arms Inn. He found the police-sergeant in conversation with the ruddy-faced gentleman who had wished to explain to him the mysteries of the Reeve staff.

"He is the doctor at the prison," whispered the sergeant aside.

Presently Hugh turned to the doctor and said:

"Do you happen to know the convict B 2001?"

"Yes—Drayton," said the doctor; "calls himself Ritson. Are you a friend?"

Hugh Ritson's face quivered slightly.

"No," he answered, "I am not his friend." Then, after a pause, "But I have an order to see him. Besides, I have just heard him discussed by a company of wardens in a pot-house on the hill."

"Who were they? What were they like?"

"A tall man, one of them, fifty-five years of age, gray hair, grizzly beard, dark, vindictive eyes, a gash on one cheek, and a voice like a crow's."

"Humph! Jim-the-ladder—a discharged soldier."

"Another, a cadaverous fellow, with a plausible tongue."

"Horrocks—an old second-classer; served his time at Dartmoor and got promotion—doubtful official discipline."

"They both deserve one more and much higher promotion," said Hugh Ritson, with emphasis.

"You mean this." The doctor laughed, and put the forefinger of one hand, held horizontally, to the tip of the other, held upright.

"Can it be possible that the law is unable to maintain a fair stand-up fight with crime, and must needs call a gang of poltroons and blackmailers to its assistance?"

"You heard a bad account of B 2001, I judge?"

"I heard of nothing that he had done which the Pope of Rome might have feared to acknowledge."

"You are right—he's as good a man as there's on Portland Bill," said the doctor, "and if he's not quite as immaculate as his holiness, he's in the right of it this time."

Hugh Ritson glanced up.

"You've heard he's in the punishment cells," said the doctor. "By the way, you'll not see him until Monday; he can't join his gang before, and he hasn't a class privilege left, poor devil."

Hugh inquired the cause.

"Since he came here he's been yoked to a young fellow dying of consumption. The lad didn't relish the infirmary—he lost his marks toward remission there. He knew the days he had to serve, and used to nick them off every night on his wooden spoon. It was a weary way from a thousand back, back, back to one. And that Jim-the-ladder took delight in keeping up the count by reports. The poor boy wanted to die in his mother's arms. He had got his time down to a week, when the 'screw' clapped as many marks on to him as added a month to his imprisonment. Then he lost heart, and dropped down like a flounder, and when they picked him up he was dead."

"Was B 2001 with him as usual?"

"He was; and he broke the strap, sprung on the warder, and tore his rifle out of his hands. Jim-the-ladder has been a prize-fighter in his day, and there was a tussle. He leaped back on B 2001 with a howl, and the blows fell like rain-drops. There was a fearful clamor, the convicts screaming like madmen."

"B 2001 is a powerful man," said Hugh Ritson.

The doctor nodded.

"He closed with the warder, gripped him by the waist, twisted him on his loins, turned him heels overhead, and brought him down in a sweep that would have battered the life out of any other man. Up came the civil guard, and the convict was brought into the lodge covered with dust, sweat and blood, his eyes flashing like balls of fire. They had the lad's body on a stretcher beside him, the lips white, and the cheeks a mask of blue. It was a tremendous spectacle, I can tell you."

Hugh Ritson's breast heaved, and somewhere deep down in his soul he surprised a feeling of pride. That man was a hero and his own brother!

"And so the convict was punished?"

"Fourteen days' penal class diet, and marks enough for six months. He'll be out on Monday, and then he'll wear the blue cap that denotes a dangerous man."

Hugh Ritson shuddered.

"Is it impossible to see him to-morrow?" he asked.

"Come up before church in the morning and ask for me, and we'll speak to the governor."

CHAPTER XIV.

Early next morning Hugh Ritson showed his order at the prison gates, and was admitted to the doctor's quarters. Hugh and the doctor went in search of the governor, but learned that he was away from home for the day. The deputy-governor was abed with a raging tooth, and there was nothing to do but to wait until morning in order to speak with the convict.

"You can stay here until to-morrow," said the doctor; "I can give you a shake-down. And now let us go off to church. But come this way first."

They walked in the direction of that portion of the parade-ground which was marked, in great white letters, "34 gang," with the broad arrow beneath. Near to this stood a building composed chiefly of wood and iron, and marked in similar letters "E Hall." They entered a corridor that led to an open landing in the shape of a many-sided polygon, each side being a door. In the middle of the landing there was an iron circular staircase that led to landings above and below. A warder paraded the open space, which was lighted by gas-jets.

"Hush! Look," said the doctor, standing by the peep-hole in one of the doors, and at the same time putting out the gas-jet that burned on the door-jamb.

Hugh Ritson approached, and at first he could see nothing in the darkness. But he heard a curious clanking noise from within. Then the glimmer of a feeble candle came through the bars, and he saw a box-like apartment, some seven feet long by four feet broad and eight feet high. It was a punishment cell. There was a shelf at the opposite end, and a tin wash-basin stood on it.

On the side of the door there must have been a similar shelf, on which the candle burned. A broom, a can, and a bowl were on the brick floor. There was no other furniture except a hammock swung from end to end, and the convict was lying in it at this moment. It could be seen that a heavy chain was fastened with riveted rings around each ankle, and linked about the waist by a strap. At every movement this chain clanked; night and day it was there; if the prisoner shifted in his sleep, its grating sound broke on the silence of the cell, and banished the only sunshine of his life, the sunshine of his dreams. His head was back to the door so that the light of the candle burning on the shelf might fall on a slate which rested on his breast. Though he occupied a punishment cell he was writing, and Hugh Ritson's quick eyes could decipher the words: "Oh, that it would please God to destroy me; that He would but loose His hand and cut me off! Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" He paused in his writing and pecked like a bird at a hard piece of bread beside him.

Hugh Ritson fell back, and as his infirm foot grated along the floor, the convict started and turned his face. It was a blank, pale face, full of splendid resolution and the nobility of suffering, but without one ray of hope.

"Do you know him?" asked the doctor.

But Hugh Ritson's eyes were on the ground, and he made no answer.

They went to church. The civil guard was drawn up under the gallery with loaded rifles. Eight hundred convicts attended service; some of them were penitent; most of them were trying to make a high profession of contrition as a bid for the good graces of the chaplain. The obtrusive reverence of one sinister gray-head near at hand attracted Hugh Ritson's especial attention. He knelt with his face to the gallery in which the choir sat. Beside him was a youth fresh from Millbank. The hoary sinner was evidently initiating the green hand into the mysteries of his new home. He was loud in his responses, but his voice had a trick of dropping suddenly to a whispered conference.

"Who's the fat 'un in the choir? A chap as is doing his ten. His missis chared to keep the kids, and one morning early he popped the old girl's shoes."

The voice of the chaplain interrupted further explanation; but after another loud response the old rascal's mouth was twisted awry with the words:

"He's a wide 'un, he is—seat in the choir got comfortable cushions. Besides, he gets off Saturday morning's work for practicing—got no more voice nor a corn-crake."

Evidently it was no disadvantage here to be the greatest of vagabonds. When a cadaverous old Jew came hobbling up the aisle with his gang, the gray-head whispered, with awe:

"It's old Mo; he's in the stocking gang; but I did business with him when he could ha' sent old Rothschild home for a pauper."

At one moment the attention of the green hand was arrested by a tall man in the black and gray that indicated a convict who had attempted to escape.

"Says he's in for twenty thousand, but it's a lie," whispered the old man; "he only knocked a living out of the religious fake."

The last of the conference that Hugh Ritson overheard was a piece of touching advice.

"Them as 'as any pluck in 'em turns savage, same as B 2001; them as 'asn't, knocks under, same

as me; and I says to you, knock under."

After service the sacrament was celebrated. There must have been many hundreds of communicants, all humble in their piety. It could be noticed that the chaplain had sometimes to keep a tight grip of the goblet containing the wine.

That night Hugh Ritson lodged at the doctor's quarters. He did not lie, but, as on the night before, he walked the long hours through, steadfastly resisting every temptation to sleep. At five in the morning he heard the great bell at the gate ring for two minutes, and, shortly afterward, the tramp, tramp, tramp of many feet under his window. The convicts, to the number of fifteen hundred, were drawn up on the parade-ground. They looked chill in the cold light of early morning; their gray jackets lay loose on their spare shoulders; their hands hung inertly at their sides, and they walked with the oscillating motion of men whose feet were sore in their heavy boots. The civil guard was drawn up, the chief warder whistled, and then the men fell out into gangs of twenty-five each, attended by an assistant warder.

"Rear rank, take two paces to the right—march."

Then the tramp, tramp again. As the outside gangs passed through the gate, each officer in charge received his rifle, bayonet, belt, and cartridge-box from the armorer at the lodge. The stone-dressing gang passed close under the window, and Hugh Ritson reeled back as one of the men—a stalwart fellow in a blue cap, who was walking abreast of a misshapen creature with a face full of ferocity—lifted his eyes upward from the file.

