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Author: George Manville Fenn

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DOUBLE KNOT ***

George Manville Fenn

"A Double Knot"

Prologue - The Germ.

A Daughter of Eve.

“Mother!”

There was no reply, and once again rose from the bed in the prettily-furnished room the same word—“Mother!” The wild, appealing, anguished cry of offspring to parent, seeming to ask for help—protection—forgiveness—the tenderness of the mother-heart to its young, and still there was no answer.

The speaker struggled up so that she rested on her elbow, the heavy dark nut-brown hair fell in long clusters on her soft white neck and bosom; her large hazel eyes looked wild and dilated; and her fair young face deathly pale, as, with quivering white lips, she cried once more:

“Mother! Speak to me or I shall die.”

“It would be better so,” was the cold hard reply, and a lady who had been gazing from the window turned slowly round to gaze full at the first speaker, her handsome Spanish type of countenance looking malignant as her dark eyes flashed, where she stood biting her full sensuous nether lip, and glaring at the occupant of the bed.

“Mother!” was the anguished cry once more, as the girl sank back upon her pillow.

“Yes,” was the bitter reply. “You are a mother. God be thanked that your father, who idolised his child, was not spared to see this day.”

“Oh, mother, mother, have some pity—have some mercy upon me. Where am I to seek it, if not from you?”

“From Heaven: for the world will show you none. Why should I? Shame upon you that you should bring this curse upon my widowed life. The coward!—the villain! Was not our simple quiet home, far away from the busy world, to be held sacred, that he must seek us out and cast such a blight upon it!”

“Oh, hush, mother!” wailed the girl. “I love him—I love him.”

“Love him! Idiot! Baby! To be led away by the smooth words of the first soft-spoken villain you meet.”

“You shall not call him villain, mamma,” cried the girl passionately. “He loves me, and I am to be his wife.”

The girl flashed up for a moment with anger, but only to lie back the next instant faint and with half-closed eyes.

“His wife! Are you such a fool that you believe this?” cried the elder woman bitterly. “His wife! There, cast aside that shadow at once, for it is a delusion.”

“No, no, mother, dear mother, he has promised me that I shall be his wife, and I believe him.”

“Yes,” said the mother, “as thousands of daughters of Eve have believed before. There, cast away that thought, poor fool, and think now of hiding your sin from the world which will shun you as if you had the plague.”

“Mother!” cried the girl piteously.

“Don't talk to me!” cried the woman fiercely, and she began to pace the room; tall, swarthy, and handsome for her years, her mobile countenance betraying the workings of the passionate spirit within her.

“Mother! Would I had never been one! My life has been a curse to me.”

“No, no; don’t say that, dear.”

“It has, I tell you. There’s something wrong in our blood, I suppose. Look at your brother.”

“Poor Julian!” sighed the girl.

“Poor Julian!” cried the woman scornfully. “Of course he is poor, and he deserves it. He must have been mad.”

“But he loved her, mamma, so dearly.”

“Loved!” cried the woman with a wild intensity of rage in her deep rich voice and gesture, as she spat on the floor. “Curse love! Curse it! What has it done for me? A few sickly embraces—a few years of what the world calls happiness—and then a widowhood of poverty and misery.”

“Mamma, you will kill me if you talk like that.”

“Then I will talk like that, and save myself from temptation more than I can bear,” cried the woman fiercely. “What has love done for the son of whom I was so proud—my gallant-looking, handsome boy? Why, with his bold, noble, Spanish face and dark eyes, he might have wed some heiress, married whom he liked—and what does he do? turns himself into a galley slave.”

“Mamma, what are you saying?” cried the girl faintly.

“The truth. What has he done? Married a woman without a *sou*, and had to accept that post at the mines. Isn’t that being a galley slave?”

“But he loved Delia, mamma.”

“Loved her! Curse love! I tell you. The ass! The idiot, to be led away by that sickly, washed-out creature—the Honourable Delia Dymcox,” she continued, with an intensity of scorn in her tones.

“But she is a lady, mamma.”

“Lady? The family are paupers, and, forsooth, they must look down on him—on us because we have no blood. Well, she is justly punished, and he too. I hope they like Auvergne.”

“Oh, mother,” sighed the girl weakly, “you are very cruel.”

“Cruel? I wish I had been cruel enough to have strangled you both at birth. I wish our family were at an end—that it would die out as Julian’s brats waste away there in that hot, dry, sun-cursed region.”

“You do not mean it, dear?”

“I do, Mary; I swear I do. Oh that I could have been so weak as to marry as I did—to be cursed with two such children!”

“You talk so, dear, because you are angry with me,” sighed the girl. “I know you loved poor papa dearly.”

“Pish! You are like him.”

“Yes, mamma, and poor Julian has always been so like you.”

There was silence then in the half-shadowed room, while the mother sat sternly gazing out at the stream that rippled by the cottage, dancing in the sunlight and bathing the roots of the willows that kissed its dimpling, silvery surface. The verdant meadows stretched far away rich in the lush grass and many flowers that dotted them with touches of light. All without looked bright and joyous, as a lark high poised poured forth his lay, which seemed to vibrate in the blue arch of heaven, and then fall in silvery fragments slowly down to earth.

The girl lay crying silently, the tears moistening her soft white pillow, as she gazed piteously from time to time at her mother’s averted face, half hidden from her by the white curtain she held aside to gaze from the window.

“Can you—can you see him coming, mamma?” faltered the girl at last.

“Whom? The doctor?” was the cold response, as the curtain was allowed to fall back in its place. “No, I have not sent for one. Why should we publish our shame?”

“Our shame, mamma?”

“Yes, our shame. Is it not as bitter for me? Live or die, I shall send for no doctor here.” Again there was silence, and the elder woman slowly paced the room, till, passing near the bed, a soft white arm stole forth, and caught her hand.

“You are very cruel to me, mother. Oh, do look; look again. See if he is coming.”

“If he is coming!” cried the elder. “Are you mad as well as weak? You will never see him more. Poor fool! I believe even his name is only assumed.”

“I shall,” cried the girl with energy, “and he will come. He loves me too dearly to forsake me now. He is a gentleman

and the soul of honour."

Her face lit up, and the joyous look of love shone in her eyes as she gazed defiantly at her mother, who looked back at her, half pitying, half mocking her faith. Then, in spite of herself, she started, for steps were heard on the path beneath, and as the girl struggled up once more to her elbow, and craned her neck towards the window, voices were heard speaking at a little distance.

"There, there," cried the girl, with a sob of joy, as she sank back laughing hysterically. "What did I say? He loves me —he loves me, and he has come."

Mrs Riversley ran to the window, and drew aside the curtain furtively as a couple of young men, gentlemen evidently, and one carrying a trout-rod, walked slowly by, following the winding path that led round by the great gravel-pit in the wood that bordered the stream, and soon after they disappeared amidst the trees.

"That was his step," cried the girl at last. "Who was with him, mamma?"

"Captain Millet."

"Poor Mr Millet!" said the girl softly; and then, with the anxious troubled look fading from her countenance to give place to one of quiet content as a smile played round her lips, she lay very still, with half-closed eyes listening for the returning steps.

Twice she started up to listen, but only to sink back again, very calm and patient, her full faith that the man she loved would return beaming from every feature of her handsome young face.

"Mother," she said at last softly; and Mrs Riversley turned towards her.

"What do you want?"

"Is it not time you brought it back to me, mother—that you laid it by my side?"

There was no reply, and the girl looked up pleadingly.

"I should like him to see it when he comes," she said softly, and a wondrous look of love dawned in her pale face, causing a strange pang in her mother's breast as she stood watching her and evidently trying to nerve herself for the disclosure she was about to make, one which in her anger she had thought easy, but which now became terribly difficult.

"If you cannot forgive me, mother dear," said the girl pleadingly, "let me have my babe: for I love it, I love it," she whispered to herself, and the soft dawn of a young mother's yearning for her offspring grew warmer in her face.

"You will never see it more," exclaimed the woman at last, in a hard harsh voice, though she trembled and shrank from her daughter's eyes as she spoke. "It will never lie by your side for him to gaze upon your shame and his: the child is dead."

A piteous cry broke from the young mother's breast, and in her bitter grief she lay sobbing violently, till nature interposed, and, exhausted, weak and helpless, she sank into a heavy sleep with the tears still wet upon her face.

"It is better so—it is better so," muttered Mrs Riversley, as she stood gazing down at her child. "It will nearly kill her, but, God forgive me, it must be done."

She stood watching in the shaded room till a slight noise below made her start, and hastily glancing at her daughter to see that she slept, she stole on tiptoe from the bedside, and crept downstairs to where a sharp angular-looking woman of four or five and twenty was standing in the little drawing-room with her shawl over one arm, and her bonnet swinging from the strings.

She looked flushed with exercise, and her hair about her temples was wet with perspiration, while her boots were covered with dust.

"Well?"

"Well," said the woman, with a rude, impatient gesture. "You must give me a glass of wine. I'm dead beat. It's quite four miles there, and as hot as hot."

"How dare you speak to me in that insolent way, Jane?" said Mrs Riversley angrily.

"Oh," said the woman sharply, "this is no time far ma'aming and bowing and scraping; servants and missuses is all human beings together when they're in trouble, and folks don't make no difference between them."

"But you might speak in a more respectful way, Jane," said Mrs Riversley, biting her lips, and looking pale.

"Dessay I might," said the woman; "but this ain't the time. Well, you want to know about the—"

"Hush! for Heaven's sake, hush," exclaimed Mrs Riversley, glancing round.

"Oh, there's no one near us," said the woman with a mocking laugh; "not even the police, so you needn't be afraid. It ain't murder."

"Did you find her?" said Mrs Riversley. "Pray tell me, Jane. I spoke rather harshly just now, but I could not help it, I

was so troubled and upset."

"Dessay you were; dessay everybody else is," said the woman roughly. "How's Miss Mary?"

"Better, Jane; *but* you must never see her again. She must never know."

"Did you tell her it was dead?" said the woman sharply.

"Yes, yes, and so it must be to her. But tell me," continued Mrs Riversley eagerly, "did you make the arrangement?"

"Yes, and I had to give her every penny of the money you started me with."

"And she does not know anything?"

"No," said the woman, "and never will if you behave to me proper."

"Yes, yes, Jane, I will; anything I can do, but you must go from here—at once."

"And how are you going to manage?"

"As I can," said Mrs Riversley sternly. "This secret must be kept."

"And what are you going to give me to keep it?" said the woman sharply.

"I am not rich, Jane—far from it," began Mrs

Riversley.

"You're rich enough to pay me twenty pounds a year always," said the woman, with a keen greedy look in her unpleasant face.

"Yes, yes, Jane, I will," said Mrs Riversley eagerly, "on condition that you keep it secret, and never come near us more."

"Then I want that grey silk dress of Miss Mary's," said the woman, with the avaricious look growing in her face. "She won't want to wear it now."

"You shall have it, Jane."

"And there's that velvet jacket I should like."

"You shall have that too, Jane."

"I ain't got a watch and chain," said the woman, "you may as well give me yourn."

Without a word Mrs Riversley unhooked the little gold watch from her side, drew the chain from her neck, and threw it over that of her servant, whose closely set eyes twinkled with delight.

"You must pay me the money in advance every year," said the woman now sharply. "I'm not going without the first year."

Without replying Mrs Riversley walked to a side-table, unlocked a desk, and from the drawer took out four crisp new bank-notes.

Jane Glyne, maid-of-all-work at the Dingle, a place two miles from everywhere, as she said, and at which she was sure no decent servant would stop, held out her crooked fingers for the money, but Mrs Riversley placed the hand containing the notes behind her.

"One word first," she said firmly. "I have agreed in every respect to the hard terms you have made."

"Well, if you call them hard terms"—began the woman in an insolent tone.

"Silence!" exclaimed Mrs Riversley, "and listen to me."

She spoke in a low deep voice, full of emotion, and the low-bred woman quailed before her as she went on.

"I say I have come to your terms that you have imposed upon me."

"I never imposed upon you," began Jane.

"Silence, woman!" cried Mrs Riversley, stamping her foot imperiously. "I have agreed to all you wished, but I must have my conditions too. You have that unfortunate babe."

"Your grandson," said the woman in a low voice, but Mrs Riversley did not heed her.

"Bring it up as you will, or trust it to whom you will, but from this hour it must be dead to us. I shall give you the money in my hand, and I will do more. This is June. From now every half year fifteen pounds shall be ready at an address in London that I will give you. To such a woman as you that should be a goodly sum, but my conditions are that within an hour you shall have made up a bundle of the best of your things, and left this place, never to return. If you ever molest us by letter or visit, the money will be stopped."

"And suppose I tell everybody about it?" said the woman insolently.

"It is no criminal proceeding that I am aware of," said Mrs Riversley coldly; "but you will not do that; you value the money too much. Do you agree to my terms?"

"But my box," said the woman. "I can't carry away half my things."

"Here is another five-pound note," said Mrs Riversley coldly; "five five-pound notes. I gave you ten pounds before, and you only gave that woman half."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know your grasping character," said Mrs Riversley firmly. "Now—quick—do you decide? Try to extort more, and finding what you are, I shall risk all discovery, and bear the shame sooner than be under your heel. Do you agree?"

"Yes," said the woman surlily.

"Quick, then; get your things and go. I will bring you the dress and jacket."

"Ain't I to say good-bye to Miss Mary?"

"No," said Mrs Riversley firmly. "Now go."

The woman stood biting the side of one of her fingers for a few moments, and seemed to hesitate; but the rustle of the new bank-notes as Mrs Riversley laid them upon the table and placed a paperweight upon them decided her, and in an incredibly short time she stood once more in the room, in her best clothes, and with a bulky bundle tied up in an old Paisley shawl.

Five minutes later she had received the money without a word being spoken on either side, and was standing just out of sight of the cottage, by the stream, hugging the bundle to her with one hand, and gnawing at the side of her finger.

"What a fool I was!" she muttered viciously. "She'd have given double if I'd pressed her, and I'm put off now with a beggarly thirty pound a year. I've a good mind to go back."

She took a few steps in the direction of the cottage, but stopped with a grim chuckle.

"Thirty pound a year regular for doing nothing is better than ten pound and lots of work. Perhaps we should only quarrel, for she's a hard one when she's up. But I might have had more."

She stood thinking for a few moments.

"What shall I do?" she muttered. "If I leave it with them they'll kill it in a week, and then there's an end of it, and I get my money for nothing. If I fetch it away I have to keep it. But it may be worth my while. Mrs Riversley ain't everybody, for there's Miss Mary, and there's him, and if he isn't a swell, t'other one is, I'm sure. What's that?"

She started in affright, for just then a strange, hoarse shriek rang out of the wood to her left, and it sounded so wild and agonising that she stood trembling and listening for awhile.

"It was like as if someone had jumped into one of the deep river holes or the big pit," she muttered; "but I dursen't go to see. It was very horrid."

Whatever the cry, it was not repeated, and the woman hurried on for about a mile, when, coming to a side lane, she hesitated as to the course she should take, and ended by going straight on.

At the end of a score of paces she stopped short, turned and hurried back to the side lane, down which she walked as fast as her bundle would let her.

"I don't care, I will," she muttered; "thirty pound a year will keep us both. I'll fetch him away; he may be worth his weight in gold."

Mine Own Familiar Friend.

They were about equal in height and build, and apparently within a year of the same age, the one dark, and wearing, what was unusual in those days, a short crisp beard and moustache; the other fair and closely-shaven as to lip and chin, but with a full brown whisker clothing his cheeks.

The former was evidently terribly agitated, for his face worked and he was very pallid, while the latter looked flushed and nervous, the hand that grasped his trout-rod twitching convulsively; and he kept glancing at his companion as they strode along past the cottage.

"What I ask you is"—the darker of the two was saying.

"For Heaven's sake be silent till we get farther on, Rob, and I'll tell you all you want to know."

There was silence for awhile, and the two young men walked rapidly on, turning through a woodland path, when the

trees caught the rod of the one addressed as Rob, and he cast it impatiently aside, stopping short directly after in an opening where the path wound round the brink of a deep gravel-pit, the wayfarer being protected from a fall by a stout oaken railing.

“Now, sir,” exclaimed the first speaker excitedly; “no one can hear us.”

“No,” said the fair man in a nervous, hesitating way. “Go on; say what you have to say.”

“It is soon said, James Huish. I have been away with my regiment in Canada two years. Previous to that chance threw me into the company of a sweet, pure girl, little more than a child then. I used to come down here fishing.”

“You did!” exclaimed the other hoarsely.

“I did, and visited at that cottage time after time. Man, man, I tell you,” he continued, speaking rapidly in his excitement, “the recollection of those days has been my solace in many a bitter winter’s night, and I have looked forward to my return as the great day of my existence.”

“Stop!” said the other nervously. “Tell me this, Rob: did she—did she love you?”

“Love me?” exclaimed the other passionately: “no. How could I expect it? She was a mere child, budding into maidenhood; but her eyes brightened when I came, and she was my little companion here in the happy days that can never be recalled. James Huish, I loved that girl with all my soul. My love has grown for her, and my first thought was to seek her on my return, and try to win her for my wife.”

“It’s deuced unfortunate, Rob,” said the other in his nervous way. Then, with a kind of bravado, he continued half laughingly: “But then, you see, you have been away two years, and you have stopped away too long. It’s a pity, too, such friends as we were.”

Ere he had finished speaking his companion had seized his arm as in a vice.

“Huish!” he cried hoarsely, “if you speak to me in that tone of voice I will not answer for the consequences. I do not wish to be rash, or to condemn you unheard; but this is of such vital import to me that, by God, if you speak of it in that flippant tone again, I shall forget that we are gentlemen, and, like some brute beast, I shall have you by the throat.”

“Loose my arm,” exclaimed the other, flushing more deeply; “you hurt me.”

“You hurt me,” cried the other, trembling with passion—“to the heart.”

“If I have wronged you,” exclaimed Huish, “even if duelling is out of fashion, I can give you satisfaction.”