At eight o'clock the governor appeared at his receiving-office. He was a slight man with the face and figure of a greyhound. His military frock-coat was embossed with Crimean medals, and he was redolent of the odor of Whitehall. He received Hugh Ritson's papers with a curious mixture of easy courtesy and cold dignity—a sort of combination of the different manners in which he was wont to bow to a secretary of state and condemn a convict to the chain and bread and water.

"The men are back to breakfast at nine," he said. "Watkins," to the chief warder, "have B 2001 brought round to the office immediately 34 gang returns."

Hugh Ritson had left the receiving-office and was crossing the parade-ground when a loud hubbub arose near the lodge.

"The boat!" shouted twenty voices, and a covey of convicts ran in the direction of a shed where an eight-oar boat was kept on the chocks. "A man has mizzled—run a wagon into the sea and is drifting down the race."

How the demons laughed, how they cursed in jest, how they worked, how luminous were their eyes and haggard faces at the prospect of recapturing one of their fellow-prisoners who had tried to make his escape! Every convict who helped to catch a fugitive was entitled to a remission of six days. The doctor took Hugh Ritson up on to the lead flat that covered his quarters. From that altitude they could see over the prison wall to the rocky coast beyond. Near the ruins of the old church a gang of convicts were running to and fro, waving their hands, and shouting in wild excitement.

"It's gang 34," said the doctor, "Jim-the-ladder's gang."

The sun had risen, the sea was glistening in its million facets, and into many a rolling wave a sea-bird dipped its corded throat. In the silvery water-way there was something floating that looked as if it might have been a tub. It was the wagon that the convict had driven into the water for a boat.

"It will sink—it's shod with thick hoops of iron," said the doctor.

The convict could be seen standing in it. He had thrown off his coat and cap, and his sleeveless arms were bare to the armpits. The civil guard ran to the cliff and fired. One shot hit. The man could be seen to tear the coarse linen shirt from his breast and bind it above the wrist.

"Why does he not crouch down?" said Hugh Ritson: he did not know who this convict was, but in his heart there was a feverish desire that the prisoner should escape.

"He's a doomed man—he's in the race—it's flowing hard, and he'll drift back to the island," said the doctor.

Half an hour later a posse of the civil guard, with two assistant warders, brought the recaptured fugitive into the governor's receiving-office. The stalwart fellow strode between the warders with a firm step and head erect. He wore no jacket or cap, and on one bare arm a strip of linen was roughly tied. His breast was naked, his eyes were aflame, and save for a black streak of blood across the cheek, his face was ashy pale. But that man was not crushed by his misfortunes; he seemed to crush them.

"Take that man's number," said the governor.

"Ay, take it, and see you take it rightly," said the convict.

"It's B 2001," said the chief warder.

The governor consulted a paper that lay on his table.

"Send for the gentleman," he said to an attendant. "It's well for you that you are wanted by the law officers of the Crown," he added, turning to the prisoner.

The convict made no answer; he was neither humble nor sullen; his manner was frank but fierce, and made almost brutal by a sense of wrong.

The next moment Hugh Ritson stepped into the office. His eyes dropped, and his infirm foot trailed heavily along the floor. He twitched at his coat with nervous fingers; his nostrils quivered; his whole body trembled perceptibly.

"This is the man," said the chief warder, with a deferential bow.

Hugh Ritson tried to raise his eyes, but they fell suddenly. He opened his lips to speak, but the words would not come. And meantime the wet, soiled, naked, close-cropped, blood-stained convict, flanked by armed warders, stood before him with head erect and eyes that searched his soul. The convict rested one hand on his hip and pointed with the other at Hugh Ritson's abject figure.

"What does this man want with me?" he said, and his voice was deep.

At that Hugh Ritson broke in impetuously:

"Paul, I will not outrage your sufferings by offering you my pity."

The officers looked into each other's faces.

"I want none of your pity!" said the convict, bitterly.

"No; it is I who need yours," said Hugh Ritson, in a low tone.

The convict laughed a hard laugh, and turned to the warders.

"Here, take me away—I've had enough of this."

"Listen. I have something to say to you—something to do for you, too."

The convict broke afresh into a laugh.

"Take me away, will you?"

"What if I say I am sorry for the past?" said Hugh.

"Then you are a hypocrite!" the convict answered.

Hugh Ritson drew himself up, and took his breath audibly. In one swift instant his face became discolored and his features pinched and rigid. There was silence, and then in a low, broken tone, he said:

"Paul, you know well what sort of a man I am; don't drive me too hard. I have come here to do you a service. Remember your sufferings—"

Once again the convict broke into a cold laugh.

"Remember that others—one other—may be suffering with you."

The convict's haughty look fled like a flash of light.

"Here, take me out of this," he muttered in a low, hoarse voice. He took a step back, but the guard closed around him. "I won't stand to listen to this man. Do you hear? I won't listen," he said hotly; "he has come to torture me—that's all!"

"I have come to undo what I have done," said Hugh. "Paul, let me undo it. Don't rouse the bad part of me at this crisis of your life and mine."

The convict paused, and said more quietly:

"Then it's your policy to undo it."

Hugh Ritson flinched. The words had gone to his heart like a spear. If he had dared to mask his motive, that thrust would have left it naked.

"I will not wrong the truth by saying I am a changed man," he answered meekly. "My motive is my own; but my act shall be all in all to you."

The convict's face lightened.

"You have used me for your vengeance," he said; "you shall not use me for your contrition also. Guards, let me out—let me out, I tell you!"

The governor interposed:

"When you leave this room you go direct to the cells."

"Ay, take me to your cells, and let me lie there and die and rot," said the convict.

"Take him away," said the governor.

"Paul, I beseech you to hear me!" cried Hugh, amid the clanking of the arms of the guard.

"Take him away!" the governor shouted again.

An hour after, B 2001 was recalled to the receiving-office. He was quiet enough now.

"We have an order respecting you from the Secretary of State," said the governor. "You are required to give evidence at a trial. At two o'clock you leave Portland for Cumberland, and your guard goes with you."

The convict bent his head and went out in silence.

CHAPTER XV.

Paul Ritson—let him be known by his official number no more—was not taken to the punishment cells. He was set to work with the stone-dressing gang stationed near the gate of the prison. The news of his attempt to escape had not spread more rapidly than rumors of his approaching departure.

"I say," shouted a hoary convict, "take a crooked message out?"

"What's your message?"

"On'y a word to the old girl telling her where she'll find a bunch of keys as she wants partic'lar."

"Write her yourself, my man."

"What, and the governor read it, and me get a bashing, and the crushers pinch the old moll? Well, I am surprised at ye; but I forgot, you're a straight man, you are."

A mocking laugh followed this explanatory speech.

A young fellow with a pale, meek face and the startled eyes of a hare crept close up to where Paul Ritson worked, and took a letter out of one of his boots.

"This is the last I had from home," he said, quietly, and put the letter into Paul's hands.

It was a soiled and crumpled paper, so greasy from frequent handlings and so much worn by many foldings that the writing could scarcely be deciphered. Home? It was dated from the Union of Liverpool, and had come from his invalid wife and his children, all living there.

The poor fellow could not read, but he had somehow learned the letter by heart, and was able to point out each bit of family history in the exact place where it was recorded.

He had lost his class privileges, and was not allowed to reply; and now he wanted to know if Paul Ritson could get down to Liverpool and see his wife and little ones, and tell them how well he was, and how lusty he looked, and what fine times he had of it—"just to keep up their spirits, you know."

"I say, you sir," bawled a sinister gray-head—the same whose conversation was overheard in church—"I hear as you're a employer of labor when yer not lagged. Any chance? I wants to leave my sitivation. Long hours, and grub reg'lar onsatisfactory. Besides, my present employer insists on me wearing a collar with a number—same as a wild beast or a bobby. It's gettin' ridic'lus. So I've give notice, and I flit in September. Maybe ye see as I'm growing my wings to fly." The hoary sinner pointed upward to his grizzly hair, which was longer than the hair of his comrades. "On'y it's coming out another tint o' awrburn nor what it was ten years ago, and the old woman won't have the same pride in my pussonal appearance."

At two o'clock the assistant warder known as Jim-the-ladder marched Paul Ritson to the chief warder's office. There the convict was handcuffed and the warder armed. Then they set out.

On the steamboat that plied between the Portland Ferry and Weymouth the convict dress attracted much attention. The day was some sort of chapel festival, and great numbers of chapel people in holiday costume crowded the decks and climbed the paddle-boxes; the weather was brilliant; the sun danced on the waters like countless fairies on a floor of glass; a brass band played on the bridge.

Again at the Weymouth railway station the people gathered in little groups, and looked askance at the convict. During the few minutes which elapsed before the train left the platform, a knot of spectators stood before the carriage and peered in at the window.

Paul Ritson paid little heed to these attentions, but they were often unwelcome enough. "Keep clear of him—see the blue cap?" "What an ill-looking fellow—to be sure, his looks are enough to hang him."

Paul laughed bitterly. His heart felt cold within him at that moment. If he had worn broadcloth and a smile, how different the popular verdict might have been. Who then would have said that he was a villain? Certainly not yonder sleek minister of Christ who was humming a psalm tune a moment ago, and paused to whisper, "Be sure your sin will find you out." The black-coated

Pharisee was handing a lady into a first-class carriage.

The train started. Paul threw himself back in his seat, and thought of all that had occurred since he made this journey before. He was traveling in the other direction then, and what an agony was that first experience of convict life! He had never thought of it from that day to this.

Other and more poignant memories had day after day obliterated the recollection of that experience. But it came back now as freshly as if it had all occurred yesterday. He was one of a gang of twenty who were traveling from Millbank to Dartmoor. The journey to Waterloo in the prison van had been a terrible ordeal. He had thought in the cells that it would be nothing to him if people in the streets recognized him. The shameful punishment of an innocent man was not his, but the law's disgrace.

Yet, when he was marched out into the prison grounds abreast of a cadaverous wretch with shrunken brows and the eyes of a hawk, an old thief in front of him, and a murderer convicted of manslaughter treading on his heels, the cold sweat burst in great beads from his forehead.

He had meant to hold up his head, and if people looked into his face to look frankly back into their faces. But when his turn came he leaped into the van, and his chin buried itself in his breast.

Then the crowds drawn up on the pavement outside as the gates rolled back and the van passed through; the crush in a busy thoroughfare when the van stopped to let a line of crowded omnibuses go by; the horrible scene at the station when the convicts were marched down the platform, and every ear was arrested by the tramp, tramp of twenty fettered men!

Above all, the jests and the laughter of the older hands who had served their time before, and were superior to all small considerations of public shame! "I say, you with the gig-lamps, toss a poor devil a bit o' 'bacco." "Seen us afore? In coorse you have. You in the white choker, look hard while yer at it, and you'll know us again." "Oh, Mother Shipton, and is that yourself? and how pleased we is to see ye, and just tip us yer welwet purse, and we'll give it yer back when we're this way again." And not all the rigor of the attendant warders was enough to suppress such jesting.

Paul Ritson could not forbear to laugh aloud when he remembered with what an agony of sweat he had that day crept back into his seat.

Times had changed since then. He had spent a year and a half in a government school, and had been educated out of all torturing delicacy.

The warder attempted to draw him into conversation. Jim-the-ladder repeatedly protested that he bore no malice. "I'm a good fellow at bottom," he said more than once, and Paul Ritson showed no malice. But he laughed bitterly at a grim and an obvious thought that the warder's dubious words suggested. Failing in his efforts at conciliation, the warder charged his pipe and relapsed into a long silence.

They had a compartment to themselves. At a station where the train stopped a man opened the door and had already put one foot into the carriage when he recognized the caste of his traveling companions. He disappeared in a twinkling. Paul Ritson did his best to restrain the anger that well-nigh choked him. He merely sent a ringing laugh after the retreating figure. At another station a police inspector, dressed in a little brief authority, caught sight of the blue cap and gray jacket, and hustled up to examine the warder's papers. Then, with a lofty look, he strode through the group of spectators whom his presence had attracted.

Arrived at Waterloo, the warder hailed a cab, and they drove to Scotland Yard to report themselves. There they supped on cocoa and brown bread, with the addition of a rasher of bacon and a pipe for the warder. Thence they were driven to Euston to catch the nine-o'clock train to Penrith.

The journey north was uneventful. At Rugby, Stafford, and elsewhere, the train stopped, and little groups of people looked in at the convict, and made apposite comments on his appearance, crime, and condition. Paul Ritson often shut his eyes and said nothing. Sometimes a sneer curled his lip, sometimes he burst into a bitter laugh. He was thinking that this was a fitting close to the degradation of his prison life. If one feeling of delicacy, one tender sentiment, one impulse of humanity remained to him when the gates of Portland closed behind him; it only required this cruel torture to crush it forever.

In spite of the risk of dismissal and the more immediate danger at the hands of Paul Ritson, the warder coiled himself up and fell asleep. It was after midnight when they reached Crewe, and from that point of the journey the worst of the torment ceased. Their merciful fellow-men were mostly in bed, dreaming of heroic deeds that they were doing. But the silence of night had its own torture. As the train rumbled on through the darkness, now rattling in a long tunnel, now sliding into open air like a boat into still water, Paul Ritson's mind went back to the day which seemed now to be so far away that it might have belonged to another existence, when he traveled this road with the dear soul who had trusted her young and cloudless life to his keeping. Where was she now? Peace be with her, wheresoever she was! He recalled her tenderest glance, he seemed to hear her softest tone; the light pressure of her delicate fingers was now on his hands—the hard hands that wore the irons. And even at that moment, when all his soul went out to the pure young wife who had shared his sufferings, and he felt as if time and space were nothing, as

if he had drawn her to him by the power of his yearning love, it seemed to him that all at once there rang in his ears the shrill, sharp voices of the convicts rapping out their foul and frightful oaths.

He leaped to his feet, with a muttered oath on his own lips, and when the imagined agony with which he surprised himself had given way to a new sense of his actual sufferings, his heart grew yet more cold and bitter. He thought of what he had been and of what he was. There could be no disguising the truth—he was a worse man. Yes; whatsoever had once been pure in him, whatsoever had once been generous, whatsoever had once been of noble aspiration, was now impure, and ungenerous, and ignoble. Above all else, he had lost that tenderness which is the top and crown of a strong man. He felt as if the world had lifted its hand against him, and as if he were ready and eager to strike back.

They reached Penrith toward four in the morning, and then the carriage in which they traveled was shunted on to the branch line to await the first train toward Cockermouth. The day was breaking. From the window Paul Ritson could see vaguely the few ruins of the castle. That familiar object touched him strangely. He hardly knew why, but he felt that a hard lump at his heart melted away. By and by the brakeman shouted to the signalman in the gray silence of the morning. The words were indifferent—only some casual message—but they were spoken in the broad Cumbrian that for a year and a half had never once fallen on Paul Ritson's ear. Then the lump that had melted as his heart seemed to rise to his throat.

The gray light become intermingled with red, and soon the sky to the east was aflame. Paul let down the carriage window, and long waves of sweet mountain air, laden with the smell of peat, flowed in upon him. His lips parted and his breast expanded. At five o'clock the engine was attached. A few carriages were added at the platform, and these contained a number of pitmen, in their red-stained fustian, going down for the morning shift. When the train moved westward, the sun had risen, and all the air was musical with the songs of the birds. Very soon the train ran in among the mountains, and then at last the bitterness of Paul Ritson's heart seemed to fall away from him like a garment. That quick thrill of soul which comes when the mountains are first seen after a long absence is a rapture known to the mountaineer alone. Paul saw his native hills towering up to the sky, the white mists flying off their bald crown, the torrents leaping down their brant sides, and the tears filled his eyes and blotted it all out. The sedge-warbler was singing with the wheatear, and, though he could not see them now, he knew where they were: the sedge-warbler was flitting among the rushes of the low-land mere; the wheatear was perched on the crevice of gray rock in which it had laid its pale-blue eggs; the sheep were bleating on the fells, and he knew their haunts by the lea of the boulders and along the rocky ledges where grew the freshest grasses. Down the corries of Blencathra, long drifts of sheep were coming before the dogs, and he knew that the shepherds had been out on the fells during the short summer night, numbering the sheep for the washing in the beck below.

Everything came back upon him like a memory of yesterday. He stood up and thrust out his head, and did not think of his gray jacket and blue cap until a carter who watered his horses at a pool near the railway lines started and stared as if he had seen a "boggle" at noonday.

Then Paul Ritson remembered that he was still a convict, that his hands wore irons, that the man who lay sleeping on the seat of the carriage was his warder, and that the steely thing that peeped from the belt of the sleeping man was a revolver, to be promptly used if he attempted to escape.

But not even these reflections sufficed to dissipate the emotion that had taken hold of him. He began at length to think of Hugh Ritson, and to wonder why he had been brought back home. Home!—home? It was a melancholy home-coming, but it was coming home, nevertheless.

CHAPTER XVI.

Two days later the gray old town-hall that stands in the market-place of Keswick was surrounded by a busy throng. The Civil Court of the County Assize was sitting in this little place for the nonce to try a curious case of local interest. It was an action for ejectment brought by Greta, Mrs. Paul Ritson, against a defendant whose name was entered on the sheet as Paul Drayton, alias Paul Ritson, now of the Ghyll, in the Parish of Newlands.

The court-room was crowded. It was a large, bare room, with a long table and two rows of chairs crossing the end, the one row occupied by the judge and a special jury, the other by the lawyers for the prosecution and defense. The rest of the chamber was not provided with seats, and there the dalespeople huddled together.