“Satisfaction!” cried the other bitterly. “Look here, James Huish. You have been a man of fashion, while I have been a blunt soldier. If what I hear be true, would it be any satisfaction for me to shoot you through the head, and break that poor girl’s heart, for I could do it if I liked; and if I did not, would it be any satisfaction to let you make yourself a murderer?”

Huish shuddered slightly, and the colour paled in his cheeks.

“Now answer my question. I say, is this true?”

“We are old friends,” retorted Huish, “but you have no right to question me.”

“Right or no right, I will question you,” exclaimed the other passionately, “and answer me you shall before you leave this spot.”

Huish glanced uneasily to the right and left, and, seeing this, his companion laid his hand once more upon his arm.

“No,” he exclaimed, “you do not go; and for your own sake, do not provoke me.”

The speaker’s voice trembled with rage, which he seemed to be fighting hard to control, while Huish was by turns flushed with anger, and pale with something near akin to fear.

“I will not answer your questions,” he exclaimed desperately.

“You promised me you would, and you shall, James Huish. Look here, sir. A little over two years ago there was a servant at the cottage—a cold hard girl. I come back here, and I find this same girl now a woman. She recognised me when I met her yesterday, and, believing that I was going to the cottage, she stopped me, and by degrees told me such a tale as I would I had never lived to hear. I went away again yesterday half mad, hardly believing that it could be true. To-day I returned, and she pointed you out to me as the villain—as Mr Ranby—a serpent crawling here to poison under an assumed name.”

“Go on,” said the other. “You meant marriage of course.”

“I tell you, man, I never had a thought for that poor girl that was not pure and true. If I had spoken so soon, it might have checked an intercourse that was to me the happiest of my life. Now I come back and find that the peace of that little home is blasted—that the woman I have loved has been made the toy of your pleasure; that you whom I believed to be a gentleman, a man of honour, have proved to be the greatest of villains upon this earth.”

“Have a care what you say,” said Huish hotly.

"I will have a care," cried the other. "I will not condemn you on the words of others; I would not so condemn the man who was my closest friend. Speak, then; tell me. I say, is this all true?"

"You have no right to question me."

"I say, is this true, James Huish?"

"Look here. What is the use of making a fuss like this over a bit of an affair of gallantry."

"What!" cried the other, grasping the arm of Huish once more tightly. "An affair of gallantry? Is it, then, an affair of gallantry to come upon a home like a blight—to destroy—yes, blast the life of a pure, trusting, simple-hearted girl, who believes you to be the soul of honour? James Huish, I do not understand these terms; but tell me this," he continued in a voice that was terrible in its cold measured tones, "is this true?"

"Is what true?" said the other, with an attempt at bravado.

"You know what I mean—about Mary Riversley."

"Well, there, yes, I suppose it is," said Huish, with assumed indifference; "and now the murder's out."

"No," exclaimed the other, with the rage he had been beating down struggling hard for the mastery; "not murder: it is worse. But look here, Huish. This girl is fatherless," he continued in a voice quite unnaturally calm. "I loved her very dearly, but, poor girl, her affection has gone to another. She cannot be my wife, but I can be her friend and I will. You will marry her at once."

"Not likely," was the scornful reply, as Huish tried to shake his arm free.

"I say, James Huish, you will marry this poor girl—no, this dear, sweet, injured lady—at once. The world would call her fallen; I say she is a good, true woman, as pure as snow, and in the sight of God Almighty your own wife. But we have customs here in England that must be observed. I say again, you will marry Ruth Riversley—at once?"

"I—will—not!" said Huish slowly and distinctly, the pain he suffered bringing a burning spot in each cheek, and his temper now mastering the dread he felt of his companion.

"I say again," said the other, in the same strange unnatural tone, "you will marry Miss Riversley—at once."

"And I say," cried Huish, now half mad with rage and pain, "I will not. Marry her yourself," he said brutally, "if—"

"Damned traitor?" cried the other, choking the completion of the sentence, as, active as a panther, he caught Huish by the throat. "Dog! coward! scoundrel! Down on your knees, and swear you will marry her, or I will not answer for your life!"

Huish in his dread half wrenched himself free, and a wild, strange cry escaped his lips. Then, nerved by his position, he turned upon his assailant, and a deadly struggle commenced.

They were well matched, but the young officer, hardened by a rough life, was the more active, and as they swayed to and fro in a fierce embrace, he more than once seemed on the point of forcing his adversary to the ground; but Huish putting forth his whole strength recovered himself, and the struggle was renewed with greater violence than before.

It was an aimless encounter, such as would result from two men engaging when maddened with rage. Their cheeks were purple, their veins stood out in their temples, and their eyes flashed with the excitement of the encounter. The danger they risked in their proximity to the deep pit was not heeded, and more than once as they wrestled to and fro, they nearly touched the fence that ran along the brink; but neither seemed to be aware of its existence, the short grass and heather by the side of the path was trampled, the bushes rustled and the twigs were broken as the antagonists in turn seemed to gain the mastery, and then for a few moments they paused, each gripping the other tightly, and gazing angrily in one another's eyes.

There was the low sobbing pant of labouring breath, the heaving of strong men's breasts, and then without a word being spoken the struggle recommenced.

It soon became evident that Huish was trying all he could to throw his adversary, the idea uppermost being that if he could get Captain Millet to the ground, he might hold him there till help came. On the other side Millet's main thought was to put into execution his threat; force Huish to his knees, and there make him humbly ask pardon and take such an oath as he should prescribe.

The upshot of the struggle was very different, though, from what either had imagined, and one that strongly influenced their future lives.

As the struggle was resumed, the better training of Millet, who was hard and spare, began to tell upon Huish, whose life of ease had not fitted him for so arduous an encounter. His breath was drawn heavily, and at rapid intervals; his grasp of his adversary was less firm; the big drops stood upon his face, and a singing noise began to sound in his ears, while the thought which made him feel infuriate seemed about to be realised, and in imagination he saw himself humbled before his friend.

In fact, the latter nearly had him at his mercy as they now swayed to and fro, and tightening his grasp with one hand, he suddenly lowered the other, and catching Huish at a disadvantage, he would in another instant have thrown him, when, maddened by desperation, Huish dashed himself forward to forestall his antagonist's effort, Millet's heel caught in a furze-bush, and the two men fell heavily against the rough fence.

There was a sharp crack made by the breaking wood, the rushing noise of falling earth and stones, and the next moment Huish was clinging to the rough stem of a bunch of golden broom, hanging at arm's length over the gravel-pit, while from beneath him came up a dull, heavy thud as of some fallen body.

Faint, sick, breathless, and ready to loose his hold, Huish clung there in an agony of desperation for a few moments. The trees, the clouds above him, seemed to be whirling round, and he closed his eyes preparatory to falling in his turn.

Then came the reaction, and, how he afterwards hardly knew, he made two or three desperate efforts to find rest for his feet, but only at first to send down avalanche after avalanche of stones and earth. Then one foot rested on a piece of old stump, and he was able to take some of the strain off his arms, resting there panting, and with a strange creeping sensation assailing his nerves as he thought that in a few minutes at most he must fall.

He glanced down once, to see that the stones were some thirty or forty feet below; and in his then position the height seemed dreadful, and with a shudder he wrenched his gaze away and looked up, thinking now of escape.

The stem he clung to was pretty strong, but the shrub was only rooted in the gravelly side of the pit, and at any moment it might be torn out by his weight. In fact, it seemed already to be giving way. But now his breath came in less laboured fashion, and the power to act began to return, the result being that he took in at a glance his situation, and, stretching out one of his feet, he found for it a more secure resting-place, one which enabled him to get hold of a stronger and tougher shrub, and draw himself to where he could stand in comparative safety, with the fence only some five feet above his hands.

Could he reach that, or must he descend?

He glanced down again.

Descent was impossible, for the side of the pit was eaten away by the weather, and receded from him, so once more with a shudder he looked up.

Yes, there was a clump of furze a foot or two higher, just on the edge where the grass reached before the gravel began to recede. Could he reach that?

For a few moments he hesitated to make the attempt—it was so hazardous, for, even should he reach it, the roots might give way. Then, rendered desperate by his position, and feeling sure that his fall must be the work of a few minutes if he stayed where he was, he gathered himself together, drew a long breath, made a tremendous effort, and got hold of the stout stem of the furze-bush, which tore and scarified his wrists. But that was not heeded, and drawing his feet up, he struggled vainly for a few moments to get some place of rest for them, but only for the gravel and stones to keep crumbling away.

Another minute of such effort and he must have fallen. It was only by letting himself hang by his hands with outstretched arms that he could just rest one foot upon a great stone embedded in the face of the pit. Small as it was, though, it was rest, and he remained quiescent once more.

As he hung there with nerves throbbing, and a strange aching sensation beginning to numb his muscles, he felt once more that he must fall, and so overpowering was the thought that he nearly loosened his hold. But the dread of death prevailed, and, making a fresh effort, he drew himself up quickly, gained a hold for the toe of one boot, made a snatch at a root a little higher, then at another, and his feet rested upon the furze stem. Another effort, and he had hold of one of the posts of the open fence, and the next minute he had crawled through the broken portion, struggled to his feet, and sunk down upon the heath, giddy, exhausted and ready to faint.

In a few minutes he had recovered himself, and getting up, he was fain to take off the stout bottom joint of his fly-rod, which, with its spear, made a sturdy support as he went to the edge of the pit, and with a shrinking sensation that he could not master, gazed down below.

He turned shuddering away, and walked a dozen paces to where he could made his way down through the trees to the bottom of a slope, where, parting the bushes, he directly after stood in the cart-track, now grown over with grass and heather, but which had once been the way used by those who carted the gravel.

His giddiness wore off, and gave place to a terrible feeling of dread as he walked hastily on, parting at last some low-growing twigs of birch, to stand beside the prostrate body of his adversary.

Millet was lying upon his back with one leg bent under him, and his arm in an unnatural position, and as James Huish gazed down upon him, the horrible thought occurred to him that the end of his affair of gallantry, as he termed it, might be a trial for murder.

As this thought presented itself, bitter repentance attacked him; his knees shook beneath him, and at last he fell upon them beside the body of his former friend, to moan in agony.

"God help me, what have I done?"

He took the fallen man's hand, and laid the arm in a natural position.

It was broken.

He then tried to lay his leg in its normal place, but there was something wrong; he could not tell what. And now he did what he might have been expected to do first, laid his hand upon the breast to try and find out if the injured man still lived.

He started to his feet then with the cold perspiration bedewing his forehead, and gazing sharply round, he exclaimed:

“I call Heaven to witness I never meant him harm.”

Then, throwing himself upon his knees, he began to examine the injured man once more, with feverish haste tearing open his shirt-front, laying his ear close to his lips, and ending by scooping up some clear water with both his hands from a little pool hard by, and dashing it in the prostrate man’s face.

“I little thought it would come to this. Rob—can you hear me? My God!” he groaned, “he must be dead.”

At that moment, to his great joy, the injured man moaned slightly, and, to Huish’s great relief, at last opened his eyes, and gazed vacantly round.

“Can you drink some of this?” said Huish eagerly, as he unscrewed the top of a small flask, and held it to the other’s lips.

Millet swallowed a few drops, and soon the vacant look passed from his eyes, and he groaned heavily.

“Huish,” he said hoarsely. “You’ve given me—my death-blow—hope first—now my life.”

“No, no—no, no!” exclaimed Huish. “Can you bear for me to leave you now? I’ll run for help.”

“Stop,” exclaimed Millet, making an effort to rise, and sinking back with a groan of agony. “Stop! come closer.”

Huish obeyed, and held the flask once more to his lips, but it was pushed aside.

“Is this manslaughter or murder?” he said, with a bitter smile.

“I protest to heaven,” began Huish.

“Hush! Listen! That poor girl—Mary—now—quick, at once—swear to me by all you hold sacred—you will—at once—make her your wife.”

Millet’s face was ghastly pale, and he spoke with difficulty, but one hand now grasped the wrist of Huish with a firm hold, and his eyes were fixed upon those of the man who bent over him with feverish intensity.

“Yes, yes, I will—on my soul, I will,” cried Huish, with frantic vehemence. “Rob, old fellow, if I could undo—”

“You cannot. Quick, man; swear it—you will marry her—at once.”

“I swear I will,” cried Huish.

“So help you God.”

“So help me, God!” exclaimed Huish, “and help me now,” he added in agony, “for he is dying.”

“Here—below there—Hi!” shouted a voice from the pathway above. “What’s the matter?”

“Quick, quick, help!” cried Huish, and his appeal was answered by rapid footsteps, the rustling of bushes, and directly after, a short, broad-shouldered young man, with a large head and keen grey eyes, was at his side.

“I say,” he cried; “struggle up above, broken fence, man killed!”

Huish started back, staring at him with dilated eyes, and then by an effort he exclaimed:

“Quick—run—the nearest doctor, man.”

“Six miles away,” was the sharp reply. “I’m a sucker—medical stoo,” he added; and pulling off his coat, he rapidly rolled it into a pad for a pillow before proceeding in a business-like way to examine the fallen man’s injuries. “I say, this is bad—arm broken—hip joint out—hold still, old fellow, I won’t hurt you,” he said, as his patient moaned. “You’d better go for help. I’ll stay. Leave me that flask; and, I say, just see if my fishing tackle’s all right: I left it up at the top.” Then, as if inspired by the words uttered by the injured man a few minutes before, he exclaimed: “I say, I don’t know that I ought to let you go; is this manslaughter or murder?”

“No,” moaned Millet, unclosing his eyes, and speaking in a hoarse whisper—“my old friend—an accident—sir—an accident.”

“I say, the brandy, man, the brandy,” cried the new-comer. “By Jove he’s fainted.”

“He’s dead—he’s dead,” groaned Huish frantically, as he sank upon his knees and caught his friend’s hand. “Rob, old fellow, I’d give my life that this had not happened; but I’ll keep my word; I’ll keep my word.”

Foster-Parents.

As Jane Glyne said, just four miles away from The Dingle was a low, long range of hovels, roughly built in the coarsest manner, and so covered in that but for a stuffing of straw here and there, the bleak winds and rain that come even in summer could beat through with all their force.

The hovels were built on the unity principle—one room—one door—one chimney—one window, and they stood in a row close by the bank of a canal which formed the great highway to and from the dirty Goshen of these modern children of Israel.

But they were not Jews, any more than they were Christians: they were simply work-people—the slaves who make bricks without straw, and not for the use of a king of Egypt, but for modern Babylon. The canal was the great highway to this settlement, which stood in an earth-gnawed desert of its own; but all the same there was a rugged pathway which led towards the pretty stream on whose bank stood Mrs Riversley's cottage, passable in fine weather, a slough in wet; and there was a roadway for carts, a horribly churned up mingling of mud and water, along which chariot wheels drave heavily to work woe upon that patient martyr of ours—the horse.

It was not a pleasant spot that brickfield, and seemed to have been thrust out far from the habitations of ordinary men. It was not salubrious, but then its subsoil was of the stiffest clay. Here the brickmakers lived gregariously, each hovel containing as many as it would hold. Here four or five men 'pigged' together. It was their own term, and most appropriate. In another hovel, a young couple would have three young men lodgers, while the occupants of other dens would have done the same, only that their swarming children did not give room for lodgers to lie down, the superficies of the floors being small.

A desolate-looking spot on a flat expanse, through which the canal, erst a river, ran. It was once a series of pleasant meadows, but Babylon swallows many bricks. Hence the tract had been delved all over into a chaos of clay, where long rows of bricks stood drying, while others were being made. Stagnant water covered with green scum lay in the holes whence clay had been dug, while other holes were full of liquid mud. Dirt-pie-making by horse-power seemed to be going on all day long, and soft mud mixtures were formed, water being run into banked-up lakes by means of wooden troughs, while every here and there wretched horses, blindfolded so that they should not resent their task, seemed to be turning torture machines to break up so much obstinate clay upon the wheel.

The breeze there was not a balmy wind, laden with sweet floral odours, but a solid gritty breeze, being the musty, ill-savoured, sifted ashes of the great city, brought in processions of barges to mix with the clay, to be burned and go back as so much brick.

"Bring that bairn here," cried a shrill voice, proceeding from a being, who, but for the shaping of the scanty garment she had on, might have been taken for a clay-daubed man. Her long cotton dress clung close to her figure, for it was soaked with water, and on "that bairn," a tiny little morsel whose experience of the world was not many hours old, being brought to her by a half-naked girl of ten with something cotton upon her, but more clay, the infant was tended in a maternal way for some little time, during which the woman, as she rocked herself to and fro, made use of an unoccupied hand to draw a piece of rag from her pocket, and then, much to the discomfort of the infant, she tied up in the corners and middle of the rag, with as many knots, five new, bright sovereigns.

"Look out, mother," cried the girl, but her warning came too late: a heavy-looking man in half a shirt, and a pair of trousers held up by a strap, and who seemed to go by machinery, for he emitted puffs of smoke from a short black pipe as he moved, made a snatch at the rag, and thrust it into his pocket.

"I'll take care o' that 'ere," he growled; and, as the woman uttered a resentful cry, he "made an offer" at her with the back of his hand, and then began puffing smoke once more, and moved away. The woman cowered down to avoid the expected blow, muttered viciously to herself, and at last rose, and tucked the babe into an improvised bed of rags in the shelter of a shed. This, by the way, was only a sloping roof of boards some six feet by five, covering the rough bench upon which a brickmaker works, and being unoccupied just then, came in handy for the purpose to which it was put.

"I'll have that back agen, old man," the woman muttered to herself. "Just wait till you're asleep. Now then," she cried aloud to sundry clayey imps who were at work fetching and carrying the plastic mass with which they were daubed, "keep a hye on this bairn, all on yer. If Bill Jones's dawg comes anigh, let go at him."

Saying this, she joined "father," who under the next shed was puffing away as he worked, a puff being emitted as each brick was made in its mould, and turned out upon a board.

"When's she comin' agen about that there kid?" growled father.