A seat had been found for Greta at one end of the table. Her cheek rested on her hand. She dropped her eyes as the spectators craned their necks to catch a glimpse of her. Behind her, and with one hand on her chair-back, stood the old parson, his Jovian white head more white than of old, the tenderer lines in his mellow face drawn down to a look of pain. Immediately facing Greta, at the opposite end of the table, Hugh Ritson sat. One leg was thrown over the other knee, and the long, nervous fingers of the right hand played with the shoelace. His head was inclined forward, and the thin, pallid, clean-cut face with the great calm eyes and the full, dilated nostrils was more than ever the face of a high-bred horse. None would have guessed the purpose with

which Hugh Ritson sat there. One would have said that indifference was in those eyes and on that brow—indifference or despair.

Near where the rustle was loudest and most frequent among the spectators, Drayton sat by the side of Mr. Bonnithorne. He was dressed in his favorite suit of broad plaid, and had a gigantic orange-lily stuck jauntily in his buttonhole. His face was flushed and his eyes sparkled. Now and again he leaned back to whisper something to the blacksmith, the miller, and the landlord of the Flying Horse, who were grouped behind him. His remarks must have been wondrously facetious, for they were promptly followed by a low gurgle, which was as promptly suppressed.

The counsel for the plaintiff opened his case. The plaintiff sued as the owner in succession to her husband, who was at present dead to the law. She contended that the man who now stood seized of the Ghyll was not her husband, Paul Ritson, but Paul Drayton, an innkeeper of Hendon, who bore him a strange personal resemblance, and personated him. The evidence of identity which should presently be adduced was full and complete in the essential particular of proving that the defendant was not Paul Ritson, by whose title alone the defense would maintain the right of present possession. Unhappily, the complementary evidence as to the actual identity of the defendant with Paul Drayton, the publican, had been seriously curtailed by the blindness, followed by the death, of an important witness. Still, if he, the counsel for the plaintiff, could prove to the satisfaction of the jury that the defendant was not the man he represented himself to be, they would have no course but to grant the ejectment for which the plaintiff asked. To this end he would call two witnesses whose evidence must outweigh that of all others—the wife of Paul Ritson, and the clergyman who solemnized the marriage.

Greta's name was called, and she rose at the end of the table. Her bosom heaved under the small lace shawl that covered her shoulders, and was knotted like a sailor's scarf, on her breast. She stood erect, her eyes raised slightly and her drooping hands clasped in front. After the customary formalities, she was examined.

"You are the only child of the late Robert Lowther?"

"I am the daughter of Robert Lowther."

Drayton threw back his head, and laughed a little.

"You were married to Paul Ritson in 1875 at the parish church of Newlands, the minister being the Reverend Mr. Christian?"

"I was."

"On the day of your marriage you accompanied your husband to London, and the same night he left you at the Convent of St. Margaret, Westminster?"

"That is quite true."

There was a buzz of conversation in the court, accompanied by a whispered conference on the bench. Counsel paused to say that it was not a part of his purpose to trouble the court with an explanation of facts which were so extraordinary that they could only be credited on the oath of a person who, though present, would not be called. At this reference Hugh Ritson raised his languid eyes, and the examination proceeded.

"Three days afterward you received a message from your husband, requesting you to meet him at St. Pancras Station, and return with him to Cumberland by the midnight train?"

"I did."

"Who took you the message?"

"Mrs. Drayton, the old person at the inn at Hendon."

"You went to the station?"

"Oh, yes."

"Tell the court what occurred there."

"Just on the stroke of twelve, when the train was about to leave, a man whom at first sight I mistook for my husband came hurrying up the platform, and I stepped into the carriage with him."

"Do you see that man in court?"

"Yes; he sits two seats to your right."

Drayton rose, smiled broadly, bowed to the witness, and resumed his seat.

"Were you alone in the compartment?"

"At first we were; but just as the train was moving away who should join us but Parson Christian."

There was another buzz of conversation, and counsel paused again to say that he should not trouble the court with an explanation of the extraordinary circumstances by which Parson Christian came to be in London at that critical moment. These facts formed in themselves a chain of evidence which must yet come before a criminal court, involving as it did the story of a

conspiracy more painful and unnatural perhaps than could be found in the annals of jurisprudence.

"Tell the court what passed in the train."

"I perceived at once that the man was not my husband, though strangely like him in face and figure, and when he addressed me as his wife I repulsed him."

"Did Parson Christian also realize the mistake?"

"Oh, yes, but not quite so quickly."

"What did you do?"

"We left the train at the first station at which it stopped."

"Did the defendant offer any resistance?"

"No; he looked abashed, and merely observed that perhaps a recent illness had altered him."

Counsel for the defense, at whose left Mr. Bonnithorne sat as attorney for the defendant, cross-examined the witness.

"You say that on the night following the morning of your marriage your husband left you at a convent?"

"I do."

Mr. Bonnithorne dropped his twinkling eyes, and muttered something that was inaudible to the witness. There was a titter among the people who stood behind him.

"And you say that Mrs. Drayton took you the message of which you have spoken. Did she tell you that your husband had been ill?"

"She did."

"We are to infer that you visited the house of the Draytons at Hendon?"

"A railway accident drove us there."

"Did any one accompany the defendant to St. Pancras that night?"

"My husband's brother, Mr. Hugh Ritson, was with him."

"Tell the jury where your husband now is, if he is not at this moment in court."

No answer. Amid a profound silence the plaintiff's lawyer was understood to object to the question.

"Well, we can afford to waive it," said counsel, with a superior smile. "One further question, Mrs. Ritson. Had you any misunderstanding with your husband?"

"None whatever."

"Will you swear that your voices were not raised in angry dispute while you were at the inn at Hendon?"

Greta lifted her head and her eyes flashed. "Yes, I will swear it," she said in a soft voice but with impressive emphasis.

Mr. Bonnithorne reached up to the ear of counsel and was understood to say that perhaps the point was too delicate to be pressed.

Parson Christian was next examined. The defendant in the present action was not the man whom he married to the plaintiff. He had since seen Paul Ritson. Where? In the convict prison of Dartmoor. In cross-examination he was asked by what name the convict was known to the directors of Dartmoor. Paul Drayton.

"Then tell the court how you came to identify the defendant as Drayton."

"There were many facts pointing that way."

"Give us one."

"On the morning of the marriage I found a letter lying open before the fire in my vestry. It was from Mr. Hugh Ritson to Mr. Bonnithorne, and it mentioned the name of Drayton in a connection which, by the light of later revelations, provoked many inferences."

Mr. Bonnithorne was unprepared for this answer. Counsel looked at him inquiringly, but the attorney glanced down and colored deeply.

"Can you show us the letter?"

"No; I left it where I found it."

"Then it can hardly be received as evidence."

The attorney smiled, and the tension of Drayton's face relaxed. There was a slight shuffle among the people; the witness had stepped back.

Counsel for the defense opened his case. They were asked to believe that the defendant in the present action was Paul Drayton, in the teeth of the fact that Paul Drayton was at that moment a convict in a convict prison. The incredible statement was made that a newly married husband had placed his young wife in a convent on the night of their marriage, and that when they should have rejoined each other an interchange had been made, the husband going to prison in another man's name, the other man coming to Cumberland to claim the place of the woman's husband. Moreover, they were asked to believe that the husband's brother, Mr. Hugh Ritson, had either been fooled by the impostor or made a party to the imposture. Happily it was easy to establish identity by two unquestionable chains of evidence—resemblance and memory. It would be shown that the defendant could be none other than Paul Ritson, first, because he resembled him exactly in person; second, because he knew all that Paul Ritson ought to know; third, because he knew nothing that Paul Ritson might not know. No two men's lives had ever been the same from the beginning of the world, and as it would be seen that the defendant's life had been the same as Paul Ritson's, it followed that Paul Ritson and the defendant were one and the same man.

Dick o' the Syke was the first witness examined for the defense. He swore that Paul Ritson was active in extinguishing a fire that broke out in the mill two years ago; that he had climbed to the cross-trees with a hatchet; and that within the past month the defendant had described to him the precise locality and shape of the gap made in the roof by the fire. No one could have known so much except himself and the man who stood on the cross-trees. That man was Paul Ritson, and he was there and then recognized by many spectators, among whom was Parson Christian.

The next witness was Mistress Calvert, of the Pack Horse. Paul Ritson had slept at their house one night two years ago, and a few days since the present defendant had pointed out the bedroom he occupied, and recalled the few words of conversation which passed between them.

Natt, the stableman, was called. His sleepy eyes blinked knowingly as he explained that one winter's night, when the snow fell heavily, Mrs. Ritson, then Miss Greta, was startled by what she mistook for the ghost of Paul Ritson. The witness had not been so easily deceived, and the defendant had since described to him the exact scene and circumstances of what the lady had thought to be the ghostly appearance.

Then followed John Proudfoot, the blacksmith; Tom o' Dint, the postman; Giles Raisley, the pitman; Job Sheepshanks, the mason; and Tommy Lowthwaite, the landlord of the Flying Horse—all swearing to points of identity.

One recalled the fact that Paul Ritson had a scar on his head that was caused by the kick of a horse when he was a boy. The defendant had just such a scar.

Another remembered that Paul Ritson had a mark on the sole of his right foot which had been made by treading on a sharp piece of rock on Hindscarth. The defendant had exactly such a mark.

A third had wrestled with Paul Ritson, and knew that he had a mole beneath the left shoulder-blade on the back. The defendant had a mole in that unusual place.

Counsel for the defense smiled blandly at the special jury, the special jury smiled blandly at counsel for the defense. Was it really necessary that the defendant should be called? Surely it was a pity to occupy the time of the court. The whole case was in a nutshell—the lady had quarreled with her husband. State of affairs would be promptly gauged when it was explained that this action had been raised to anticipate a forthcoming suit in the divorce court for restitution of connubial rights.

The counsel for the plaintiff smiled also, and his was a weak smile of conscious defeat. He stammered a desire to withdraw—said he had been promised more conclusive evidence when he undertook the case, and sat down with an apologetic air.

There was a shuffle of feet in the court. Drayton had risen to receive the congratulations of his friends behind him and the cordial nods of some of the superior people who had been favored with seats at the right hand and left of the judge. He was answering in a loud tone, when there was a sudden lull of the buzz of gossip, and all eyes were directed toward one end of the table.

Hugh Ritson had risen from his seat, and with a face that was very pale, but as firm as a rock, he was engaged in a whispered conference with the plaintiff's counsel. That gentleman's eager face betrayed the keenest possible interest in what he heard. Presently he lifted his arm with an impatient gesture, and said:

"My lord, I have unexpectedly come into possession of new and most important evidence."

"Of what nature?" asked the judge.

"If it is conceivable," said counsel, "that in any question of personal identity the court will accept the evidence of all the tinkers and tailors, the riff-raff, the raggabash of the country-side, and reject that of the wife of the man whose estate is in question, perhaps it will be allowed that there are three persons who are essential to this examination—the brother of Paul Ritson, the defendant who claims to be Paul Ritson, and the convict who is suffering penal servitude in the name of Paul Drayton. I might name one other whose evidence might be yet more conclusive than

that of any of these alone—the mother of Paul Ritson; but she is unhappily dead to the world."

Drayton was still on his feet, riveted to the spot where he stood. Obtuse as he was, he saw at a glance what had occurred. In all his calculations this chance had never suggested itself—that Hugh Ritson would risk the personal danger to bring him down.

"Can you put these persons into the witness-box?"

"My lord, it is, I presume, within the liberties of the defendant to keep carefully out of that box, but the court will not refuse to hear the evidence of the two persons of whom I speak—the brother of Paul Ritson and the convict known as Paul Drayton."

At this there was high commotion. Greta had leaned back in her chair, her bosom heaving, her face shadowed by lines of pain. Parson Christian stood behind her with a blank expression of bewilderment. Drayton's brows were tightened and his lips were drawn hard.

"None of their criss-crossin' for me," he muttered.

"You can ask for a new trial," said the judge.

"My lord, another case is pending, and on the issue in this case the other case must largely depend."

"How far has the present one proceeded?"

"The defendant's case is not yet completed."

During this scene Hugh Ritson had stood quietly by the table. He remained there with complete self-possession while counsel proceeded to explain that four days ago, in anticipation of this action and of another that had been threatened, a statutory declaration had been made in the presence of the Home Secretary and the law officers of the Crown. The first result of that statement was that the convict Drayton was now present in the court-house ready to appear at this trial.

The judge signified his desire that the convict might be brought in and heard.

Hugh Ritson motioned to a tall man who stood near, and immediately afterward a door was thrown open and another man stepped into the court-room.

Every eye was fixed upon him. He wore a convict's gray jacket, with the round badge marked "3. B 2001. P S," and the broad arrow beneath. His face was pale and rigid; his large eyes glittered; he was in his full manhood, but his close-cropped hair was slightly tinged with gray. He pushed his way through the people, who fell back to let him pass. When he reached the table he tapped it impatiently with one of his hands, which were fettered, and threw up his head with a glance of defiance. His whole bearing was that of a strong man who believed that every man's hand was against him, and who intended to let it be seen that his own hand was against every man's.

Counsel rose again, and asked that the defendant's witnesses might be recalled. This was done.

"John Proudfoot, Job Sheepshanks, Thomas Lowthwaite, Giles Raisley, look this way. Who is this man?"

There was a dead hush. Then, one by one, the men who had been named shook their heads. They did not know the convict. Indeed, he was terribly altered. The ordeal of the past two years had plowed strange lines in his face. At that moment he was less like himself than was the impostor who came there to personate him.

Hugh Ritson's manner did not change. Only a slight curl of the lip betrayed his feelings.

Counsel continued, "Is there any one in court who recognizes him?"

Not a voice responded. All was silence.

"Will the defendant stand side by side with him?"

Drayton leaped up with a boisterous laugh, and swaggered his way to the opposite side of the table. As he approached, the convict looked at him keenly.

"Will Mrs. Ritson come forward again?"

Greta had already risen, and was holding Parson Christian's hand with a nervous grip. She stepped apart, and going behind the two men, she came to a stand between them. On the one side stood Drayton, with a smirking face half turned toward the spectators; on the other stood the convict, his hands bound before him, his defiant glance softened to a look of tenderness, and his lips parted with the unuttered cry that was ready to burst from them.

"Greta," said Hugh Ritson, in a low tone of indescribable pathos, "which of these men is your husband?"

Counsel repeated the question in form.

Greta had slowly raised her eyes from the ground until they reached the convict's face. Then in an instant, in a flash of light, with the quick cry of a startled bird, she flung herself on his neck. Her fair head dropped on the frieze of the convict's jacket, and her sobs were all that broke the

silence.

Hugh Ritson's emotion surged in his throat, but he stood quietly at the table. Only his slight figure swayed a little and his face quivered. His work was not yet done.

"This is the answer of nature," he said quietly.

Hugh Ritson was put into the witness-box, and in a voice that was full and strong, and that penetrated every corner of the court, he identified the convict as his brother, Paul Ritson.

Counsel for the defense had seemed to be stunned. Recovering himself, he tried to smile, and said:

"After this melodramatic interlude, perhaps I may be allowed to ask our new witness a few questions. Did you, at the Central Criminal Court, held at the Old Bailey in 1875, swear that the person who stands here in the dress of a convict was not Paul Ritson?"

"I did."

"Now for my second question. Did you also swear that the defendant was your brother, and therefore not Paul Drayton."

"I did."

"Then you were guilty of perjury at that time, or you are guilty of perjury now?"

"I was guilty of perjury then."

The judge interposed and asked if the witness was awakened to the enormity of the crime to which he confessed. Hugh Ritson bent his head.

"Are you conscious that you are rendering yourself liable to penal servitude?"

"I have signed a declaration of my guilt."

The answers were given in perfect calmness, but a vein of pathos ran through every word.

"Do you know that a few years back many a poor wretch whose crime was trifling compared with yours has gone from the dock to the gallows?"

"My guilt is unmitigated guilt. I make a voluntary statement. I am not here to appeal for mercy."

There was the hush of awe in the court.

The face of the convict wore an expression of amazement.

Counsel smiled again.

"I presume you know that the effect of the law officers of the Crown, believing the story that you tell us now is that, if they do so, the man whom you call your brother will be put into possession of the estate of which your late father died seized?"

"He is entitled to it."

Counsel turned to the jury with a smile.

"It is always necessary to find some standard by which to judge of human actions. The witness quarreled with the defendant four days ago, and this is his revenge. But I appeal to the court. Is this story credible? Is it not a palpable imposture?"

The judge again interposed.

"Men do not risk so much for a lie. The witness knows that when the court rises the sheriff may take him into custody."

At this counsel rose again and asked the bench not to play into the hands of the witness by apprehending him.

"Let the convict be examined," said the judge.

Paul Ritson raised his head; Greta sunk into a chair beneath him. He was not sworn.

The warder in charge put in an entry from the books of the prison. It ran: "Paul Drayton, five feet eleven inches, brown hair and eyes, aged thirty, licensed victualer, born in London, convicted of robbery at the scene of a railway accident."

"Does that entry properly describe you?" asked the judge.

The convict's eyes wandered.

"What's going on?" he said, in a tone of bewilderment.

"Attend, my man. Are you Paul Ritson, the eldest son of the late Allan Ritson?"

"Why do you want to know?" said the convict.

"It befits a witness who is permitted to come from the scene of a degrading punishment to give a

prompt and decisive answer. What is your name, sir?"

"Find it out."

"My man," said the judge, more suavely, "we sit here in the name of the law, and the law could wish to stand your friend." (The convict laughed bitterly.) "Pray help us to a decision in the present perplexing case by a few frank answers. If you are Paul Drayton, you go back to Portland to complete the term of your imprisonment. If it can be proved that you are Paul Ritson, your case will be laid before the home officials, with the result that you will be liberated and re-established in your estate. First of all, which is your name—Paul Drayton or Paul Ritson?"