"Wait and see," said the woman surlily, as she attacked a mass of clay, as if it were so much dough pinched off pieces, and roughly shaped them into loaves a little larger than a brick ready for the man to mould.

Then there was a pause, during which the puffs of smoke came with beautiful regularity from the brickmaker's mouth, and as a boy approached, it almost seemed as if he were going to stoke father, and put on some more coals; but he only dabbed down a mass of clay which he had carried upon his head, whose shape was printed in the lump which left a portion amongst the boy's hair.

"Think it were Bill Jones's dawg as took Lamby's kid, mother?" growled father at last.

"Think? I'm sure on it," said mother. "It were there one minute, and it were gone the next. Where could it ha' gone if he hadn't took it."

The machinery stopped, for father took his pipe out of his mouth, wiped his lips with the back of his clayey hand, which was all the cleaner afterwards, father's lips having the character of a short stubbly bristled brush. Then he thought for a minute; the machinery began to go once more, a puff of smoke was emitted from his lips and he replied:

"Dunno!"

“I think Lamby’s gal, July, dropped it in the canal, and was ’fraid to tell,” said the girl in the clay robe shrilly.

“You hold your noise, and look alive wi’ them lumps,” growled father, who made as if to strike the girl, whereupon she ducked down to avoid the expected blow, dodged away to a safe distance, put out her tongue, and said, “Yah!” and the other children—four—all engaged in carrying clay, laughed and ran to avoid blows.

They varied in age from five to fourteen, and were all richly clothed in clay, which coated them from their hair—tangled and hardened with the worked-up adhesive soil—to their very toes, which printed their shapes in the moist ground they trod.

Father seeming disposed to “hull” one of the moulds at them, they all hastened away to the clay mill—a machine like a great churn bound with many strong iron hoops and with a thumper or plunger therein, to which a long wooden bar was attached, harnessed to one end of which was another blindfolded skeleton of a horse, which still retained its skin and vitality, and went round and round despondently, as if under the impression that it was going straight forward; but a sharp jerk of the head seemed to say from time to time: “It doesn’t matter; it will not be for long.”

At the bottom of the great mill, in a gloomy hole, was a clayey man in a kind of rough apron, and armed with a piece of wire two feet long, whose ends were twisted round a couple of pieces of wood to form handles.

As the mill turned, the well-mixed clay was forced through the bottom in a mass some ten inches in diameter, which from time to time the man dexterously cut through with his wire, and passed the pieces to the children who came for fresh supplies.

One took the heavy fat lump, and hugged it to its breast, making a mould in the top for its little chin.

Another had it dabbed upon its curly head; another bore it upon the shoulder, leaving therein the print of the ear; but the favourite way seemed to be to hug it to the breast back to the shed, where mother seized it and went on making her brown loaves.

Father, whose external machinery consisted of some water, some dry, sandy earth, and a little oblong box the shape of the brick, seized the brown loaves his wife passed to him, gave them a dexterous dab which forced them into the mould, scraped off the top level with the sides, pushed it along on a board, raised the mould, and left there a soft clay brick.

Then with regular puffs the process was repeated again and again, while a man with a strange-shaped barrow removed the new soft bricks and bore them away.

At the first sight it seemed as if the babe Jane Glyne had brought had fallen amongst savages, but they were English fellow-creatures, living—existing rather—not so very far from the centre of civilisation, and bricks are in great demand.

As the work went on in its muddy monotony, an evil-looking, long-jawed dog, the very opposite of the hound in the legend who slew the wolf to save his master’s child, came slinking and sniffing about the sheds. He was a lean, starving, wolfish, mangy cur, with reddish glaring eyes, always on the watch for kicks and blows. He would have been a big dog had he been fed, but want of food appeared to have produced a bad crop of hair upon his skin, and given him a thin shadowy look even to his head, which seemed to have been starved into a snarl and a set of teeth.

The dog slunk here and slunk there for a time, till his keen senses led him towards where, some fifty yards away, one of the brickmakers’ dinners lay within his reach. Giving a sharp glance round, he had already opened his sharp jaws to snatch up the knotted handkerchief which held a basin, when a well-aimed, half-dried brick struck him in the ribs, which emitted a cavernous drummy sound, and with a sharp yelp the brute bounded off.

But he was too hungry to be driven right away, and before long he stopped short, screwed himself round, and soothed the injured spot with half a dozen licks. Then, wild of eye and wolfish of aspect, he turned once more towards the sheds to seek for food.

He whined a little, either from pain or from an injured feeling—his *amour propre* telling him that dogs must live as well as the savages round whose camp he prowled. Then, forgetting one pain external in a greater one within, he set off once more, but this time displaying a caution worthy of a wolf as he neared the shed where father, mother, and the clayey children were all so busily at work making their summer harvest—too busy to mind the wretched foster-child, which, after feebly appealing against the neglect, and turning its little face to and fro in search of something warm, had gone off fast asleep.

Inoculated for a Wolf.

Suddenly in the midst of the work there was the sound of a whip cracking, accompanied by loud oaths, many of them very red, shouts, and the jerking noise of chain harness.

It was nothing new, but being a diversion from the monotony of their work, half the brickmakers stopped to look on.

The remnant of a fine horse was in the shafts of a heavily-laden sand cart, which he had dragged for some distance through the tenacious mud of the deeply-cut ruts, till, coming to a softer place than usual, one wheel had gone down nearly to the nave in the mire, tilting the cart sideways, and every frantic struggle made by the poor beast only seemed to set it more fast. Its hoofs, which sank deeply, churned up the mud and water, and it stood still at last with heaving flanks, its great earnest eyes staring appealingly at its masters, while the blindfolded skeleton in the clay mill went round and round, then stopped short, and gave its head a jerk, as if saying once more, “It doesn’t matter; it

will not be for long.”

Click, clack, clack went the whip, and the skeleton in the mill started energetically once more, while the horse in the cart struggled spasmodically to move the load, much of its strength being, however, exhausted by extricating its hoofs from the clayey, sticky mud.

Click, clack, clack went the whip once more, and as Jane Glyne came along panting and perspiring with the weight of her bundle, a little crowd of clayey savages began to collect.

The horse struggled with a piteous expression in the wrinkles above its starting eyes; its flanks heaved; they moistened the lash of the cruel whip, and still it strove; but the cart wheels had sunk so low that a team could hardly have dragged it out, and the willing beast vainly essayed the impossible. A dozen strong men stood around, as many shovels were within reach ready to remove the clay from the wheels, and partially dig them out; but, as Jane Glyne looked on, in a strange, hard, callous manner, no one made a move, not a hand was placed to a wheel-spoke to help with a few pounds the labouring beast. Cartloads of hard broken brick rubbish lay about that could have been thrown down to fill up the ruts; but not a barrowful was brought, and amidst a shower of oaths, there was added, to make it a storm, a shower of blows.

The horse’s struggles grew interesting, and as the little crowd increased pipes were replenished, and the heavy clay-sullied men looked on.

More blows, more struggles; but the cart sank deeper, and was not likely to be moved, for, in spite of the frantic way in which the horse plunged into its collar, it could not stir the load an inch. Not an inch, strong as it was; but there is exhaustion even for the strongest, and at last the poor brute stood deep in the tenacious mud, with wet heaving flanks, staring eyes, and trembling in every limb.

“Here, give us holt!” cried father; and his children brought up in this earthly school looked on with glee.

“Father ’ll soon fetch him out,” said the eldest boy; and it seemed that at last the poor brute was to get some help. But it was not help the horse was to have, for the whip was handed to father.

“Take holt on his head,” he cried to the man in charge, and the latter ruffian seized the rein, and began to jerk and drag the bit savagely.

“Jeet—jeet—aw—a—a—ya! Hoot!” roared the ruffian, with a hot burst of oaths, while father, puffing regularly his smoke, turned his machinery to bear upon the poor dumb brute, and with a grim smile lashed and cut at it, ingeniously seeking out the tender parts beneath.

“Gie’t ’im, lad. Gie’t ’im,” rose in chorus.

The poor trembling horse, roused by the stinging thong, shot into the collar in a way that broke one of the chains that linked it to the shaft, and then as a more cruel lash fell upon its side, it fell upon its knees, the cart shafts pinning it down as the load sank forward. Now followed more lashing, the horse struggled frantically, rolled over, dragging its legs from the mud, plunged and struck out as if galloping, though its hoofs only beat the mud and water. Then it raised its head two or three times as if trying to regain its feet, before letting it subside into the mud, and the eye that was visible began to roll.

“Get up!” roared father, with a burst of oaths, and again the whip came into play.

But it was an order that the poor brute, willing to the last, could not obey, pinned down as it was by the shafts and the weight of the sand. At the first cut of the whip, though, the horse struck out with its hoofs, sending the mud flying, and causing a roar of laughter amongst the crowd as father was bespattered from head to foot. Then there was a curious gasping cry as the horse threw up its head; a shiver ran through its heaving frame; a couple of jets of blood started from its nostrils; there was a strange sigh, and the head fell heavily down in the mud and water.

Even then there was a sharp lash given with the whip, just as a convulsive kick or two splashed up the mud, before the willing beast lay motionless; it had broken its heart—no metaphor here for excess of sorrow, but the simple truth, while the listening skeleton in the mill gave its head another jerk, and seemed to say, “I knew it wouldn’t be for long.”

“Well—”

Father did not finish his sentence, for Jane Glyne uttered a loud shriek and dropped her bundle in the mud just as a shout arose from one of father’s clay-daubed sons.

“Hi! chivy him,” roared the boy. “Bill Jones’s dawg has got that kid.”

It was too true: the wolfish starveling beast had watched his opportunity while the crowd was occupied, slinked up to the shed, seized the babe by one arm, and was stealing cautiously off, when the boy turned and saw him, shouted, gave chase, and the savage brute broke into a heavy lumbering canter.

For a short distance he dragged the child along the earth; then, with a dexterous twist, he threw it over his shoulders and increased his pace.

“Hi! stop him, hi!” roared a score of voices which echoed through the brickfield, and men, women, and children came hurrying from all parts to take up the chase.

For they saw in a moment what had taken place, and the hunt roused all to a pitch of excitement consequent upon

the evil reputation borne by “Bill Jones’s dawg.”

This being the case, the way off to the open fields where the woodland and stream lay beyond the flat plain was closed, and for a moment or two the dog halted and threw up his head to see that he was hemmed in on three sides by enemies, while at his back was the canal, and for water he had no love.

Enemies they were indeed, for the brickfield savages were human, after all, and every man, woman, and child was armed with shovel, stick, or well-burned fragment of refuse brick—this last, a missile that he knew by heart as angular and sharp; and dog as he was, he had sense enough to feel that, if taken, they would pound the life out of his wretched carcase on the spot.

If he had dropped his prey, he might have shown his pursuers a clean pair of heels; but he was hungry—wolfishly hungry, and more savage than domestic as he was, he literally knew the taste of that which he held between his teeth. He would have died the death before, on suspicion, had not Bill, his master, interposed. Now, however, he saw the said Bill armed with a clay spade, although he whistled to him to come. But “Bill Jones’s dawg” knew too well the treachery of the human heart, and would not listen to whistle nor following call.

Which way should he go? Towards that frantic woman who had torn off her shawl? No. There was the clinker kiln, where a whole burning of bricks was spoiled. He could not reach the open—he would have been cut off as he went, and chopped with spades, and stunned with brick-bats; but there was that kiln standing old and weather-beaten, a very sanctuary of bricks burned into solid masses, full in view, though a quarter of a mile lower by the other works. Yes, there was that kiln abounding in convenient holes, where he had often spent the night; he might reach there in safety with his prey, and then—

“Hi! stop him—stop him!”

The yelling crowd was closing in and growing more dangerous every moment, so the dog took a tighter grip of his prize, and made straight for the old kiln.

Brickmaking was impossible in the face of such a chase, and everyone joined in, with the full determination that this day “Bill Jones’s dawg” must die.

“Hi! stop him—stop him!”

By an ingenious double or two, the dog nearly reached the refuge that he sought, but he was cut off and turned back by swift-footed boys, yelling with excitement and panting to hurl the first lump of brick at the hated beast. But the dog kept out of harm’s way by running between the rows of piled-up, unburnt bricks, which afforded him shelter, and the baby, too, for missiles went flying after them at every chance.

Up this row, down that, and zigzag to and fro, till the canal was near, and the forces joining, the dog was nearly driven to leap into the foul stagnant water; but again he doubled, passed through an opening, and was once more in the shelter between two rows of bricks, cantering along towards the end. Here, though, he was cut off again by one of the lads, who, divining the course he had taken, shouted to part of the contingent, and turned the wily brute back.

But he was not beaten. He was starving, but he was hard and strong: no fattened, asthmatic favourite was he, but long-winded and lank, ready to run for an hour yet, even with the load he bore. Wily too, as his relative the fox, he cleverly doubled in and out, in the maze-like rows of wet bricks, avoiding as if by magic the missiles that were thrown; and at last, just as the boys were driving him back towards the spade-armed men, whom he had from the first given a wide berth, he cleverly dashed for the weak part in the advancing line of lads, passed them, put on all his pace, and went away for the kiln.

There were swift runners amongst those lightly-clad, barefooted boys, and now that it had become a tail race, away they went with all their might, faster and faster, and yelling till they were hoarse. For there were shouts and cries of encouragement from behind, enough to spur on the greatest laggard, and on they went till the dog reached the old kiln and tried to enter a low hole, probably the one he made his den.

Here, though, he had a check, by the clothes of the infant catching in the rough scoria, when—foxlike—he backed out, turned, and then began to back in.

That momentary check saved the child: for just as it was disappearing in the opening, the foremost boy bounded up, caught the infant by its leg, and the long robe it wore, and, pulling and shouting hard, succeeded in drawing the wretched little object back, the dog snarling savagely, and holding on with all his might; but just then half a brick smote him on the head, he loosed his hold, and, backing in, the child with its lacerated arm and shoulder was held up on high amidst the cheering of the boys.

In another minute the panting crowd surrounded the opening, and Jane Glyne had the baby in her arms, wondering whether it was alive or dead.

The tragedy was not over yet.

Bill Jones stood amongst the men, and was for defending his “dawg,” but the blood of all present was thoroughly roused, and though Bill declared his readiness to fight any man present for a pot, he soon cried off on finding that his challenge was taken up by a score of fellow-workers, half of whom began to prepare for the trial by battle on the spot.

“I don’t keer what you do wi’ the dawg,” Bill growled, taking out and beginning to fill his pipe, and directly after joining in the attempt about to be made to get the beast out of his place of refuge.

Forming themselves into a semicircle round the opening, a part stood ready, while some of the sturdiest brickmakers began to drag the burrs apart, a task in which they had not been long engaged, standing upon the heap, before there was a rustling noise; the old rough bricks began to crumble down inwards; and with a savage snarl the frightened dog bounded out.

There was a shout, a chorus of yells, mingled with which was the last ever given by “Bill Jones’s dawg,” for his mortal race was run. Even Cerberus of the three heads could not have existed many seconds beneath the shower of bricks and clinkers that assailed him after the savage chop given by father’s spade. One yell only, and there was a mass of brick rising over him, the dog’s death and burial being a simultaneous act on the part of those who, old and young, did not pause until they had erected a rough but respectable mausoleum over the wolfish creature’s grave.

“Put a bit o’ wet ’bacco on the place,” said father, removing his pipe as he turned to where Jane Glyne and mother were examining the little frail morsel, which, in spite of its usage, began now to wail feebly; “put a bit o’ wet ’bacco on the place; it ain’t dead. There, give it to mother; and, I say, when are you going to pay agen?”

“Never,” cried Jane Glyne, hastily wrapping the baby in the shawl now handed by one of the staring girls.

“Oh, it ain’t hurt much,” said father; “put a bit o’ wet ’bacco on the place.”

“Hurt!” cried the woman excitedly, as with a newly-awakened interest she held the child tightly to her hard breast, “it’s a’most killed, and if it lives, that dog’s teeth have poisoned it, and it will go mad.”

“Not it,” growled father; “why, the dawg is dead. Give it to mother, and I say, when—why, she’s gone!”

He said this after a pause, as he stared after Jane Glyne hurrying towards the path where her bundle lay, but thinking more of her little burden, inoculated by the poison of those wolfish teeth—blood-poisoned, perhaps, as to its mental or bodily state—certainly suffering from lacerations that might end its feeble little life.

Volume One—Chapter One. The Story - Years Ago.

Cinderella and the Sisters.

“Ruth.”

“Yes, dear; I’ll come directly.”

“Ruth!”

“Be quiet, Clo. She can’t come yet.”

“But she must come. Ruth!”

“May I go to her, Marie?”

“No, certainly not. Finish my hair first.”

Two pretty little white patient hands went on busying themselves plaiting the rich dark-brown hair of a singularly handsome girl, sitting back in a shabby, painted, rush-bottomed chair, in a meanly-furnished chamber, whose bare boards looked the more chilly for the scraps of carpet stretched by bedside, toilet-table, and washstand.

The bed had not long been left, and the two pillows each bore the impress of a head. The bedstead was an attenuated four-post structure, with dreary and scanty slate-coloured hangings, that seemed to have shrunk in their many washings, and grown skimpy and faded with time; the rush-bottomed chairs were worn and the seats giving way, and a tall painted wardrobe had been scrubbed until half the paint had gone. Even the looking-glass upon the paltry old dressing-table seemed to have reflected until it could perform its duties no more, for the silver had come off in patches, and showed the bare brown wood behind.

Wherever the eye rested it was upon traces of cleanly, punctilious poverty, for even the dresses that were hanging from the row of drab-painted wooden pegs nailed against the dreary washed-out wall-paper looked mean and in keeping with the room. There was not one single attractive object of furniture or attire besides, not even a bright spring flower in a vase or glass; all was drab, dreary, and dull, and yet the room and objects full of life and light.