The convict did not answer at first. Then he said in a low tone:

"No law can re-establish me."

The judge added:

"Bethink you, if you are Paul Ritson, and an innocent man, the law can restore you to your young wife."

Visibly moved by this reference, the convict's eyes wandered to where Greta sat beside him, and the tension of his gaze relaxed.

The judge began again:

"You have been recognized by two witnesses—one claiming to be your brother, the other to be your wife—as Paul Ritson. Are you that person?"

The convict's face showed the agony he suffered. In a vague, uncertain, puzzled way he was thinking of the consequences of his answer. If he said he was Paul Ritson, it seemed to him that it must leak out that he was not the eldest legitimate son of his father. Then all the fabric of his mother's honor would there and then tumble to the ground. He recalled his oath; could he pronounce six words and not violate it? No, not six syllables. How those mouthing gossips would glory to see a good name trailed in the dust!

"Are you Paul Ritson, the eldest son and heir of Allan Ritson?"

The convict looked again at Greta. She rose to her feet beside him. All her soul was in her face, and cried:

"Answer, answer!"

"I can not answer," said the convict, in a loud, piercing voice.

At that terrible moment his strength seemed to leave him. He sunk backward into the chair from which Greta had risen.

She stood over him and put her hand tenderly on his head.

"Tell them it is true," she pleaded, "tell them you are my husband; tell them so; oh, tell them, tell them!" she cried in a tone of piteous supplication.

He raised to hers his weary eyes with a dumb cry for mercy from the appeal of love.

Only Hugh Ritson, of all who were there present, understood what was in the convict's heart.

"Paul Ritson is the rightful heir of his father and his mother's legitimate son," he muttered audibly.

The convict turned to where his brother sat, and looked at him with a face that seemed to grapple for the missing links of a chain of facts.

Counsel for the defense arose.

"It will be seen that the unhappy convict witness will not be used as an instrument of deception," he said. "He is Paul Drayton, and can not be made to pretend that he is Paul Ritson."

The hush of awe in the court was broken by the opening of a door behind the bench. Two women stood on the threshold. One of them was small, wrinkled, and old. She was Mrs. Drayton. The other was a nun in hood and cape. She was Sister Grace.

Hugh Ritson leaned toward counsel for the plaintiff, who promptly rose and said:

"The witness I spoke of as dead to the world is now present in the court."

Amid a buzz of conversation the nun was handed to the table. She raised her long veil and showed a calm, pale face. After the usual formalities, counsel addressed her.

"Mrs. Ritson," he said, "tell us which of the two men who sit opposite is your son."

Sister Grace answered in a clear, soft voice:

"Both are my sons. The convict is Paul Ritson, my son by Allan Ritson; the other is Paul Lowther, my son by an unhappy alliance with Robert Lowther."

Drayton jumped to his feet.

"There, that's enough of this!" he shouted, excitedly. "Damme, if I can stand any more of it!"

Bonnithorne reached over and whispered:

"Mad man, what are you doing? Hold your tongue!"

"It's all up. There's the old woman, too, come to give me away. Here, I say, I'm Paul Drayton; that's what I am, if you want to know."

"Let the sheriff take that man before a justice of the peace," said the judge.

"It was you that led me into this mess!" shouted Drayton at Bonnithorne. "Only for you I would have been in Australia by this time."

"Let the sheriff apprehend Mr. Bonnithorne also," said the judge. "As for you, sir," he continued, turning to Hugh Ritson, "I will report your evidence to the Public Prosecutor—who must be in possession of your statutory declaration—and leave the law officers to take their own course with regard to you."

The action for ejectment was adjourned.

Drayton and Bonnithorne did not trouble the world much longer. Within a month they were tried and condemned together—the one for personation; both for conspiracy.

Paul Ritson was removed in charge of his warder, to be confined in the town jail pending the arrival of instructions from the Secretary of State. Hugh Ritson walked out of the court-room a free man.

CHAPTER XVII.

Hugh Ritson returned to his room on the pit-brow. On his way there he passed a group of people congregated on the bridge at the town end. They fell apart as he walked through, but not an eye was raised to his, and not one glance of recognition came from his stony face. Toward the middle of the afternoon a solicitor came from Carlisle and executed a bill of sale on the machinery and general plant. The same evening, as the men on the day shift came up the shaft, and those on the night shift were about to go below, the wages were paid down to the last weights taken at the pit-mouth. Then Hugh Ritson closed his doors and began afresh his melancholy perambulation of the room.

That night—it was Wednesday night—as darkness fell on the mountain and moorland, there was a great outcry in the Vale. It started at the pit-mouth, and was taken up on every side. In less than a quarter of an hour a hundred people—men, women, and children—were gathered about the head of the shaft. There had been a run of sand in the pit, and some of the hands were imprisoned in the blocked-up workings. Cries, moans, and many sounds of weeping arose on the air in one dismal chorus. "I knew it would come;" "I telt the master lang ago;" "Where's my man?" "And mine?" "And my poor barn—no'but fifteen." "Anybody seen my Willie?" "Is that thee, Robbie, ma lad?—No." As every cageful of men and boys came to the surface, there was a rush of mothers, wives, and fathers to recognize their own.

Hugh Ritson went out and pushed his way through the people.

"Where is the sand running?" he asked of a pitman just landed.

"In the sandy vein, 2, 3, 1," answered the man.

"Then the shaft is clear?"

"Ay, but the water's blocked in the main working, and it's not safe to go down."

Hugh Ritson had taken the man's candle out of his hand, and was fixing it with the putty in the front of his own hat.

"Are you ready?" he shouted to the engine-man, above the babel of voices.

In another moment he had stepped into the cage and looped down the iron rail in front of it. There was a moment's silence among the panic-stricken people as the cage began to move downward.

At the bottom of the shaft a group of men waited to ascend. Their faces were lurid in the dim light. Before the cage grounded Hugh Ritson could hear their breathing. "How many of you are left?" he asked.

"No'but two now—Giles Raisley and auld Reuben," answered one of the men. The others, without heeding the master's question, had scrambled into the cage, and were already knocking the signal for the ascent.

Hugh Ritson turned toward the working known among the men as the sandy vein. The cage was now rising, and the pitman who had spoken found himself left on the pit bottom; the single moment that he had given to the master had lost him his chance of a place. He cast one stern

glance upward, and a muttered oath was on his lips. At the next instant he had taken the direction followed by Hugh Ritson, and was walking one pace behind him.

In the silence the dull thud of their footsteps on the rock beneath mingled with the drip, drip of the water overhead. When they had gone a hundred yards down the narrow working there came another and far more terrible sound. It was such a sound as the sea might have made if it had rushed through a thousand crevices in the rock. It was the sound of the thousands of tons of sand as they forced their way from the dense mass above. And over the hiss as of the sea was the harsh crack of great timbers splitting like matchwood.

Toward the awful scene of this tumult Hugh Ritson quickened his steps. The man followed close at his heels. Presently their passage was blocked with sand like a wall. Then over their heads the cross-trees cracked, and the upright forks split and bent at the right and left of them. In another moment the ground beneath them shook under the new weight that lay on it. They stepped quickly back, and in an instant, with a groan such as the sea makes when it is sucked by the ebbing tide from a cave in a rock, the floor, with all its freight, went down a score of feet. It had fallen to an old working that lay below.

Then the bent forks hung from the roof in empty air. Silence followed this shock, and through the silence there came a feeble cry for help. Hugh Ritson stepped out, plucked his candle from his hat, and held it before his feet.

"Where are you?" he called, and his voice came back through the echoing depths beyond. Presently a man could be dimly seen clinging to a cross-piece in an alcove made for an air-shaft from the main working. To get to him the treacherous ground must be crossed, with its cracking roof, through which the sand slid even yet, and under the split timbers that still creaked.

Hugh Ritson did not hesitate; he turned to leap down, saying, "Follow me." But the man clung to him from behind.

"For God's sake, dunnot!" he cried. "I can not go there. It's mair nor my life is worth!"

Hugh Ritson twisted about, and looked him steadily in the face.

"What is your name, my man?"

"Davey Braithwaite."

"Then you are the young fellow whose wife died last week?"

"Ey," with a drooping head.

"Your child died before her, did it not?"

"Ey, he did, poor laal thing!"

"Your father and mother are gone, too?"

"They're gone, for sure!"

"And you have neither kith nor kin left in all the world?"

"Nay, no'but mysel' left."

Hugh Ritson said no more; a hard smile played on his white face, and at the next instant he had leaped down on to the bed of sand below.

The man recoiled a pace or two and wrung his hands. Before he was aware of what had happened, Giles Raisley and the master were standing beside him.

"Where were old Reuben and his gang stationed?" said Hugh Ritson.