For the girl seated indolently in the chair before the glass, draped in a long washed-out dressing-gown that heightened rather than hid the graces of her well-developed form, possessed features which might have been envied by a queen. Her dark, well-arched eyebrows, the long heavy lashes that drooped over her large eyes, her creamy complexion, rather full but well-cut lips and high brow, were all those of a beautiful woman whom you would expect to look imperious and passionate if she started into motion, and raised and flashed upon you the eyes that were intent upon a paper-covered French novel, whose leaves she turned over from time to time.

Bending over her, and nimbly arranging the rich hair that hung over the reader’s shoulders, was a girl not unlike her in feature, but of a fairer and more English type. Where the hair of the one was rich and dark, that of the other was soft and brown. The contour was much the same, but softer, and the eyes were of that delicious well-marked grey that accords so well with light nut-brown hair. There was no imperious look in her pleasant, girlish countenance, for it was full of care consequent upon her being wanted in two places at once.

For the sharp demand made upon her was uttered by a third occupant of the room—a girl of one or two and twenty,

sister, without doubt, of the reader at the dressing-table, and greatly like her, but darker, her eyebrows and hair being nearly black, her complexion of a richer creamy hue, one which seemed to indicate the possibility of other than English blood being mingled in her veins.

She, too, was draped in a long washed-out print dressing-gown, and as she lolled upon a great box whose top was thinly stuffed and covered with chintz to make it do duty for an ottoman, her long dark hair fell in masses over her shoulders.

Sisters undoubtedly, and the family resemblance of the fair-complexioned girl suggested the possibility of her occupying the same relationship, though the difference was so marked that cousin seemed more probable.

“Finish your own hair,” cried the girl upon the ottoman, in an angry voice. “I won’t wait any longer; I was up first;” and she banged down the circulating library novel she had been skimming.

“Shan’t!”

“Bring my hairbrush, Ruth.”

The girl addressed retained her hold of the massive plait that she was forming, and, snatching a well-worn hairbrush from the table, reached out as far as she could from the tether of plait that held her to the girl in the chair, when the brush was snatched from her, and sent whizzing through the air, narrowly missing the reader’s head, but putting an end to the reflective troubles of the unfortunate toilet-glass, which was struck right in the centre, and shivered into fragments.

“Oh!” ejaculated Ruth.

“Beast!” cried Marie, leaping up, sending her chair backwards, and dashing the French novel at her sister.

“Wretch! devil!” retorted the other, her creamy face flushing, her dark eyes scintillating with passion, and her ruddy lips parting from her regular white teeth, as she retaliated by throwing the book she held, but with a very bad aim.

For a moment it seemed as if blows were to follow, but after a short skirmish with a comb, an empty scent-bottle, and a pin-cushion, the beginner of the fight uttered a cry of triumph, and pounced upon the French novel.

“I wanted that,” she cried.

“Ruth, fetch back that book,” cried Marie.

“Please give me that book back, Clotilde,” said the obedient girl, as, crossing the room, she held out her hand to the angry beauty.

For answer, the maiden upon the box caught her by the wrist with both hands, bent her head rapidly down, and fixed her white teeth in the soft, round arm.

“There, take that, and I wish it was ’Rie’s. Now you stop here, and do my hair directly. Hateful little beast! why didn’t you come before?”

The blood flushed up in Ruth’s face, and little troubled lines made their appearance in her forehead as, after a piteous glance at the other sister, she began to brush the great flowing bands of dark hair waiting their turn.

“I don’t care,” said Marie, with all the aggravating petulance of a child. “Mine was just done.”

“But I’ve got the book,” retorted the other. “Be careful, little beast; don’t pull it out by the roots.”

She turned her face up sharply to the busy toiler, with the effect that she dragged her own hair, and this time she struck the girl so sharply on the cheek with the open hand that the tears started to her eyes.

“Nasty, spiteful, malicious wretch!” said Marie, giving the finishing touches to her own hair; “but you’ll have a good lecture for breaking the glass. Aunties will be angry.”

“I shall say Ruth did it,” said the girl.

“Just like you, Clo,” retorted the other.

“If you call me Clo again, I’ll—I’ll poison you.”

“Shall if I like: Clo, old Clo—Jew—Jew—Jew! There!”

As she spoke, Marie turned her mocking countenance to her sister, and finished off by making what children call “a face,” by screwing up her mouth and nose; desisting, however, as Clotilde made a dash at the water-glass to throw it at her head, and then made a feint of spitting at her in a feline way.

The whole affair seemed to be more the quarrel of vulgar, spoiled children of nine or ten than an encounter between a couple of grown women in the springtide of their youth, and Ruth silently glanced from one to the other with a troubled, half-pitying expression of countenance; but she did not speak until the noise had begun to lull.

“Please don’t say that I broke the glass,” she said at last.

“I shall. Hold your tongue, miss. She broke it through her wretched carelessness, didn’t she, ’Rie?”

“Give me back the French book, and I’ll tell you,” was the reply.

“Take your nasty old French book,” said Clotilde, throwing it back. “I’ve read it all, and it’s horribly naughty. Now, then, didn’t she break the glass?”

“Yes,” said Marie, arranging her shabby morning dress, and standing before the fragments of the toilet-glass, a handsome, lady-like girl, whose beauty no shabbiness of costume could conceal.

“There,” said Clotilde, “do you hear, Cindy? You broke the glass, and if you say you didn’t I’ll make your wretched little life miserable.”

“Very well, dear, I’ll say I did,” said Ruth calmly.

“Hist, ’Rie! The book!” whispered Clotilde, her sharp ears having detected a coming step.

Marie made a pantherine bound across the room, and thrust the book between the mattress and palliasse just as the handle rattled, and a tall, gaunt elderly woman entered the room.

She was not pleasant to look upon, for there was too much suggestion of a draped scaffold erected for the building of a female human figure about her hard square bony form, while her hard face, which seemed to wrinkle only about the forehead, as if it had never smiled since childhood, was not made more pleasant by the depth and darkness of the lines in her brow all being suggestive of the soap and flannel never probing their depths, which was not the case, however, for she was scrupulously clean, even to her blonde cap, and its side whiskers with a sad-coloured flower in each.

“Morning, children,” she said harshly. “Your aunts ’ll be down directly. You ought to be dressed by now.”

“Morning, nurse,” said the girls in chorus.

“Ruth’s so slow,” said Clotilde.

“Then do your hair yourself,” said the woman roughly. “Ruth, child, turn down that bed, and open the window.”

Their actions before her arrival had been those of children; she treated them like children, and they were as obedient and demure now as little girls, while the woman placed a large white jug containing a tablespoon upon the table, and a plain tumbler beside it.

Ruth began to open the bed, and Marie cast anxious eyes at the part where her French novel lay *perdu*.

“’Tisn’t physic morning again, nurse,” said Clotilde pettishly.

“Yes it is, miss, so don’t you grumble. You know it’s Wednesday as well as I do.”

Clotilde turned her head away, and gave her teeth an angry snap as she went on rapidly dressing, while the new arrival poured out half a tumbler of a dark-brown fluid from the jug, after giving the said jug a twirl round to amalgamate its contents. This tumbler was handed to Clotilde.

“I’m not ready, nurse,” she said pettishly; “leave it on the table, and we’ll take it. We shall be down directly.”

“I don’t go till I can tell your aunts that every drop’s taken,” said the woman sturdily. “I know your tricks, making Miss Ruth drink it all. Both of you did last time.”

“Did Ruth dare to say we did?” cried Marie sharply.

“No, she didn’t, miss, so don’t you go in a pet.”

“Then how could you tell?” cried Clotilde.

“How could I tell, big baby?” said the woman scornfully; “why, wouldn’t three doses make her ill?”

“I don’t know. Ugh! filthy stuff!” said Clotilde, taking the tumbler, drinking off the brown draught, and shuddering afterwards. She set down the glass, which was, after another flourish of the white jug, the spoon being held captive by the woman’s thumb, half filled again.

“Now, Miss Marie.”

Marie made a grimace, and drank her portion in turn, after which Ruth swallowed hers with the patience and long-suffering of custom.

“Now, Miss Clotilde,” said the woman, picking out something dark from the bottom of the jug with the spoon, “here’s your prune.”

This was held out in the spoon, and it was ludicrous to see the handsome, womanly girl open her ruddy lips to admit the brown swollen morsel, a similar process being gone through with Marie and Ruth.

“There, children, don’t make such a fuss about it,” said the woman. “It’s lucky for you that you’ve got aunties who take such care of you. Pretty skins and complexions you’d have if you weren’t looked after, and when you grow up, if you’re wise, you’ll treat yourselves just the same. Now then, make haste down.”

This was uttered as she left the room and closed the door, after which Clotilde waited till her steps were inaudible, when she stamped with both her feet, and ground her teeth like an angry child.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she cried. "The disgusting, filthy stuff. I'm sick of it all, 'Rie. I'll run away with the first man who asks me, even if he's a sweep. I hate it; I hate everything; I hate myself, and won't submit any longer. We're not children, and I won't have it. Where's our spirit, that we don't rebel?"

"Where could we go? What could we do?" replied Marie. "It's horrible. How could we bear it all these weary years?"

She clasped her hands, and threw herself into her chair, rocking herself to and fro, while Ruth crept softly to her side, and placed her blonde face against the riper, rounder cheek of her cousin.

It was a mute way of showing her sympathy, and Marie felt it to be so, for she turned quickly and kissed her just as the loud jangle of a large hand-bell was heard from below, and Clotilde returned from the open window.

"Come down, girls," she said bitterly; "there's the bell. Old Markes didn't see the broken glass. Go on, Ruthy, and let's get prayers over, or you'll be afraid to tell that fib."

The bell was still clanging as the three girls went down the one flight of stairs contained in their aunts' share of the private apartments at Hampton Court, at the bottom of which stairs a tall, thin young man, in a striped jacket, was frantically swinging the noisy instrument to and fro—having to stop, though, to allow the young ladies to pass, when he set down the bell with a clang upon the hearth-stoned floor in a dark corner, fiercely dragged a form from under the stairs, and carried it into the dining-room.

It was a brilliant morning in May, but the one window of that dark room received none of the sunshine, for it looked north, over a festive-looking yard or quadrangle, whose stones were mossy and green, kept comfortably damp by their proximity to a basin of water, out of which spurts of water rose from what looked like pieces of black gas-pipe; while three bloated gold and two silver fish swam solemnly round and round, gaping placidly, and staring with apoplectic eyes upwards at the strange phenomenon of what must have seemed to them like a constant shower of rain.

The room was lofty, and panelled in regular compartments, all painted a pale drab, as were also the sides of the floor where the well-worn, indescribable-patterned carpet did not reach; and over this painted portion chair-legs gave uncomfortable scroops.

It was a depressing room, without a particle of ornament, and would have produced indigestion in the healthiest subject. There was a circular sideboard at one end, upon which stood a solemn-looking lamp, whose globe made a dismal boom like a funeral knell when it was removed. Twelve spindly-legged chairs covered with chintz of a washed-out material stood stiffly against the walls, and there were two uneasy chairs covered with chintz and very angular in their backs on either side of the fire, where hung a pair of old-fashioned brass bellows and a worn-out telescope toasting-fork.

As the young ladies entered the room, looking as prim and demure as the chintz-covered chairs, a thin sharp cough was heard on the stairs, followed immediately by another thin sharp cough like the echo of the first, and two very tall meagre ladies entered the room.

Each was dressed in a pale washed-out fabric, with voluminous sleeves tight at the wrists, and had her grey hair in a large cluster of curls at the temple, the back hair being kept in place by a large tortoiseshell comb similar in shape to the leather withers protector carried on the collar by the horses in a brewer's dray.

There was a pinched, refined air about the aspect of their faces, as if they had led ascetic lives in an aristocratic shade; and as they entered the room side by side, the young ladies approached them, and were received with an old-fashioned courtly grace such as was probably presumed to be correct within these palatial walls.

"Good-morning, aunt dear," was said to each in turn by the young ladies, in return for which a little birdlike peck of a kiss was given to each soft round face, after which there was silence, each one waiting till there was a scuffle outside, and a little angry muttering, all of which was entirely ignored by the tall, thin, pale ladies, who stood with their mitten-covered hands crossed in front of them, and their eyes cast down.

Everything was so chilly, in spite of its being a warm spring morning, that the advent of a very old and battered but very hot bronze urn seemed quite to send a glow through the room as it was whisked in by the thin young man and placed upon the table, to hurry out and return directly with a crockery toast-rack, full of thin, dry husks of mortified half-burned bread.

Meanwhile, Sister Philippa unlocked a tea-caddy, while Sister Isabella let some hot water run into the pot, and poured it out into the pale blue-and-white cups.

Two caddy-spoonfuls were then placed in the pot, which was duly filled, and Sister Philippa said with grave austereness:

"My dears, will you take your places?"

Then in utter silence the three girls came to the table, and partook with their aunts of the very thin tea, sweetened with no liberal hand, while the bread-and-butter looked untempting and stale.

This went on for some few minutes, every act in connection with the breakfast being performed with scrupulous attention to etiquette, as taught in the highest old-fashioned circles.

"May I give you a little more tea, Clotilde?"

"Will you have the goodness to pass the bread-and-butter, Marie?"

"Ruth, I will trouble you, my dear, for the dry toast."

After awhile Sister Philippa started an enlivening conversation on the number of drawing-rooms that were held by her late Majesty Queen Adelaide at which they were present as girls, Sister Isabella being of our opinion that the Court dresses of that period of history were much more modest, refined and graceful than those of to-day.

Sister Philippa agreed to this, and with her agreement the breakfast came to an end.

"We will take our morning's walk, my dears, at once, as it is fine," said Sister Philippa. "Will you go and dress?"

"Yes, aunt," was chorused, and the young ladies rose, curtsied, and retired backwards from the room, to ascend to their chamber, through which Ruth had to proceed to get into the cupboard which held her bed and a small chest of drawers.

The moment they were inside the room, Clotilde rushed into the middle, gritting her teeth together and clenching her fists.

"Oh-h-h!" she exclaimed, with a cry of suppressed passion, "I can't bear it. I shall go mad."

Then with a bound she dashed to the bed, striking at it and seizing the pillow in her teeth.

Marie got rid of her suppressed vitality by fiercely seizing Ruth by the shoulders, shaking her angrily, and then, as if repenting, catching her about the waist, and waltzing her round the room.

"Oh, Clo! it's horrible," she cried, loosing Ruth to seize her sister. "Get up, and let's quarrel or fight, or do something. I can't—I won't—I shan't—I will not bear it. It's like being mummies in a tomb."

Clotilde turned round, and let herself sink upon the floor, with her head leaning back against the bed, biting the counterpane and twisting it viciously with her hands.

"'Rie," she said at last, and her eyes sparkled as she spoke, "do you know what happened in the old days to the captive maidens in the stony castles?"

"Yes; the knights came and rescued them."

"Then, why don't they come and rescue us? I'll run away with the first man who asks me. I'd marry that thin wretch Joseph to-morrow if he'd have me, and I'd stick pins in him all the rest of his life to see him writhe."

"I can't bear it much longer," said Marie, in a low, deep voice; "I'm nineteen, Clo, and you are turned twenty, and they treat us as if we were little children still. Ah, how I hate them both!"

"Oh, Marie," said Ruth reproachfully, "how can you say so!"

"Because I do—I do," she cried. "I'm not a soft, smooth thing like you. If this lasts much longer I shall poison them, so as to be hung out of my misery."

"I shan't," said Clotilde. "I say I'll marry the first man who asks me. I will marry him; I'll make him marry me; and then—ah," she cried fiercely, as she started up, and began pacing up and down, beautiful as some caged leopard, "once I am free, what I will do! We might as well be nuns."

"Better," cried Marie angrily, "for we should be real prisoners, and expect no better. Now we are supposed to be free."

"And there'd be some nice fat old father confessors to tease. Better than the smooth-faced, saintly Paul Montaigne. Oh, how I would confess!" cried Clotilde.

"Old Paul's a prig," said Marie.

"He's a humbug, I think," said Clotilde.

"Bother your nice old fat father confessors," cried Marie, with her eyes gleaming. "I should like them to be young, and big, and strong, and handsome."

"And with shaven crowns," said Clotilde maliciously. "How should you like them, Ruth?"

"I don't know," said Ruth simply. "I have never thought of such a thing."

"Take that, and that, you wicked story-teller!" cried Clotilde, slapping her arms; "I know you think more about men than either of us. For my part, the man I mean to have will—"

She stopped, for Marie laid her hand upon her lips, and they both began to prepare themselves for their walk as the grave-looking woman entered the room.

"Oh, you're not ready, then?" she said grimly.

"No, nurse; but we shall be directly."

"No, you needn't; you're not going."

"Not going, nurse? Why?"

"The new Lancer regiment is coming to the barracks this morning, and your aunts say some of the officers may be about."

Volume One—Chapter Two.

His Uncle's Nephew.

"Why didn't I come? Why should I? Very kind of Lady Millet to ask me, but I'm not a society man."

"Oh, but—"

"Yes, I know, lad. Did the affair go off well?"

"Splendidly, only mamma left the wine to the confectioner, and the champagne—"

"Gave you a horrible headache, eh? Serve you right; should have had toast-and-water."

"Marcus!"

"So Malpas came, did he?"

"Yes. Bad form, too. I don't like him, Glen. But that's all over now. Fellow can't always marry the woman he wants."

"Can't he?"

"No, of course not. I wish you had come, though."

"Thank you! But you speak in riddles, my little Samson. What's all over now, and what fellow can't always marry the woman he wants? Speak out, small sage!"

"I say, Glen, I didn't make myself."

"True, O king!"

"'Tisn't my fault I'm small."

"True."

"You do chaff me so about my size."

"For the last time: now proceed, and don't lisp and drawl. Who's who? as Bailey says."

"I thought I told you before about my sisters?"

"Often: that you have two pretty sisters—one married and one free."

"Well, my married sister, Mrs Morrison, used, I think, to care for Major Malpas."

"Sorry she had such bad taste."

This in an undertone.

"Eh?"

"Go on."

"Well, it didn't go on or come off, as you call it."

"As you call it, Dicky."

"I say, don't talk to me as if I were a bird."

"All right. Now then, let me finish for you: mamma married the young lady to someone else, and there is just a fag-end of the old penchant left."

"Oh, hang it, no!"

"I beg pardon!—the young lady's, too. But, my dear Dick, I am one of the most even-tempered of men; but if you keep up that miserable fashionable drawl and lisp, I shall take hold of you and shake you."

"But, my dear fellow—weally, Mawcus."

"Am I to do it? Say 'Marcus' out plain."

“Mawcus.”

“No! Marcus.”

“Marcus.”

“That’s better. There, hang it all, Dick, you are a soldier; for heaven’s sake be one. Try to be manly, old fellow, and pitch over those silly affectations.”

“It’s all very well for you,” said Dick Millet, in an ill-used tone. “You are naturally manly. Why, you are five feet ten at least, and broad-shouldered and strong.”

“While you are only about five feet two, and slight, and have a face as smooth as a girl’s.”

“Five feet three and a half,” said the other quickly.

“How do you know?”

“I made the sergeant put me under the standard this morning. I can’t help it if I haven’t got a heavy brown moustache like you!”

“Who said you could help it, stupid? Why, what a little gander you are, Dick! I’m eight-and-twenty, and you are eighteen.”

“Nineteen!”

“Well, nineteen, then. There, there, you are only a boy yet, so why not be content to be a boy? You’ll grow old quite fast enough, my dear lad. Do you know why I like you?”

“Well, not exactly. But you do like me, don’t you, Glen?”

“Like you? Yes, when you are what I see before me now, boyish and natural. When you put on those confounded would-be manly airs, and grow affected and mincing as some confounded Burlington Arcade dandy, I think to myself, What a contemptible little puppy it is!”

“I say, you know—” cried the lad, and he tried to look offended.

“Say away, stupid! Well?”

Captain Marcus Glen, of Her Majesty’s 50th Lancers, a detachment of which, from the headquarters at Hounslow, were stationed at Hampton Court, sank back in his chair, let fall the newspaper he had been reading, and took out and proceeded to light a cigar, while Richard Millet flushed up angrily, got off the edge of the table where he had been sitting and swinging a neat patent-leather boot adorned with a spur, and seemed for a moment as if he were about to leave the room in a pet.

Marcus Glen saw this and smiled.

“Have a cigar, Dick?” he said.

The lad frowned, and it was on his lips to say, “Thanks, I have plenty of my own,” but his eyes met those of the speaker looking kindly and half laughingly in his, and the feeling of reverence for the other’s manly attributes, as well as his vanity at being the chosen friend of one he considered to be the finest fellow in the regiment, made him pause, hesitate, and then hold out his hand for the cigar.

“Better not take it, Dick. Tobacco stops the growth.”

The boy paused with the cigar in his hand, and the other burst into a merry laugh, rose lazily, lit a match, and handed it to the young officer, clapping him directly after upon the shoulder.

“Look here, Dick,” he said; “shall I give you the genuine receipt how to grow into a strong, honest Englishman?”

“Yes,” cried the lad eagerly, the officer and the would-be man dropped, for the schoolboy to reassert itself in full force. “I wish you would, Glen, ’pon my soul I do.”

“Forget yourself then, entirely, and don’t set number one up for an idol at whose shrine you are always ready to worship.”

“I don’t quite understand you,” said the lad, reddening ingenuously.

“Oh yes, you do, Dick, or you would not have been measured this morning, and made that little nick with the razor on your cheek in shaving off nothing but soap. If you did not worship your confounded small self, you would not have squeezed your feet into those wretched little boots, nor have waxed those twenty-four hairs upon your upper lip; and ’pon my word, Dick, that really is a work of supererogation, for the world at large, that is to say our little world at large, is perfectly ignorant of their existence.”

“Oh, I say, you are hard on a man, Glen! ’Pon my soul, you are;” and the handsome little fellow looked, with his flushed cheeks and white skin, more girlish than ever.

“Hard? Nonsense! I don’t want to see you grow into a puppy. I must give you a lesson now and then, or you’ll be

spoiled; and then how am I to face Lady Millet after promising what I did?”

“Oh, I had a letter from mamma this morning,” said the lad; “she sent her kindest regards to you.”

“Thank her for them,” said the young officer. “Well, so the party went off all right, Dick?”

“Splendid! You ought to have been there. Gertrude would have been delighted to see you.”

“Humph! Out of place, my boy. Lady Millet wants a rich husband for your sister. I’m the wrong colour.”

“Not you. I don’t want Gerty to have someone she does not like.”

“But I thought you said that there was a Mr Huish, or some such name?”

“Well, yes, there is; but it may not come off. Mamma hates the Huishes.”

“You’re a character, Dick!” said the officer laughingly. “There, I’m going to make you dissipated to get you square, so light your cigar, my lad; I won’t bully you any more,” he continued, smiling good-humouredly, “and you may shave till your beard comes if you like, and wax your—your eyebrows—I mean moustache, and dandify yourself a little, for I like to see you smart; but an you love me, as the poet says, no more of that confounded lisp. Now then, you’ve been reconnoitring, have you, and spying out the barrenness of the land?”

“Yes, and it’s a horrible one-eyed sort of a place. Why don’t you come and have a look?”

“I shall presently. Seen the Palace?”

“I had a walk round and went into the gardens, which are all very well—old-fashioned, you know; but the private apartments are full of old maids.”

“Ah, yes; maiden ladies and widows. Sort of aristocratic union, I’ve heard. Good thing for you, Dick.”

“Why?” said the lad, who had again perched himself on the edge of the table and was complacently glancing at his boots.

“Because your inflammable young heart will not be set on fire by antique virgins and blushing widows of sixty.”

“I don’t know so much about that,” cried the lad excitedly, taking off his natty little foraging cap. “Marcus, dear boy, I was walking round a cloister sort of place with a fountain in the middle, and then through a blank square court, and I saw three of the loveliest women, at one of the windows, I ever saw in my life.”

“Distance lends enchantment to the view, my dear boy. If you had gone closer you would have seen the wrinkles and the silvery hairs, if they had not been dyed.”

“I tell you they weren’t old,” continued Dick, whose eyes sparkled like those of a girl.

“I’m not a marrying man, for reasons best known to my banker and my creditors.”

“Two of them were dark and the other was fair,” continued the lad, revelling in his description. “Oh, those two dark girls! You never saw such eyes, such hair, such lovely complexions. Juno-like—that they were. I was quite struck.”

“Foolish?”

“No, no; the Lelys in one of the rooms are nothing to them.”

“Lilies?”

“Nonsense—Lelys: the pictures, Court beauties. I could only stand and gaze at them.”

“Young buck—at gaze,” said the other, smiling at the boy’s enthusiasm. “What was the fair one like?”

“Oh, sweet and Madonnaesque—pensive and gentle. Look here, Marcus, you and I will have a walk round there presently.”

“Not if my name’s Marcus,” said the other, laughing. “Go along, you silly young butterfly, scenting honey in every flower. I say, Dick, shall you go in full review order?”

“I wish you weren’t so fond of chaffing a fellow.”

“Did the maidens—old, or young, or doubtful—at the window see our handsome young Adonis with his clustering curls?”

“Hang me if I ever tell you anything again!” cried the lad pettishly. “Where do you keep your matches? You are always chaffing.”

“Not I,” said the other, turning himself lazily in his chair, “only I want to see you grow into a matter-of-fact man.”

“Is it a sign of manhood to grow into a Diogenes sort of fellow, who sneers at every woman he sees?” said the lad hotly.

“No, Dick, but it’s a sign of hobble-de-hoyishness to be falling in love with pretty housemaids and boarding-school

girls."

"Which I don't do," said the lad fiercely.

"Except when you are forming desperate attachments to well-developed ladies, who, after your stupid young heart has been pretty well frizzled in the imaginary fire cast by their eyes, turn out to be other men's wives."

"I declare you are unbearable, Glen," cried the lad hotly.

"My dear Dick, you are the most refreshing little chap I ever knew," said the other, rising. "There, put on your cap, my boy, and let's go;" and leaving the direction of their course to his younger companion, Captain Glen found himself at last on the broad walk facing the old red-brick Palace.

"I wonder you have never seen it before."

"So do I; but I never did. Well, old Dutch William had a very good idea of taking care of himself, that's all I can say."

"But come along here; some of the interior is very curious, especially the quadrangles."

"So I should suppose," said Glen drily. "But I have a fancy for examining some of these quaint old parterres and carven trees, so we'll turn down here."

Richard Millet's countenance twitched, but he said nothing; and together they strolled about the grounds, the elder pointing out the pretty effects to be seen here and there, the younger seeing nothing but the faces of three ladies standing at a window, and longing to be back in that cloister-like square to gaze upon them again.

"This place will be dull," said Glen, as he seated himself upon a bench at the edge of a long spread of velvet turf; "but better than dingy Hounslow, and I've come to the conclusion that we might be much worse off. The society may turn out pretty decent, after all. This old garden will be splendid for a stroll. And—look there, Dick, the inhabitant of the land is fair. Here is another chance for you to fall in love."

"What, with one of those old—Oh, I say, look, look! I did not see them at first. Those are the very girls."

For Richard Millet's face had been turned in the other direction, and when he first spoke he had only caught sight of the Honourable Misses Dymcox, walking side by side for their morning walk, closely followed by their three nieces, to make up for a close confinement to the house for three days, consequent upon the coming of the fresh troops to the barracks; the military being a necessary evil in the eyes of these elderly ladies, and such dreadful people that they were to be avoided upon all occasions.

"Oh, those are the damsels, are they?" said Glen, watching the little party as they walked straight on along a broad gravel path. "The old ladies look as if they were marching a squad of an Amazonian brigade to relieve guard somewhere. My word: how formal and precise! Now, I'll be bound to say, my lad, that you would like to see where they are posted, and go and commit a breach of discipline by talking to the pretty sentries."

"I should," cried Dick eagerly. "Did you notice them?"

"Well, I must own that they are nice-looking, young inflammable, certainly."

"But that first one, with the dark hair and eyes—she just glanced towards me—isn't she lovely?"

"Well, now, that's odd," said Glen, smiling. "I suppose it was my conceit: do you know, I fancied that she glanced at me. At all events, I seemed to catch her eye."

"Ah, it might seem so, but of course she recognised me again! Let's walk gently after them."

"What for?"

"To—er—well, to see which way they go."

"I don't want to know which way they go, my dear lad, and if I did, why, we can see very well from where we are. There they go, along that path to the right; you can see their dresses amongst the trees; and now they have turned off to the left. Would you like to stand upon the seat?"

"Oh, how cold and impassive you are! I feel as if I must see which way they go, and then we might take a short cut over the grass, and meet them again."

"When those two fierce-looking old gorgons would see that you were following them up, and they would fire such a round from their watchful eyes that you, my dear boy, would retire in discomfiture, and looking uncommonly foolish. I remember once, when I was somewhere about your age, I had a very severe encounter with a chaperone in a cashmere shawl."

"Oh, do get up, Glen, there's a good fellow, and let's go."

"I had fallen in love with a young lady. I fancy now that she wore drawers with frills at the bottom, and that her dresses were short—frocks, I believe."

"There they are again," cried the boy, jumping up; "look, they are going down that path."

"I think the young lady was still in the schoolroom, but though undeveloped, and given to slipping her shoulders out

of the bands of her frock, she was very pretty—bony, but pretty—and I was desperately in love.”

“How wonderfully they are alike in height!”

“I believe,” continued the captain, in a slow, ponderous way, though all the while he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying his companion’s eagerness, “that if I had made love-offerings to my fair young friend—I never knew her name, Dick, and unkindly fate parted us—they would have taken the form of sweet cakes or acidulated drops, and been much appreciated; but alas!—”

“Oh, hang it all, I can’t stand this! There goes Malpas. He has seen them, and is making chase. Glen, I shall shoot that fellow, or run him through.”

“What for, my boy?”

“Because he is always sitting upon me, and making fun of me at the mess. Hang him! I hate him!”

“Don’t take any notice of his banter,” said Glen seriously, “and if he is very unpleasant, it is more dignified to suffer than to fall out. Between ourselves, and in confidence, I advise you not to quarrel with Major Malpas. He can be very disagreeable when he likes.”

“As if I didn’t know! He was always hanging after our Renée—Mrs Frank Morrison, I mean.”

“Indeed!”

“Before she was married, of course.”

“Oh!”

“And used to treat me like a schoolboy. I hadn’t joined then, you know.”

“No, no, of course not,” said the captain with a peculiar smile.

“But look at him. You can see his black moustache and hooked nose here. He’s going straight for them. Look, don’t you see?”

“Well, yes, he does seem to be doing as you say. If he is, you may just thank your stars.”

“Thank my stars? What for?”

“For his getting the snub that you would have received had you been so foolish as to go after those ladies—for they are ladies, Dick.”

“Yes, of course, but it is horrible to be bested like this. Will you come?”

“No; and I won’t let you go. Sit still, you little stupid, and—there, see how propitious the fates are to you!” he continued, as he saw something unnoticed by his little companion.

“What do you mean?”

“Why, the enemy.”

“The enemy?”

“Well, the Amazonian brigade have seen the demonstration being made by the Major on their left flank, the officer in command has given the order, and they have countermarched and are returning by troops from the left.”

“But are they coming back this way?”

“To be sure they are, and if you sit still you will be able to enfilade them as they retreat.”

“Oh, please don’t—pray don’t, Glen, there’s a good fellow!”

“My dear boy, don’t what?”

“Don’t light another cigar. Elderly ladies hate smoking, and you’ll send them off in another direction. Besides, it’s forbidden.”

“Oh, very well, most inflammable of youths. I shall have to make this the subject of a despatch to mamma.”

“Hush! be quiet. Don’t seem to notice them, or they may turn off another way. I say, old Malpas is done.”

“And you are able to deliver a charge without change of position.”

It might have been from design, or it might have been pure accident, for ladies’ pockets always do seem made to hold their contents unsafely. Certain it was, however, that as the Honourable Misses Dymcox marched stiffly by, closely followed by their nieces, all looking straight before them, and as if they were not enjoying their walk in the slightest degree, there was a glint of something white, and Clotilde’s little old and not particularly fine handkerchief fell to the ground.

Glen saw it, and did not move.

Richard Millet did not see it for the moment, but as soon as it caught his eye he impulsively dashed from his seat, picked it up, and ran a few steps after the little party.

“Excuse me,” he exclaimed.

“Oh, thank you,” said Clotilde; and she stretched out her hand to take the handkerchief, but in a quick, unobtrusive way Miss Isabella interposed her thin stiff form, received the handkerchief from the young officer with a formal obeisance, and before he could recover from the paralysing chill of her severe look, the party had passed on.

“But I had a good look at her,” he cried excitedly, as he rejoined his companion.

“And that severe lady had a good look at you, Dick. What a cold, steely glance it was!”

“But did you see her eyes, Glen—dark as night!” he cried rapturously. “Did you see the glance *she* gave me?”

“No,” said the young officer bluntly, “seemed to me as if she wanted her glasses;” and then to himself, “She is handsome, and if it were not conceited, I should say she was looking at me.”

Volume One—Chapter Three.

Captain Millet’s Brother’s Wife.

Plump, blonde Lady Millet uttered an ejaculation and made a gesture of annoyance as she settled herself in a luxurious lounge.

“Now, do for goodness’ sake wipe your eyes, Gertrude, and be sensible if you can! I declare it’s enough to worry one to death. Once for all, I tell you I do not like these Huishes, and what your father could have been about to listen to your uncle Robert and bring that young man here I can’t think.”

Gertrude Millet forced back her tears, and bent lower over some work upon which she was engaged in the drawing-room of her father’s house in Grosvenor Square.

“They are very plebeian sort of people, and they have no money; but because his father was an old friend of your uncle Robert’s when he was a young man, this Mr John Huish must be invited here, and you, you silly child! must let him make eyes at you.”

“Really, mamma—”

“Now do let me speak, Gertrude,” said Lady Millet severely. “It is as I say, and I will not have it. Sentimentality does very well for low-class people, but we have a position to maintain, and I have other views for you.”

“But, mamma, you never thought Frank Morrison plebeian,” said Gertrude, raising her bright grey eyes to bring them to bear on her dignified mother, who was arranging the lace about her plump white throat.

“My dear child, comparisons are odious, and at your age you should allow people to think for you. Does it ever occur to you that your mother’s sole wish—the object for which she almost entirely lives—is to see her child happily settled in life? No, no; don’t speak, please: you hurt me. I consented to your sister Renée’s union with Frank for many reasons. Certainly his family is plebeian, but he is a young man whom I am rejoiced to see determined to make use of his wealth to his own elevation—to marry well, and be the founder of a new family of gentry.”

“But I’m sure Renée is not happy, mamma.”

“Then, in her position, it is her own fault, my dear, of course. I had been married years before I had a second carriage. Once for all, there is no comparison between Frank and this Mr Huish. If it had not been out of commiseration for your uncle Robert—it being his wish—Mr Huish would not have been received here at all.”

Gertrude bit her nether lip, and bent lower over her work as sweet and lovable a face as girl of twenty could have.

“Your uncle is a most unhappy man; and if he were not so rich people would call him insane, living such an absurd life as he does. I often feel as if I must go and rouse him up, and force him to act like a Christian. By the way, you have not been to see him lately?”

“No, mamma.”

“Call, then, soon. He must not be neglected. We have our duties to do, and that is one of them. He is always kind to you?”

“Always, mamma.”

“That is right. You must humour him, for he seems to have taken a most unnatural dislike to Richard.”

“Yes, mamma.”

“Do you think so?” said Lady Millet sharply.

“He forbade Dick to call again after he had importuned him for money.”

"Foolish, reckless boy! That's the way young people always seem to me determined to wreck their prospects. Your uncle Robert has no one else to leave his money to but you children, and yet you persist in running counter to his wishes."