"In the main working; but the water is dammed up; we can never pass."

They returned to the shaft bottom, and walked thence down the cutting that ran from it at right angles. A light burned far away in the dim vista of that long dark burrowing.

It was a candle stuck to the rock. The men who worked by it had left it there when they rushed off for their lives. Through the bottom of this working there ran a deep trough, but it was now dry.

This was the channel by which the whole pit was drained. Beyond the light the three men encountered another wall of sand, and from behind it and through it there came to them the dull thud and the plash of heavy water.

"If auld Reuben's theer, he's a dead man," said Giles Raisley, and he turned to go.

Hugh Ritson had struggled to the top of the heap, and was plowing the sand away from the roof with his hands. In a little while he had forced an opening, and could see into the dark space beyond. The water had risen to a reservoir of several feet deep. But it was still four or five feet from the roof, and over the black, surging, bubbling waves the imprisoned miner could be seen clinging to a ledge of rock. Half his body was already immersed. When the candle shot its streak of light through the aperture of sand, the poor creature uttered a feeble cry.

In another moment the master had wormed his body through the hole and dropped slowly into

the water. Wading breast deep, he reached the pitman, gave him his hand, and brought him safely through the closing seam.

When the cage rose to the surface again, bringing back to life and the world the last of the imprisoned miners, a great cheer broke from many a lusty throat. Women who had never thought to bless the master, blessed him now with fervent tongues. Men who had thought little of the courage that could rest in that slight figure, fell aside at the sense of their own cowardice. Under the red glow that came from the engine fire many a hard face melted.

Hugh Ritson saw little of this, and heeded it not at all. He plucked the candle, still burning, from his hat, and threw it aside. Then he walked through the people toward his room, and when he got there he shut the door, almost slamming it in the faces of those who followed. He pulled down the window-blinds, and began afresh his perambulation to and fro.

He had grown paler and thinner. There was a somber light in his eyes, and his lips were whitening. His step, once quick and sure, despite his infirmity, was now less certain. He had not slept since the night of Mercy's death. Determined never to encounter again the pains and terrors of sleep, he had walked through the long hours of the four succeeding nights. He knew what the result must be, and did not shrink from it. Once only he had thought of a quicker way to the sure goal that was before him. Then he had opened a cupboard, and looked long and intently at a bottle that he took from its shelf. But he had put the bottle back. Why should he play the fool, and leap the life to come? Thus, night after night, he had walked and walked, never resting, never pausing, though the enfeebled limbs shook beneath him, and the four walls of the room reeled in his dazed eyes.

Before returning to their homes, the people gathered in the darkness about the office on the pit-brow and gave one last cheer.

The master heard them, and his lip curled.

"Simpletons!—they don't understand," he muttered, beneath his breath, and continued his melancholy walk.

Next morning, a banksman, who acted as personal attendant on Hugh Ritson, brought him his breakfast. It was not early.

The sun had risen, but the blinds of the office were still drawn, and a candle burned on the table. The man would have put out the candle and let in the sunlight, but the master forbid him. He was a Methodist, and hummed psalm tunes as he went about his work. This morning he was more than usually fresh and happy when he entered with his tray; but at the sight of Hugh Ritson's pallid face his own face saddened.

"You are a young man yet, Luke," said the master. "Let me see, how old are you?"

"Seventy-nine, sir. I was born in ninety-eight. That was when auld Bonnypart was agate of us and Nelson bashed him up."

"I dare say you have grandchildren by this time?"

"Bless you, ey, and great-grandchilder, and ten of them, too; and all well and hearty, thank the Lord!"

The sound of a bell, slowly tolling, came from across the dale. Hugh Ritson's face contracted, and his eyes fell.

"What bell is that?" he asked, in an altered tone.

"It's like to be the church bell. They're burying poor auld Matha's lass and her wee barn this morning."

Hugh Ritson did not touch his breakfast.

"Luke, close the shutters," he said, "and bring more candles."

He did not go out that day, but continued to walk to and fro in the darkened room. Toward nightfall he grew feverish, and rang frequently the bell that summoned the banksman. He had only some casual order, some message, some unimportant explanation.

At length the old man understood his purpose, and settled himself there for the night. They talked much during the early hours, and often the master laughed and jested. But the atmosphere that is breathed by a sleepless man is always heavy with sleep, and in spite of his efforts to keep awake, Luke dozed away in his chair. Then for hours there was a gloomy silence, broken only by the monotonous footfall within and the throb of the engine without.

The next day, Friday, the sun shone brilliantly, but the shutters of the little house on the pit-brow remained closed, and the candle still burned on the table. Hugh Ritson had grown perceptibly feebler, yet he continued his dreary walk. The old banksman was forbidden to send for a doctor, but he contrived to dispatch a messenger for Parson Christian. That night he watched with the master again. When the conversation failed, he sung. First, a psalm of David, "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God;" then a revival hymn of Charles Wesley about ransom by Christ's blood.

It would have been a strange spectacle to strange eyes. The old man—young still, though seventy-nine, dear to troops of dear ones, encircled in his age by love and honor, living in poverty that was abundance, with faith that was itself the substance of things hoped for, his simple face ruddier and mellowed than before—rocking his head and singing in the singleness of his heart. The other man—barely thirty, yet already old, having missed his youth, his thin cheeks pallid as linen, his eyes burning with a somber light—alone in the world, desolate, apart—walking with an uncertain step and a tremor of the whole frame, which seemed to lurch for poise and balance, yet swinging his arms with the sweep of the melody, and smiling a forced smile through his hard and whitened lips.

When the singing ceased, Hugh Ritson paused suddenly and turned to the old banksman.

"Luke," he said, abruptly, "I suppose there will be many to follow you when your time comes?"

"Ey, please God," answered the banksman, dashing away a furtive drop that had rolled on to his cheek; "there'll be my childer, and my childer's childer, and their childer, forby. Maybe the barns will lay me behind the mother; poor auld body!"

Hugh Ritson's face darkened, and he resumed his walk.

"Tut! what matter?" he asked himself; "the night winds are enough to moan over a man's grave." And he laughed a little.

Next morning—Saturday morning—he wrote a letter, and sent Luke to the village to post it. Then he attended to some business relating to the pit. After that, he shut the door and bolted it. When the old man brought the midday meal he knocked in vain, and had to go away.

Night closed in, and still there came no answer to the old man's knock. When the sun had set the wind had risen. It threatened to be a tempestuous night.

Toward ten o'clock Parson Christian arrived. He had wrestled long with his own heart as to what course it was his duty to take. He had come at last in answer to the banksman's summons, and now he knocked at the door. There was no answer. The wind was loud in the trees overhead, but he could hear the restless footfall within. He knocked again, and yet again.

Then the bolt was drawn, and a voice at once strange and familiar cried, "Come in, Parson Christian."

He had not called or spoken.

The parson entered. When his eyes fell on Hugh Ritson's face he shuddered as he had never shuddered before. Many a time he had seen death in a living face, but never anything like this. The livid cheeks were stony, the white lips were drawn hard, the somber eyes burned like a deep, slow fire, the yellow hands were gaunt and restless. There was despair on the contracted brow, but no repentance. And the enfeebled limbs trembled, but still shuffled on—on, on, on, through their longer journey than from Gabbatha to Golgotha. The very atmosphere of the room breathed of death.

"Let me pray with you," said the parson, softly, and without any other words, he went down on his knees.

"Ay, pray for me—pray for me; but you lose your labor; nothing can save me."

"Let us call on God," said the parson.

A bitter laugh broke from Hugh Ritson's lips.

"What! and take to him the dregs and rinsings of my life? No!"

"The blood of Christ has ransomed the world. It can save the worst sinner of us all, and turn away the heavy wrath of God."

Hugh Ritson broke again into a bitter laugh.

"The end has come of sin, as of trouble. No matter." Then, with an awful solemnity, he added: "My soul is barren. It is already given over to the undying worm. I shall die to-morrow at sunrise."

"No man knows the day nor the hour—"

Hugh Ritson repeated, with a fearful emphasis, "I shall die as the sun rises on Sunday morning."

Parson Christian remained with him the weary night through. The wind moaned and howled outside. It licked the walls as with the tongues of serpents. The parson prayed fervently, but Hugh Ritson's voice never once rose with his. To and fro, to and fro, the dying man continued his direful walk. At one moment he paused and said with a ghastly smile, "This dying is an old story. It has been going on every day for six thousand years, and yet we find it as terrible as ever."

Toward three in the morning he threw open the shutters. The windows were still dark; it seemed as if the dawn were far away. "It is coming," he said calmly. "I knew it must come soon. Let us go out to meet it."

With infinite effort he pulled his ulster over his shoulders, put on his hat, and opened the door.

"Where are you going?" said the parson, and his voice broke.

"To the top of the fell."

"Why there?"

Hugh Ritson turned his heavy eyes upon him. "To see the new day dawn," he said, with an awful pathos.

He had already stepped out into the gloom. Parson Christian followed him. They took the path that led through the moor end to the foot of Cat Bells. The old man offered his arm, but Hugh Ritson shook his head and walked one pace ahead. It was a terrible journey. The wind had dropped. In the air the night and day commingled. The dying man struggled along with the firm soul of a stricken lion. Step by step and with painful labor they ascended the bare side of the fell in the gray light of morning. They reached the top at last.

Below them the moorland lay dark and mute. The mist was around them. They seemed to stand on an islet of the clouds. In front the day-break was bursting the confines of the bleak racks of cloud. Then the day came in its wondrous radiance, and flooded the world in a vast ocean of light.

On the mountain brow Hugh Ritson resumed his melancholy walk. The old parson muttered, as if to himself, "Wilt thou break a leaf driven to and fro? Wilt thou pursue the dry stubble?" Hugh Ritson overheard the words, and all his manner changed. The stubborn lips softened, the somber eye melted, the contracted brow relaxed, and for the first time in all this length of years, he cried like a little child.

At the same instant the sun swept up, and he fell. Parson Christian bent over him. The crimson of the east was reflected on his white face. The new day had dawned.

On the Tuesday following two mourners stood by an open grave in the church-yard of Newlands. One of them was white-headed; the other wore the jacket and cap, the badge and broad arrow of a convict. The sexton and his man had lowered the coffin to its last home, and then stepped aside. A tall man leaned on the lych-gate, and a group of men and women stood in silence by the porch of the church. The afternoon sun was low, and the shadows of the tombstones stretched far on the grass.

The convict went down on his knees, and looked long into the grave. When he arose, the company that had gathered about the porch had gone, and voices singing a hymn came from within the old church. It was the village choir practicing. The world's work had begun again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Two days later the fell behind the Ghyll was a scene of unusual animation. It was the day of the shearing. The sheep, visibly whiter and more fleecy for a washing of some days before, had been gathered into stone folds. Clippers were seated on creels ranged about a turf fire, over which a pot of tar hung from a triangle of boughs. Boy "catchers" brought up the sheep, one by one, and girl "helpers" carried away the fleeces, hot and odorous, and hung them over the open barn doors. As the sheep were stripped, they were tugged to the fire and branded from the bubbling tar with the smet mark of the Ritsons. The metallic click of the shears was in the air, and over all was the blue sky and the brilliant sunshine.

In a white overall, stained with patches of tar and some streaks of blood, smudged with soap and scraps of the clinging wool, Parson Christian moved among the shearers, applying plentiful doses of salve from a huge can to the snips made in the skin of the sheep by the accidents of the shears.

"We might have waited for the maister afore shearing—eh?" said Reuben, from one of the creels.

"He'll be here before we finish, please the Lord," answered the parson.

"Is it to-day you're to gang for him?"

"Yes, this afternoon."

"A daub on this leg, parson, where she kicked—deuced take her!... It's like you'll bring him home in a car?"

"Ay; Randal Alston has loaned me his mare."

"Why, man, what a upshot we'll have, for sure—bacon pie and veal and haggis, and top stannin pie and puddings, I reckon.... Just a hand to her leg, parson, while I strip the coat and waistcoat off this black-faced herdwick.... Is the mistress to come home, too?"

"Nay, Reuben, Mrs. Ritson has gone back to where she came from."

"Weel, it's no'but naturable, after all that's happent.... Easy now ... be quiet, wilta ... dusta want another snip, eh?... And young Mistress Greta—it's like she'll be mistress now?"

"It's very likely she'll come to the Ghyll with her husband, Reuben."

"God bless her! And there's been no luck on the land since he left it—and everything a fault, too.... There, she's stripped. Away with her, Natt, man, and de'il tak' her."

In the afternoon a vast crowd of men, women and children had gathered once more about the old town-hall at Keswick. They laughed and bantered and sung. Presently the door of the hall was thrown open, and two men came out. One was Paul Ritson, no longer clad as a convict; the other was Parson Christian. The people hailed them with a mighty shout, lifted them into a gig that was drawn up in the market-place, took out the horses and crowded into the shafts. Then they set off with a great cheer through the town and the country road, the dust rising in clouds behind them.

They took the road to the west of the valley, and as they passed under the wood, an old man, much bent, was easing a smoking fire in the charcoal pit. He paused and raised himself, his iron rod in his hand, and lifted his heavy eyes toward the clamorous company. The gig flew past with its shouts, its cheers, and its noisy laughter, and the old man turned silently back to his work.

When they came near to the vicarage, Paul leaped from the carriage over the heads of the men who pulled it, vaulted the gate, and bounded into the house. There was one who waited for him there, and in an instant she was locked close in his arms. "At last!" he whispered. Her heart overflowed; she dropped her fair young head on his heaving breast, and wept sweet tears.

Parson Christian came rolling up the path surrounded by a tumultuous throng. Foremost and lustiest were the blacksmith and the miller, and close behind came the landlord and the postman. All were shouting as if their brassy throats might crack.

There was high revel at the Ghyll that evening. First came the feasting in the old kitchen: huge rounds of beef, quarters of lamb, pease, and sweet puddings and pies. Then came the dancing in the barn, lighted by candles in cloven sticks, and lanterns of turnips that were scooped out hollow.

But at the vicarage Paul and Greta sat alone in silence and with clasped hands. Parson Christian came in and out at intervals, gossiping cheerily of the odds and ends of daily life, as if its even tenor had never been disturbed. They supped together, and sat on till midnight; and then the old Christian took down his green tome and wrote:

"June 30.—So Paul being to return home after his long absence, I spent the forenoon on the fell shearing, and earned a stone of wool and a windle of rye. In the afternoon I set forward toward Keswick, wherefor Randal Alston had loaned me his mare and gig. At the Flying Horse I lighted not, but stood while I drank a pot of ale with John Proudfoot and Richard Parkinson and a neighbor that comes to-morrow to thatch the low barn for me. Then direct to Keswick, where there was a great concourse, and a hearty welcome, and much rejoicings that warmed me and came nigh to break me withal. Got son Paul at last, and would have driven direct home, but the good folk were not minded that it should be so, and naught would do but that they must loose the mare and run in the shafts. So we reached home about six, and found all well, and my love Greta, after long waiting in her closet, very busy with Paul, who had run in ahead of me. So I went out again and foddered and watered the mare, for Peter is sometimes a sad fatch and will not always give a horse what is worth its trouble in the eating. And being thrang this evening a-mending the heels of my old clock boots with lath nails, whereof I bought a pennyworth at Thomas Seed's shop in the market-place, I saw little of Paul, but left him to Greta. Then supped, and read a psalm and prayed in my family, and sat till full midnight. So I retire to my lodging-room, at peace with all the world, and commend my all to God. The Lord forgive the sins of me and mine that we have committed in these our days of trial. Blessed be God who has wrought our victory, and overcome our enemies and brought us out more than conquerors. Amen."

Parson Christian had put down the pen, and was sprinkling the writing with sand from a pepper-castor, when Brother Peter came in with candles in his hand and a letter under his abridged arm. "Laal Tom o' Dint gave me this for thee," he said to Paul, and dropped the letter on to his knees. "I was sa thrang with all their bodderments, that I don't know as I didna forget it."

Parson Christian returned the green-clad book to its shelf, took up his candle, bid good-night, and went to bed.

Brother Peter shambled out, and then Paul and Greta were left alone.

Paul opened the letter. It was inclosed in a sheet of paper that bore the stamp of the Convent of St. Margaret, and these words only, "Sent on by Sister Grace." Paul began to read the letter aloud, Greta looking over his shoulder. But as he proceeded his voice faltered, and then he stopped. Then, in silence, the eyes of both traversed the written words. They ran:

"Mother, I have wronged you deeply, and yours is a wrong that may never be repaired. The past does not return, and what is done is done with. It is not allowed to us to raze out the sins and the sufferings of the days that are gone; they stand and will endure. I am not so bad a man as perhaps I seem; but of what avail is it to defend myself now? and who would believe me? My life has been one long error, and the threads of my fate have been tangled. Have I not passed before our little world for a stern and callous man? Yet the blight of my soul has been passion.

Yearning for love where love could never be returned, I am the ruins of what I might have been. If I did wrong knowingly, it was not until passion mastered me; if I saw things as they did not exist, it was because passion made me blind. Mother, if there is One above to watch and judge our little lives, surely He sees this, and reckons the circumstances with the deed.

"Tell her that I wish her peace. If I were a man used to pray, perhaps I would ask Heaven to bless her. But my heart is barren of prayer. And what, after all, boots my praying? I have given her back at last to the love of a noble man. And now my wasted life is done, and this is the end—a sorry end!

"Mother, I shall not live to suffer the earthly punishment of my crime. Never fear—my hand shall not be lifted against myself. Be sure of that, whatever else may seem doubtful. But very soon this passionate and rebellious soul will stand for judgment before its awaiting God.

"Farewell, my mother, farewell!"

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