"I, mamma?"

"All of you. Do you suppose because he desired your father to take a little more notice of this John Huish that you were to throw yourself at his head?"

Gertrude squeezed her eyelids very tightly together, and took three or four stitches in the dark.

"I have always found Uncle Robert particularly kind to me."

"And so he would be to Renée and to Richard if they were not so foolish. I declare I don't know what that boy can possibly do with his money. But, there, I suppose being in a regiment is expensive."

"Do you like Major Malpas, mamma?" said Gertrude suddenly.

"Certainly not!" said Lady Millet tartly; "and really, Gertrude, you are a most extraordinary girl! John Huish one moment, Major Malpas the next. Huish was bad enough; now don't, for goodness' sake, go throwing yourself at Major Malpas."

"Mamma!"

"Will you let me speak, child?" cried Lady Millet angrily. "I don't know what you girls are thinking about! Why, you are as bad as Renée! If I had not been firm, she would have certainly accepted him, and he is a man of most expensive habits. It was most absurd of Renée. But there: that's over. But I do rather wonder at Frank making so much of a friend of him. Oh dear me, no, Gertrude! that would be impossible!"

"Of course, mamma!"

"Then why did you talk in that tone?"

"Because I don't like Major Malpas, and I am sure Renée does not, either."

"Of course she does not. She is a married lady. Surely she can be civil to people without always thinking of liking! It was a curious chance that Richard should be gazetted into the same regiment; and under the circumstances I have been bound to invite him and that other officer, Captain Glen, here, for they can help your brother, no doubt, a great deal. You see, I have to think of everything, for your poor father only thinks now of his dinners and his clubs."

Gertrude sighed and went on with her work, while Lady Millet yawned, got up, looked out of the window, and came back.

"Quite time the carriage was round. Then I am to go alone?"

"I promised Renée to be in this morning," said Gertrude quietly.

"Ah, well; then I suppose you must stop. I wonder whether Lady Littletown will take any notice of Richard now he is at Hampton Court?"

"I should think she would, mamma. She is always most friendly."

"Friendly, but not trustworthy, my dear. A terribly scheming woman, Gertrude. Her sole idea seems to be match-making. But, there, Richard is too young to become her prey!"

Gertrude's brow wrinkled, and she looked wonderingly at her mother, whose face was averted.

"I have been looking up the Glens. Not a bad family, but a younger branch. I suppose Richard will accompany his brother officer here one of these days. By the way, my dear, Lord Henry Moorpark seemed rather attentive to you at the Lindleys the other night."

"Yes, mamma," said Gertrude quietly; "he took me in to supper, and sat and chatted with me a long time."

"Yes; I noticed that he did."

"I like Lord Henry, mamma; he is so kind and gentle and courteous."

"Very, my dear."

"One always feels as if one could confide in him—he is so fatherly, and—"

"My dear Gertrude!"

"What have I said, mamma?"

"Something absurd. Fatherly! What nonsense! Lord Henry is in the prime of life, and you must not talk like that. You girls are so foolish! You think of no one but boys with pink and white faces and nothing to say for themselves. Lord Henry Moorpark is a most *distingué* gentle—I mean a nobleman; and judging from the attentions he began to pay you the other night, I—"

“Oh, mamma! surely you cannot think that?”

“And pray why not, Gertrude?” said Lady Millet austerely. “Why should not I think *that*? Do you suppose I wish to see my youngest daughter marry some penniless boy? Do, pray, for goodness’ sake, throw away all that bread-and-butter, schoolgirl, sentimental nonsense. It is quite on the cards that Lord Henry Moorpark may propose for you.”

“Oh dear,” thought Gertrude; “and I was talking to him so warmly about John Huish!”

Gertrude’s red lips parted, showing her white teeth, and the peachy pink faded out of her cheeks as she sat there with her face contracting, and a cloud seemed to come over her young life, in whose shadow she saw herself, and her future as joyless as that of the sister who had been married about a year earlier to a wealthy young north Yorkshire manufacturer, who was now neglecting her and making her look old before her time.

“There, it must be nearly three,” said Lady Millet, rising; “I’ll go and put on my things. I shall not come in again, Gertrude. Give my love to Renée, and if Lord Henry Moorpark does come—but, there, I have perfect faith in your behaving like a sensible girl. By the way, Richard may run up. If he does, try and keep him to dinner. I don’t half like his being at that wretched Hampton Court; it is so terribly suggestive of holiday people and those dreadful vans.”

With these words Lady Millet sailed out of the room, thinking to herself that a better managing mother never lived, and a quarter of an hour after she entered her carriage to go and distribute cards at the houses of her dearest friends.

Volume One—Chapter Four.

The Remains of a Fall.

Gertrude Millet’s anxious look grew deeper as she sat with her work in her lap, thinking of John Huish and certain tender passages which had somehow passed between them; then of Lord Henry Moorpark, the pleasant, elderly nobleman whose attentions had been so pleasant and so innocently received; and as she thought of him a burning blush suffused her cheeks, and she tried to recall the words he had last spoken to her.

The consequence was a fit of low spirits, which did not become high when later on Mrs Frank Morrison called, dismissed her carriage, and sat chatting for some time with her sister, Lady Millet being, she said, in the park.

“You need not tell me I look well,” said Gertrude, pouting slightly. “I declare you look miserable.”

“Oh no, dear, only a little low-spirited to-day. Have you called on Uncle Robert lately?”

“Without you? No.”

“Then let’s go.”

Gertrude jumped at the suggestion, and half an hour later the sisters were making their way along Wimpole Street the gloomy, to stop at last before the most wan-looking of all the dreary houses in that most dreary street. It was a house before which no organ-man ever stopped to play, no street vendor to shout his wares, nor passer-by to examine from top to bottom; the yellow shutters were closed, and the appearance of the place said distinctly “out of town.” The windows were very dirty, but that is rather a fashion in Wimpole Street, where the windows get very dirty in a month, very much dirtier in two months, and as dirty as possible in three. They, of course, never get any worse, for when once they have arrived a this pitch they may go for years, the weather rather improving them, what with the rain’s washing and the sun’s bleaching.

The paint of the front door was the worst part about that house, for the sun had raised it in little blisters, which street boys could not bear to see without cracking and picking off in flakes; and the consequence was that the door looked as if it had had a bad attack of some skin disease, and a new cuticle of a paler hue was growing beneath the old.

Wimpole Street was then famous for the knockers upon its doors. They were large and resounding. In fact, a clever manipulator could raise a noise that would go rolling on a still night from nearly one end of the street to the other. For, in their wisdom, our ancestors seized the idea of a knocker on that sounding-board, a front door, as a means to warn servants downstairs that someone was waiting, by a deafening noise that appealed to those in quite a different part of the place. But this was not allowed at the house with the blistered front door, for a great staple had been placed over one side for years, and when you had passed the two great iron extinguishers that were never used for links, and under the fantastic ironwork that had never held a lamp since the street had been lit with gas, and, ascending three steps, stood at the door, you could only contrive quite a diminutive kind of knock, such as was given upon that occasion by Renée, for Gertrude was carrying a large bouquet of flowers.

The knock was hard enough to bring a little bleached, sparrow-like man, dressed in black, to the door, and his colourless face, made more pallid by a little black silk cap he wore, brightened as he held his head first on one side, then on the other, his triangular nose adding to his sparrow-like appearance, and giving a stranger the idea that he would never kiss anyone, but would peck.

“How is my uncle this morning, Vidler?” said Gertrude.

“Capital, miss,” said the little man, holding wide the door for the ladies to enter, and closing it quickly, lest, apparently, too much light should enter at the same time.

For the place was very gloomy and subdued within. The great leather porter’s chair, the umbrella-stand, and the

pictures all looked sombre and black. Even the two classical figures holding lamps, that had not been lighted for a quarter of a century at least, were swarthy, and a stranger would have gone stumbling and feeling his way along; but not so Vidler, Captain Robert Millet's handy servant. He was as much at home in the gloom as an owl, and in a quick, hurried way that was almost spasmodic he led the visitors upstairs, but only to stop on the first landing.

"If I might make so bold, Miss Gertrude," he said, holding his head on one side. "I don't often see a flower now."

The girl held up the bouquet, and the little man had a long sniff with a noise as if taking a pinch of snuff, said, "Thank you, miss," and went on up to the back drawing-room door, which was a little lighter than the staircase, for the top of the shutters of one of the three tall narrow windows was open.

A glance round the room showed that it was scrupulously clean. Time had blackened the paint and ceiling, but everything that could be cleaned or polished was in the highest state of perfection.

For Valentine Vidler and his wife Salome, being very religious and conscientious people, told themselves and one another nearly every day that as the master never supervised anything it was the more their duty to keep the place in the best of order. For instance, Vidler would say:

"I don't think I shall clean all that plate over this week, Salome. It's as bright as it can be."

When to him Salome: "Valentine, there's One above who knows all, and though your master may not know that you have not cleaned the plate, He will."

"That's very true, Salome," the little man would say with a sigh, and then set to work in a green baize apron, and was soon be-rouged up to the eyes as he polished away.

Another day, perhaps, it would be Salome's turn; for the temptation, as she called it, would attack her. The weather would be hot, perhaps, and a certain languid feeling, the result of a want of change, would come over her.

"Valentine," she would say, perhaps, "I think the big looking-glass in the drawing-room will do this week; it's as clean as clean."

"Hah!" would say Valentine, with a sigh, "Satan has got tight hold of you again, my dear little woman. It is your weakness that you ought to resist. Do you think the Lord cannot see those three fly-specks at the bottom corner? Resist the temptation, woman; resist it."

Then little Salome, who was a tiny plump downy woman, who somehow reminded people of a thick potato-shoot that had grown in the dark, would sigh, put on an apron that covered her all over except her face, climb on a pair of steps, and polish the great mirror till it was as clear as hands could make it.

She was a pleasant-faced little body, and very neatly dressed. There was a little fair sausage made up of rolled-up hair on each side of her face, two very shiny smooth surfaces of hair over her forehead, and a neat little white line up the centre, the whole being surmounted by one of those quaint high-crowned caps which project over to the front. In fact, there was, in spite of the potato-shoot allusion, a good deal of resemblance in little Mrs Vidler to a plump charity child, especially as she wore an apron with a bib, a white muslin kerchief crossed over her bosom, and a pair of muslin sleeves up to her elbows.

The little woman was in the drawing-room armed with a duster as Valentine showed up the young ladies, and she faced round and made two little bobs, quite in the charity-school-child fashion, as taught by those who so carefully make it the first duty of such children to obey their pastors and masters, and order themselves lowly and reverently, and make bobs and bows to—all their betters.

"Why, my dears, I am glad you're come," she exclaimed. "Miss Renée—there, I beg your pardon—Mrs Morrison, what an age it is since I saw you! And only to think you are a married lady now, when only the other day you two were little things, and I used to bring you one in each hand, looking quite frightened, into this room."

"Ah yes, Salome, times are changed," said Renée sadly. "How is uncle?"

"Very well, my dear," said the little woman, holding her head on one side to listen in the same birdlike way adopted by her husband. "He's not in his room yet. But what beautiful flowers!"

She, too, inhaled the scent precisely in her husband's fashion, before fetching a china bowl from a chiffonier, and carefully wiping it inside and out, though it was already the perfection of cleanliness.

"A jug of clean water, if you please, Vidler," she said softly.

"Yes, my dear," said the little man, smiling at the sisters, and giving his hands a rub together, before obeying his wife.

"I was so sorry, Miss Renée—there, I must call you so, my dear; it's so natural—I was so sorry that I did not see you when you came. Only to think of my being out a whole month nursing my poor sister! I hadn't been away from the place before for twenty years, and poor Vidler was so upset without me. And I don't think," she added, nodding, "that master liked it."

"I'm sure he would not," said Gertrude; and then, the little man coming in very quietly and closing the door after him, water was poured in the china bowl, the flowers duly deposited therein and placed upon a small mahogany bracket in front of a panel in the centre of the room.

"There, my dears, I'll go now. I dare say he will not be long."

The little woman smiled at the sisters, and the little man nodded at them in a satisfied way as if he thought them very pleasant to look upon. Then, taking his wife's hand, they toddled together out of the room.

A quaint, subdued old room—clean, and yet comfortless. Upon a wet day, when a London fog hung over the streets and filled the back yards, no female could have sat in it for an hour without moistening her handkerchief with tears. For it was, in its dim twilight, like a drawing-room of the past, full of sad old memories of the dead and gone, who haunted it and clung to its furniture and chairs. It was impossible to sit there long without peopling the seats with those who once occupied them—without seeing soft, sad faces reflected in the mirrors, or hearing fancied footsteps on the faded carpet.

And it was so now, as the sisters sat thinking in silence, Renée with her head resting upon her hand, Gertrude with her eyes closed, half dreaming of what might have been.

For Gertrude's thoughts ran back to a miniature in her father's desk of a handsome, sun-browned young man in uniform, bright-eyed, keen, and animated; and she thought of what she had heard of his history: how he had loved some fair young girl before his regiment was ordered away to Canada. How he had come back to find that she had become another's, and then that some terrible struggle had occurred between him and his rival, and the young officer had been maimed for life—turned in one minute from the strong, vigorous man to a misanthrope, who dragged himself about with difficulty, half paralysed in his lower limbs, but bruised more painfully in his heart. For, broken in spirit as in body, he had shut himself up, after his long illness, never seeing a soul, never going out of the closely shuttered rooms that he had chosen for himself in his lonely faded house.

Vidler had been a drummer in his regiment, she had heard, and he had devoted himself to the master who had fetched him in when lying wounded under fire; and in due time Vidler had married and brought his little wife to the house, the couple never leaving it except on some emergency, but growing to like the darkness in which they dwelt, and sternly doing their duty by him they served.

"Poor uncle!" sighed Gertrude, as she thought of his desolate life, and her own sad position. "I wonder who it was he loved."

As the thought crossed her mind, there was a slight noise in the next room, like the tapping of a stick upon the floor, and Gertrude laid her hand upon her sister's arm.

Then the noise ceased, and the little panel, about a foot square, before which the flowers had been placed, was drawn aside, seeming to run into a groove.

The sisters did not move, but waited, knowing from old experience that at a word or movement on their part the panel would be clapped impatiently to, and that their visit would be a fruitless one.

A stranger would have thought of rats and the action of one of those rodents in what took place; for now that the panel had been slid back, all remained perfectly still, as if the mover were listening and watching. Then at last a thin, very white hand appeared, lifted the flowers out of the bowl, and they disappeared.

There was not even a rustling noise heard for a few minutes, during which the sisters sat patiently waiting.

At last there was a faint sigh; and a cold—so to speak, colourless—voice said:

"Is Gertrude there?"

"Yes, dear uncle," said the young girl eagerly.

"Anyone else?"

"I am here too, dear uncle," said Renée.

"Hah! I am glad to hear you, my children—glad to hear you. How is my brother?"

"Papa is not very well, uncle," said Gertrude. "Poor dear, his cough is very troublesome."

"Poor Humphrey! he is so weak," said the voice, in the same cold, monotonous way that was almost repulsive in its chilling tone. "Tell him, when he is well enough, he can come and talk to me for half an hour. I cannot bear more."

"Yes, dear uncle, I will tell him," said Renée.

Then there was another pause, and at last the thin white hand stole cautiously forth, half covered with a lace frill, and the cold voice said:

"Renée!"

The young wife left her seat, went forward, took it in her ungloved hand, and kissed it. Then she returned to her place, and the voice said:

"Gertrude!"

The young girl went through the same performance, and as she loosed it, the hand was passed gently over both her cheeks, and then withdrawn, when Gertrude returned to her seat, and there was again silence.

“You are not happy, Renée,” said the voice at last, in its cold measured accents; “there was a tear on my hand.”

Renée sighed, but made no reply.

“Gertrude, child, I like duty towards parents; but I think a daughter goes too far when, at their wish, she marries a man she does not love.”

“Oh, uncle dear,” cried Gertrude hysterically, “pray, pray, do not talk like this!”

She made a brave effort to keep back her tears, and partially succeeded, for Renée softly knelt down by her side and drew her head close to her breast.

“Poor children!” said the voice again. “I am sorry, but I cannot help you. You must help yourselves.”

There was a nervous, querulous tone in the voice now, as if the suppressed sobs that faintly rose troubled the speaker, but it had passed when the voice was heard once more in a quiet way, more like an appeal than a command:

“Sing to me.”

The sisters rose and went to a very old-fashioned grand piano, opened it, and Gertrude’s fingers swept the wiry jangling chords which sounded quite in keeping with the room; then, subduing the music as much as possible, so that their fresh young voices dominated, rising and falling in a rich harmony that floated through the room, they sang the old, old duet, “Flow on, thou shining river.” Every note seemed to have in it the sadness of age, the mournful blending of the bygone when hope was young and disappointment and care had not crushed with a load of misery a heart once fresh as those of the singers.

A deep sigh came from the little panel, unheard, though, by the two girls, and the hand appeared once more for the thin white fingers to tap the wood gently in unison with the music, which was inexpressibly sweet, though sad.

For how is it that those melodies of the past, even though major, seemed to acquire a mournful tone that is not minor, but has all its sad sweetness? Take what pathetic air you will of a generation or two back, and see if it has not acquired within your knowledge a power of drawing tears that it had not in the days of old.

From the simple duet, first one and then the other glided to the old-fashioned ditties popular thirty or forty years before. “Those evening bells,” “Waters of Elle,” and the like, till, without thinking, Gertrude began “Love not,” her sweet young voice sounding intensely pathetic as she went on, gradually gathering inspiration from the words, till in the midst of the sweetest, most appealing strain, she uttered a cry of misery, and threw herself sobbing into her sister’s arms.

“Oh, Gerty, darling, why did you sing that?” whispered Renée, trying to soothe her, as her own tears fell fast, but for a few minutes in vain, till by a brave effort Gertrude got the better of her hysterical feelings, and, hastily wiping her eyes, glanced towards the panel, where the bowl of water stood upon the bracket, but the opening was closed.

The sisters looked piteously at one another, and Renée whispered:

“Speak to him. Tell him you did not wish to make him angry.”

Gertrude glided to the panel, and, stifling a sob, she said softly:

“Uncle, dear uncle, do not be cross with me—I am very sorry. I was so miserable.”

There was no reply—no sound to indicate that the words had been heard; and after waiting for about a quarter of an hour the two girls crossed to the door, went slowly out, and found that they had had an audience in the shape of Valentine Vidler and his wife, who had been seated upon the stairs.

“Thank you, my dears,” said Salome, nodding and smiling. “We like to hear you sing. You have made a very long stay to-day, and his lunch is quite ready.”

The sisters were too heartsore to trust themselves to say much, and Vidler opened the door for them, admitting as little light as he could by closing it directly and going to assist his wife.

“Renée,” said Gertrude as they reached the square, “do you remember what Uncle Robert said?”

“Yes. He could not help us—we must help ourselves.”

“Then”—There was a pause.

“Yes, dear, what?”

“I’m sure mamma is planning for me to marry Lord Henry Moorpark.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“And I’m sure, Ren dear, he’s a dear, amiable, nice old man; but if he proposes I never will say ‘Yes’.”

There was another pause, and then Renée smiled, passed her arm round her handsome sister’s neck, and kissed her lovingly.

"Have you got John Huish very bad?" she whispered.

Gertrude's cheeks were crimson, and the colour flushed into her neck as she flung her arms round her sister and hid her face on her breast.

Volume One—Chapter Five.

Dr Stonor's Patient.

"The doctor at home?"

This to a quiet, sedate-looking man in livery, who opened the door of one of the serious-looking houses in Finsbury Circus, where, upon a very shiny brass plate, were in Roman letters the words "Dr Stonor." There was not much in those few black letters, but many a visitor had gone up the carefully-whitened steps, gazed at them, stepped down again with a curious palpitation of the heart, and walked right round the Circus two or three times to gain composure enough before once more ascending the steps and knocking at the door.

There had been cases—not a few—where visitors had spent weeks in making up their minds to go to Dr Stonor, and had reached his doorstep only to hurry back home quite unable to face him, and then suffer in secret perhaps for months to come.

For what would that interview reveal? That the peculiar sensations or pains were due to some trifling disorganisation that a guinea and a prescription would set right, or that the seeds of some fatal disease had begun to shoot?

Daniel, factotum to Dr Stonor, had been standing like a spider watching at the slip of a window beside the door waiting for sick flies to come into the doctor's net.

"Old game!" said Daniel to himself, as he drew back from the window to observe unseen, and without moving a muscle in his face. For it was Daniel's peculiarity that he never did move the muscles of his face. He would hold a patient for his master during a painful operation, be scolded, badgered, see harrowing scenes, receive vails, hear praise or abuse of the doctor—for these are both applied to medicine men—and all without making a sign, losing his nerve, or being elated. Daniel was always the same—clean, quiet, self-possessed; and he had seen handsome fair-bearded John Huish descend from a cab, walk up to the door, pass by and go slowly and thoughtfully on, passing his hand over his thick golden beard, looking very tall, manly, and unpatientlike, as he passed on round the Circus.

"He'll be back in ten minutes," said Daniel to himself, as he admitted a regular patient and once more closed the door. It was a quarter of an hour, though, before John Huish came to the house, asked if the doctor was at home, was shown into the waiting-room, and in due course came face to face with the keen, grey, big-headed, clever-looking little practitioner.

"Ah, Huish, my dear boy! Glad to see you, John. Sit down. This is kind of you, to look me up. I've only just come back from a fishing trip—trouting. Old habit. Down this way?"

"Well, no, doctor," said the young man hesitatingly. "The fact is, I came to consult you."

"Glad of it. I was the first person who ever took hold of your little hand, and the tiny fingers clutched one of mine as if you trusted me. And you always kept it up—eh? I'm very glad."

"Glad, sir?"

"Of course I am," said the doctor, taking out his keys and unlocking a drawer. "What is it, my boy—a little cheque?"

"Oh dear no, doctor."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"I hope not. I thought I would consult you."

"That's right, my lad. Well, what is it? Going to buy a horse—speculate in the funds—try a yachting trip?"

"My dear sir," said Huish, smiling, "you do not understand me. I am afraid I am ill."

"Ill? You? Ill?" said the doctor, jumping up and laying his hands on the young man's shoulders as he gazed into his frank, earnest eyes. "Get up, Jack. You were almost my first baby, and I was very proud of you. Finest built little fellow I ever saw. There, put out your tongue"—he was obeyed—"let's feel your pulse"—this was done—"here, let me listen at your chest. Pull a long, deep breath;" and the doctor listened, made him pull off his coat and clapped his ear to his back, rumpled his shirt-front as he tapped and punched him all over, concluding by giving the visitor a back-handed slap in the chest, and resuming his seat, exclaiming:

"Why, you young humbug, what do you mean by coming here with such a cock-and-bull story? Your physique is perfect. You are as sound as a bell. You are somewhere about thirty years old, and you are a deuced good-looking young fellow. What do you want?"

"You take my breath away, doctor," said the young man, smiling. "I want to explain."

"Explain away, then, my dear boy; but, for goodness' sake, don't be such an ass as to think the first time you are a bit bilious, or hipped, or melancholy, that you are ill. Oh, by the way, while I think of it, I had a letter from your people

yesterday. They want me to have a run down to Shropshire."

"Why not go?"

"Again? I can't. Fifty people want me, and they would swear to a man if I went away that I was indirectly murdering them. But come, I keep on chattering. Now then, I say, what's the matter? In love?"

The colour deepened a little on the white forehead, and the visitor replied quietly:

"I should not consult a physician for that ailment. The fact is, that for some while past I have felt as if my memory were going."

"Tut! nonsense!"

"At times it seems as if a perfect cloud were drawn between the present and the past. I can't account for it—I do not understand it; but things I have done one week are totally forgotten by me the next."

"If they are bad things, so much the better."

"You treat it very lightly, sir, but it troubles me a great deal."

"My dear boy, I would not treat it lightly if I thought there was anything in it; but you do not and never have displayed a symptom of brain disease, neither have your father and mother before you. You are not dissipated."

"Oh no! I never—"

"You may spare yourself the trouble of talking, John, my boy. I could tell in a moment if you had a bit of vice in you, and I know you have not. But come, my lad: to be serious, what has put this crotchet into your head?"

"Crotchet or no," said the young man sadly, "I have for months past been tormented with fears that I have something wrong in the head—incipient insanity, or idiocy, if you like to call it so."

"I don't like to call it anything of the kind, John Huish," said the doctor tartly, "because it's all nonsense. I have not studied insanity for the last five-and-twenty years without knowing something about it; so you may dismiss that idea from your mind. But come, let's know something more about this terrible bugbear."

"Bugbear if you like, doctor, but here is the case. Every now and then I have people—friends, acquaintances—reminding me of things I have promised—engagements I have made—and which I have not kept."

"What sort of engagements?" said the doctor.

"Well, generally about little bets, or games at cards."

"That you owe money on?"

"Yes," said Huish eagerly. "I have again and again been asked for money that I owe."

"Or are said to owe," said the doctor drily.

"Oh, there is no doubt about it," said Huish. "About a twelvemonth ago, when this sort of thing began—"

"What sort of thing?" said the doctor.

"These lapses of memory," replied Huish. "Oh!"

"I used to be annoyed, and denied them, till I began to be scouted by the men I knew; and at last one or two of them brought unimpeachable witnesses to prove that I was in the wrong."

"Oh, John Huish, my dear boy, how can you let yourself be imposed upon so easily!"

"There is no imposition, I assure you. I give you the facts."

"Facts! Did you ever know anyone come and tell you that he owed you money, and pay you?"

"Yes, half a dozen times over—heavier amounts than I have had to pay."

"Humph! that's strange," said the doctor, looking curiously at his visitor.

"Strange?—it's fearful!" cried the young man passionately. "It is getting to be a curse to me, and I cannot shake off the horrible feeling that I am losing my mind—that I am going wrong. And if this be the case, I cannot bear it, especially just now, when—"

He checked himself, and gazed piteously at the man to whom he had come for help.

"Be cool, boy. Supposing it is as you say, it is only a trifle, perhaps; but it seems to me that there is a great deal of imagination in it."

"Oh no—oh no! I fear I am going, slowly but surely, out of my mind."

"Because you forget things after a certain time, eh? Stuff! Don't be foolish. Why, you never used to think that your

brain was going wrong when you were a schoolboy, and every word of the lesson that you knew perfectly and said *verbatim* to a schoolfellow dropped out of your mind."

"No."

"Of course you did not; and as to going mad, why, my dear boy, have you any idea what a lunatic is?"

"I cannot say that I have."

"Well, then, you shall have," said the doctor; "and that will do you more good than all my talking. You shall see for yourself what a diseased mind really is, and that will strengthen you mentally, and show you how ill-advised are your fancies."

"But, doctor, I should not like to be a witness of the sufferings of others."

"Nonsense, my boy. There, pray don't imagine, because I live at Highgate, and am licenced to have so many insane patients under my care, that you are going to see horrible creatures dressed in straw and grovelling in cells. My dear John, I am going to ask you to a mad dinner-party."

"A mad dinner-party?"

"Well, there, to come and dine with my sister, myself, and our patients. No people hung in chains or straw. Perfectly quiet gentlemen, my dear fellow, but each troubled with a craze. You would not know that they had anything wrong if they did not break out now and then upon the particular subject. Come to-night at seven sharp."

The doctor glanced at his watch, rose, and held out his hand; and though John Huish hesitated, the doctor's eyes seemed to force him to say that he would be there, and he began to feel for his purse.

"Look here, sir," said the doctor, stopping him: "if you are feeling for fees, don't insult your father's old friend by trying to offer him one. There, till seven—say half-past six—and I'll give you a glass of burgundy, my boy, that shall make you forget all these imaginations."

"Thank you, doctor—"

"Not another word, sir, but *au revoir*."

"*Au revoir*," said Huish; and he was shown out, to go back to his chambers thinking about his ailment—and Gertrude, while the doctor began to muse.

"Strange that I should take so much interest in that boy. Heigho! Some years now since I went fly-fishing, and fished his father out of the pit."

Volume One—Chapter Six.

Aunt Philippa on Matrimony.

"Will you speak, Isabella, or shall I?"

"If you please, Philippa, will you?" said her sister with frigid politeness.

The Honourable Miss Dymcox motioned to her nieces to seat themselves, and they sat down.

Then there was a sharp premonitory "Hem!" and a long pause, during which the thoughts of the young ladies went astray.

"I wonder what that officer's name is," thought Clotilde, "and whether that good-looking boy is his squire?"

Rather a romantic notion this, by the way, and it gave Marcus Glen in the young lady's ideas the position of knight; but it was excusable, for her life had been secluded in the extreme.

"What a very handsome man that dark officer was that we nearly met! but I don't like his looks," mused Marie; and then, as Ruth was thinking that she would rather be getting on with some of the needlework that fell to her share than listening to her aunt's lecture—one of the periodical discourses it was their fate to hear—there was another sharp "Hem!"

"Marriage," said the Honourable Miss Dymcox, "is an institution that has existed from the earliest ages of the world."

Had a bomb-shell suddenly fallen into the chilly, meanly-furnished drawing-room, where every second article seemed to wear a brown-holland pinafore, and the frame of the old-fashioned mirror was tightly draped in yellow canvas, the young ladies could not have looked more astonished.

In their virgin innocency the word "marriage" had been tabooed to them, and consequently was never mentioned, being a subject held to be unholy for the young people's ears.

Certainly there were times when the wedding of some lady they knew was canvassed; but it was with extreme delicacy, and not in the downright fashion of Miss Philippa's present speech.

“Ages of the world,” assented the Honourable Isabella, opening a pale drab fan, and using it gently, as if the subject made her warm.

“And,” continued Miss Philippa, “I think it right to speak to you children, now that you are verging upon womanhood, because it is possible that some day or another you might either of you receive a proposal.”

“That sun-browned officer with the heavy moustache,” thought Clotilde, whose cheeks began to glow. “She thinks he may try to be introduced. Oh, I wish he may!”

“When your poor—I say it with tears, Isabella.”

“Yes, sister, with tears,” assented that lady.

“I am addressing you, Clotilde and Marie,” continued Miss Philippa. “You, Ruth, of course cannot be answerable for the stroke of fate which placed you in our hands, an adopted child.”

“An adopted child,” said Miss Isabella, closing her fan, for the moral atmosphere seemed cooler.

“When your poor mother, your poor, weak mamma, children, wantonly and recklessly, and in opposition to the wishes of all her relatives, insisted upon marrying Mr Julian Riversley, who was never even acknowledged by any member of our family—”

“I remember papa as being very handsome, and with dark hair,” said Marie.

“Marie!” exclaimed the Honourable Misses Dymcox in a breath. “I am surprised at you!”

“Tray be silent, child,” added Miss Philippa.

“Yes, aunt.”

“I say your poor mamma must have known that she was degrading the whole family—degrading us, Isabella.”

“Yes, sister, degrading us,” assented that lady.

“By marrying a penniless man of absolutely no birth.”

“Whatever,” assented Miss Isabella.

“As I have often told you, children, it was during the corrupting times of the Commonwealth that the lineal descendants of Sir Guy Dymcoques—the *s* not sounded, my dears—allowed the family name to be altered into Dymcox, which by letters patent was made imperative, and the proper patronymic has never been restored to its primitive orthography. It is a blot on our family history to which I will no more allude.”

Miss Isabella allowed the fan to fall into her lap, and accentuated the hollowness of her thin cheek by pressing it in with one pointed finger.

“To resume,” said Miss Philippa, while her nieces watched her with wondering eyes: “our dear sister Delia, your poor mamma, repented bitterly for her weakness in marrying a poor man—your papa, children—and being taken away to a dreary place in Central France, where your papa had the management of a very leaden silver-mine, which only produced poverty. The sufferings to which Mr Julian Riversley exposed your poor mamma were dreadful, my dears. And,” continued Miss Philippa, dotting each eye with her handkerchief, which was not moistened, “your poor mamma died. She was killed, I might say, by the treatment of your papa; but ‘De mortuis,’ Isabella?”

“‘Nil nisi bonum,’” sighed the Honourable Isabella.

“Exactly, sister,” continued the Honourable Philippa—“died like several of your unfortunate baby brothers and sisters, my dears; and shortly after—four years exactly, was it not, Isabella?”

“Three years and eleven months, sister.”

“Thank you, Isabella. Mr Julian Riversley either fell down that lead-mine or threw himself there in remorse for having deluded a female scion of the ancient house of Dymcoques to follow his fortunes into a far-off land. He was much like you in physique, my dears, but I am glad to say not in disposition—thanks to our training and that of your mamma’s spiritual instructor, Mr Paul Montaigne, to whom dearest Delia entrusted you, and to whom your repentant—I hope—papa gave the sacred charge of bringing you to England to share the calmness of our peaceful home.”

“Peaceful home,” assented Miss Isabella.

“I need hardly tell you, children, that the Riversleys were, or are, nobodies of whom we know nothing—never can know anything.”

“Whatever,” assented Miss Isabella.

“To us they do not exist—neither will they for you, my dears. We believe that Mr Julian had a sister who married a Mr Huish; that is all we know.”

“All we know,” assented Miss Isabella.

“I will say nothing of the tax it has been upon us in connection with our limited income. A grateful country,

recognising the services of papa, placed these apartments at our disposal. In consideration of the thoughtfulness of the offer, we accepted these apartments—thirty-five years ago, I think, Isabella?”

“Thirty-five years and a half, sister.”

“Exactly; and we have been here ever since, so that we have been spared the unpleasantry of paying a rent. But I need not continue that branch of my subject. What I wish to impress upon you, children, is the fact that in spite of your poor mamma’s *mésalliance*, you are of the family of Dymcoques, and that it is your duty to endeavour to raise, and not degrade, our noble house. I think I am following out the proper line of argument, Isabella?”

“Most accurately, sister.”

“In the event, then, of either of you—at a future time, of course—receiving a proposal of marriage—”

Miss Isabella reopened her fan, and began to use it in a quick, agitated manner.

“It would be your duty to study the interest of your family, children, and to endeavour to regain that which your poor mamma lost. To a lady, marriage—”

Miss Isabella’s fan raised quite a draught in the chilly room, and the white tissue-paper chimney-apron rustled in the breeze.

“Marriage is the means by which we may recover the steps lost by those who have gone before; and I would have you to remember that our position, our family, our claims to a high descent, warrant our demanding as a right that we might mate with the noblest of the land.”

For a moment a curious idea crossed Clotilde’s brain—that her aunts had some thought of entering the married state; but it passed away on the instant at the next words.

“Your aunt Isabella and myself might at various times have entered into alliance with others—”

Miss Isabella’s fan went rather slowly now. “But we knew what was due to our family, and we said ‘No!’ We sacrificed ourselves in the cause of duty, and we demand, children, in obedience to our teaching, that you do the same.”

“Yes, aunt,” said Clotilde demurely.

“An impecunious, poverty-stricken alliance,” continued Miss Philippa, “is at best a crime, one of which no true woman would be guilty; while an alliance that brings to her family wealth *and* position is one of which she might be proud. You understand, my children?”

“Yes, aunt,” in chorus.

“We—your aunt Isabella and I—of course care little for such things; but we consider that young people of birth and position should, as a matter of duty, look forward to having diamonds, a town house, carriages and servants, pin-money. These are social necessities, children. Plebeians may perhaps consider that they are superfluities, but such democratic notions are the offspring of ignorance. Your grandfather devoted himself to the upholding of Church and State; he was considered worthy of the trust of the Premier of his day; and it is our duty, as his descendants, to hold his name in reverence, and to add to its lustre.”

Marie, as her aunt stopped for breath, wondered in what way her grandfather had benefited his country, and could not help wishing that he had done more to benefit his heirs. Then she half wondered that she had ventured to harbour such a thought, and just then Miss Philippa said blandly:

“I think that will do, Isabella?”

“Yes, I think that will do,” said that lady, dropping her fan.

“You may retire to the schoolroom, then, my dears,” continued Miss Philippa. “Clotilde, come here.”

The dark girl, with an unusual flush beneath her creamy skin, crossed the room to her aunt, who laid her hands upon her shoulder, gazed wistfully in her eyes, and then kissed her upon either cheek.

“Wonderfully like your papa, my child,” she said, and she passed her on to Miss Isabella. “But the Dymcoques’ carriage.”

“Ah, yes! wonderfully like your papa,” sighed Miss Isabella, and she, too, kissed Clotilde upon either cheek. “But the Dymcoques’ carriage.”

“Marie,” said Miss Philippa, “come here, child.”

Marie rose from her chair, crossed to her aunt, received a hand upon each shoulder and a kiss upon either cheek.

“Yes, your papa’s lineaments,” sighed Miss Philippa, passing her on also to Miss Isabella.

“Wonderfully like indeed,” assented Miss Isabella sadly.

“You may retire now, children,” said Miss Philippa. “You had better resume your practice and studies in the schoolroom. Well, Ruth, why do you not go?”

Poor Ruth had been expecting a similar proceeding towards her, but it did not come about, and she followed her cousins out of the room after each had made a formal curtsey, which was acknowledged by their aunts as if they were sovereigns at a state reception.

“It will cost a great deal, Isabella,” said Miss Philippa, as soon as they were gone. “Yes, dear; but, as Lady Littletown says, it is an absolute necessity; and it is time they left the schoolroom for a more enlarged sphere.”

The young ladies went straight to the apartment, where they had passed the greater part of their lives, in company with a green-baize-covered table, a case of unentertaining works of an educational cast, written in that delightfully pompous didactic style considered necessary by our grandfathers for the formation of the youthful mind. There were also selections from Steele and Addison, with Johnson to the extent of “Rasselas.” Mangnall was there, side by side with Goldsmith, and a goodly array of those speckled-covered school books that used to have such a peculiar smell of size. On a side-table covered with a washed-out red and grey table-cover of that charming draughtboard pattern and cotton fabric, where the grey was red on the opposite side, and in other squares the reds and greys seemed to have married and had neutral offspring, stood a couple of battered and chipped twelve-inch globes, one of which was supposed to be celestial, and the other terrestrial; but time and mildew had joined hand in hand to paint these representations of the spheres with entirely fresh designs, till the terrestrial globe was studded with little dark, damp spots or stars of its own, and fungoid continents had formed themselves on the other amid seas of stain, where nothing but aerial space and constellations should have been.

Ruth entered the schoolroom last, to cross over to where stood on its thin, decrepit legs the harp of other days, in the shape of a most unmusical little piano, which, when opened, looked like some fossil old-world monster of the toad nature, squeezed square and squatting there in a high-shouldered fashion, gaping wide-mouthed, and showing a row of hideous old yellow teeth, the teeth upon which for many a weary hour the girls had practised the “Battle of Prague,” “Herz Quadrilles,” and the overture to “Masaniello,” classical strains that were rather out of tune, and in unwonted guise, consequent upon so many notes being dumb, while what seemed like a row of little imps with round, flat hats performed a kind of excited automatic dance *à la Blondin* upon the wire in the entrails of the fossil toad.

As Ruth crossed and stood leaning with one hand upon the old piano, with her eyelids drooping, and the great tears gathering slowly beneath the heavily-fringed lids, a deep sigh struggled for exit. It was not much to have missed that cold display of something like affection just shown by the ladies to her cousins; but she felt the neglect most sorely, for her tender young heart was hungry for love, and all these many sad years that she had passed in the cheerless schoolroom, whose one window looked out upon the dismal fountain in the gloomy court, she had known so little of what real affection meant.

If she could only have received one word of sympathy just then she would have been relieved, but she was roused from her sad reverie by a sharp pat upon the cheek from Clotilde.

“Tears? Why, you’re jealous! Here, Rie, the stupid thing is crying because she was not kissed.”

“Goose!” exclaimed Marie. “She missed a deal! Ugh! It’s very horrid.”

“Yes,” cried Clotilde. “Bella’s teeth-spring squeaked, and I thought Pip meant to bite. Here, Ruthy, come and kiss the places and take off the nasty taste.”

She held out one of her cheeks, and Ruth, whose face still tingled with the smack she had received, came forward smiling, threw her arms round her cousin, and kissed her cheeks again and again.

“Ah, I feel sweeter now!” said Clotilde, pushing Ruth away. “Make her do you, Rie.”

Marie laughed unpleasantly as, without being asked, Ruth, smiling, crossed to her chair and kissed her affectionately again and again, her bright young face lighting up with almost childish pleasure, for she was of that nature of womankind whose greatest satisfaction is to give rather than receive.

“There, that will do, baby,” cried Marie, laughing. “What a gushing girl you are, Ruth!” but she kissed her in return all the same, with the effect that a couple of tears stole from the girl’s eyes. “Mind you don’t spoil my lovely dress. Now then, Clo, what does all this mean?”

“Mean?” cried her sister, placing one hand upon the table and vaulting upon it in a sitting position. “It means—here, Ruth, go down on your knees by the door, and keep your ear by the keyhole. If you let that old hyaena Markes, or either of those wicked old cats, come and hear what we say, I’ll buy a sixpenny packet of pins and come and stick them in all over you when you’re in bed.”

Ruth ran to the door, knelt down, and placed her ear as she was ordered to do, while her cousin went on:

“It means that the wicked old things are obliged to own at last that we have grown into women, and they want to get us married. Whoop! Lucky for them they do. If they didn’t, I’d run away with one of the soldiers. I say, Rie, wasn’t that big officer nice?”

“I don’t know,” said her sister pettishly. “I didn’t taste him.”

“Who said you did, pig? Diamonds, and carriages, and servants, Rie. I’d have a box at the opera, too, and one at all the theatres. Oh, Rie! wait till I get my chance. I’ll keep up the dignity of the family; but when my turn does come, oh! won’t I serve those two old creatures out.”

“Dignity of the family, indeed!” cried Marie angrily. “How dare they speak like they did of poor dear papa, even if he was a Riversley!”

"And the wicked old thing boasting all the time about her Norman descent, and Sir Guyfawkes de Dymcoques. I dare say he was one of the Conqueror's tag-rags, who came to see what he could get."

"I know poor papa was very handsome."

"Just like you, Rie," laughed Clotilde.

"No, he was more like you, Clo," said her sister quietly. "I don't see anything to laugh at. Do you suppose I don't know that we are both very beautiful women?"

Clotilde's eyes flashed, and her cheeks began to glow as she saw her sister, in her shabby gingham morning dress, place her hands behind her head, interlacing her fingers and leaning sidewise in an attitude full of natural, unstudied grace. She looked down at kneeling Ruth.

"We are both handsome girls now, aren't we, Ruth?" she said imperiously.

"Yes, dear, very—very," said the girl, flushing as she spoke. "I think you lovely with your beautiful dark eyes, and soft, warm complexions; and you both have such splendid figures and magnificent hair."

Marie's eyes half closed in a dreamy way, as if some dawning love fancy were there, and an arch smile curled her rich red lip.

She was quite satisfied, and accepted the girl's admiration as her due, hardly moving as Clotilde bounded from the table to the door, listened for a moment, and then, seizing Ruth by the pink, shelly little ear, half dragged her into the room. Her hot blood showed in her vindictive, fierce way, as she stood threateningly over the kneeling girl.

"Lying little pig," she hissed, "how dare you say such things! It's your mean-spirited, cringing, favour-currying way. You think we are both as ugly as sin."

"I don't indeed, indeed I don't!" cried the girl, stung by the charge into indignant remonstrance. "I think you are both the most beautiful girls I ever saw. Oh, Clotilde! you know what lovely eyes and hair you have."

"I haven't; my eyes are dark and my hair is long and coarse."

"It's beautiful!" cried Ruth, "isn't it, Marie? Why, see how everyone turns to look at you both when you are out, in spite of your being so badly dressed."

"Go back to the door. No, stop," cried Clotilde, pushing the poor girl's head to and fro as she retained her ear.

"Clotilde dear, you hurt me very much," sobbed Ruth.

"I'm trying to hurt you," said Clotilde, showing her white glistening teeth.

"Let her be, Clo."

"Shan't. Mind your own business."

"Let her be, I say," cried Marie, flashing into excitement. "If you don't loose her I'll scratch you."

"You daren't," cried Clotilde, and as her sister's face turned red her own grew pale. "Go back to the door and listen, little fibster."

"I dare," said Marie, relapsing into her half-dreamy way. "Come here, Ruthy; I won't have you hurt. It's truth, isn't it? We are beautiful?"

"Yes," said Ruth, starting to her feet, and joyfully nestling in the arms held out for her, while Marie kissed her with some show of affection. "Yes, you are both beautiful, and Clotilde knows I would not tell her a story."

The gratified look had spread by this time to the elder sisters face, and she returned to her position upon the table, where she sat swinging one leg to and fro.

"Go back and listen, Ruthy," said Marie quietly. "You are quite right, dear—we are both handsome; and so are you."

"I?" laughed Ruth, with a merry, innocent look brightening her face; "oh no!"

"Yes, you are," said Marie, smoothing her own dark hair. "You are very nice, and pretty, and sweet, and when I'm married and away from this wicked old poverty-stricken workhouse, you shall come and live with me."

"Shall I, Marie?" cried the girl, with the eagerness of a child.

"Yes, dear; and you shall have a handsome husband of your own."

Ruth laughed merrily.

"What should I do with a husband?"

"Hold your tongue, Rie, and don't stuff the child's head with such nonsense."

"Child, indeed! why, she is only a year younger than I. Oh! it has been abominable; we have been treated like babies,

and I feel sometimes now as if I were only a little girl. But only wait.”

“Yes,” cried Clotilde with a curious laugh, “only wait.”

“Someone coming,” whispered Ruth, leaping up from the floor where she had been listening, and the childlike obedience to the stern authority in which they had been trained resumed its sway.

Clotilde bounded to the piano, and began to practise a singing lesson, her rich contralto voice rising and falling as she ran up an arpeggio, trying to make it accord with five notes struck together out of tune; Marie darted to a chair, and snatched up a quill pen, inked her forefinger, and bent over a partly written exercise on composition—a letter addressed to a lady of title, to be written in the style of Steele; and Ruth snatched up a piece of needlework, and began to sew. Then the door opened, and Markes, the nurse, appeared.

“Miss Clotilde and Miss Marie to come to the dining-room directly.”

“What for, Markes?” cried Clotilde, pausing in the middle of a rich-toned run full of delicious melody.

“Come and see. There, I’ll tell you—may as well, I suppose. Dressmaker to measure you for some new frocks.”

“La—ra—ra—ra—ra—ra—ra—rah!” sang Clotilde in a powerful crescendo, as she swung round upon the music-stool and then leaped up, while Marie rose slowly, with a quiet, natural grace.

“Am—am I to come, too?” said Ruth.

“You? No. It’s them,” said Markes grimly. “Fine goings on, ’pon my word.”

“What are fine goings on, Markes?” cried Clotilde.

“Why, ordering new dresses. Better buy a new carpet for one of the bedrooms, and spend a little more money on the living. I’m getting sick of the pinching and griping ways.”

“I say, Markes, what’s for dinner to-day?” exclaimed Marie, on finding the woman in a more communicative mood than usual.

“Cold boiled mutton.”

“Ugh!” ejaculated Clotilde. “I hate cold mutton. Is there no pudding?”

“Yes; it’s pudding day.”

“That’s better. What pudding is it?”

Markes shook her head.

“Tell me, and I’ll give you a kiss,” said Clotilde.

“If your aunts was to hear you talk like that they’d have fits,” grumbled the woman. “It’s rice-pudding.”

“Baked?”

“No.”

“Boiled in milk?”

“No—plain boiled.”

“Sauce or jam with it?”

“Sauce or jam!” said the woman, in tones of disgust. “Neither on ’em, but sugar and a bit o’ butter; and think yourselves lucky to get that. New dresses, indeed! It’s shameful; and us in the kitchen half-starved!”

“Well, we can’t help it,” said Marie. “I’m sure we don’t live any too well.”

“No, you don’t,” said the woman, grinning. “But it does seem a shame to go spending money as they seem to mean to do on you two. I ’spose you’re going to be married, ain’t you?”

“I don’t know,” said Clotilde. “Are we?”

“There, don’t ask me. I don’t know nothing at all about it, and I shan’t speak a word. I only know what I heard them say.”

“Do tell us, Marky dear, there’s a dear, good old nursey, and we’ll do just as you tell us,” said Clotilde, in a wheedling way.

“You both make haste down, or you’ll both have double lessons to get off, so I tell you.”

“But tell us,” said Marie, “and we’ll both give you a kiss.”

“You keep your kisses for your rich husbands, my dears, and I hope you’ll like giving ’em—that’s all I can say. I told you so: there goes the bell.”

Volume One—Chapter Seven.

Eccentric Guests.

“That’s right—I adore punctuality,” said Dr Stonor, as John Huish was ushered into the drawing-room of Laurel Hall. For, having mastered the repugnance which had made him feel disposed to send a message to put off his visit, he had chartered a hansom, and run up to the doctor’s house.

There was nothing new about it externally, for it was one of those old red-brick buildings that our ancestors knew so well how to contrive, and which they always surrounded with iron railings with great gates about double their height. This was evidently for protection; but why the gates were made so high and the railings so low has never been yet found out.

So John Huish rang and was admitted, starting slightly on finding himself face to face with Daniel; but as that individual acted as if they had never met before, and asked him his name, the visitor felt more composed, and entered, and was announced.

“My sister, Miss Stonor,” said the doctor. “Selina, my dear, this is one of my oldest patients. I prescribed for him for infantile colic when he was a month old, and lanced his gums at six.”

John Huish found himself face to face with a thin, prim little lady in tightly-fitting black silk with white collar and cuffs. She was rather pale, had perfectly grey hair in smooth bands, and looked mild and wistful, but she saluted their guest with a quiet smile, and then he was led off to be introduced to the others present.

“This is Captain Lawdor, Mr Rawlinson, Mr Roberts,” continued the doctor. “My old friend John Huish.” And he introduced Huish in turn to a rather bluff-looking, florid man with grey whiskers; a heavy, stern and stubborn looking man with iron-grey hair and a closely-trimmed beard; and a slight, delicate man with rather a sad expression, which, however, lit up with a genial smile.

John Huish was very soon engaged with Captain Lawdor on the question of yachting, and found his new acquaintance somewhat of an enthusiast upon the build and rig of sea-going boats, his preference being for the yawl. But, all the same, he found time to exchange a few words with the thin, pensive-looking Mr Roberts, who chatted about the politics of the hour, and with Mr Rawlinson, whose speech quite carried out the stubborn appearance of his knotty forehead and short iron-grey hair. He was very indignant about a railway accident mentioned in the daily paper, and gave it as his opinion that there would be no safety until heavy penalties were inflicted upon the companies, or else until the lines were in the hands of the Government.

Then Daniel came in and announced dinner, and Mr Roberts taking down Miss Stonor, Huish found himself with the doctor.

“Patients not well enough to show up, doctor?” he said quietly, as they went towards the dining-room.

“Eh?”

“I said, ‘Patients not well enough to show up’?”

“Hist! Don’t mention them,” said the doctor; and Huish gave a sigh of relief as he thought how much better the dinner would pass off without such company.

A minute later and they were seated at table, John Huish on the doctor’s right, and the captain on his right again. The stubborn, heavy man was upon Miss Stonor’s right, and the pensive-looking man facing Huish. Grace was said, the cover of the soup-tureen was lifted with a flourish by Daniel, and Miss Stonor ladled out the clear brown *julienne*, half hidden herself behind the tureen, till all were helped but Mr Rawlinson and the doctor.

Mr Rawlinson passed his hands through his iron-grey hair, and smiled as he watched the ladle go down into the steaming fluid and come up again to be emptied into the plate held by Daniel.

“And so, Rawlinson, you would heavily fine the companies?” said the doctor.

“Indeed I would,” was the reply. “Would you mind, Miss Stonor,” he continued insinuatingly, “half a ladleful more? Delicious soup. Thanks.”

Miss Stonor smiled, and the soup was placed before him, when, to the amazement of Huish, Mr Rawlinson sent his chair back with a quick motion, deftly-lifted the soup-plate on to the Turkey carpet, and, as if it were a footpan, composedly placed the toes of his patent-leather shoes therein.

Miss Stonor did not move a muscle—she might have been a disciple of Daniel; while the doctor said quietly: “Head hot, Rawlinson?”

“Yes, very,” was the reply, as the eccentric guest smiled and nodded.

“I’d go and lie down for an hour,” said the doctor gently.

“Would you—would you?” said Mr Rawlinson, smiling pleasantly. “Well, I will.”

“Come and join us presently if you feel better,” said the doctor.

“Certainly I will,” said Mr Rawlinson. “Miss Stonor, you’ll excuse me?”

Miss Stonor bowed, and he turned upon Daniel.

“A napkin, Daniel,” he said rather severely. “I cannot leave the room with my shoes in this state.”

He lifted his feet from the soup-plate as he spoke, and sat with his legs at right angles to his body, while in the most matter-of-fact way Daniel stooped down, wiped the patent-leather shoes, and, sticking his thumbs into his armholes, Mr Rawlinson calmly left the room.

“Suppose you ease off a little to the left, Roberts,” said the doctor, as the soup-plate was removed. “Rawlinson will not be back to dinner.”

“No,” said the captain, smiling. “Poor fellow!” he continued, turning to Huish; “you would not have thought he was a little wrong, I suppose?”

“Indeed I should not,” said Huish eagerly.

“No,” said the captain. “He looks as sane as I am; but he breaks out now and then, poor fellow!”

Just then Daniel was helping the guests to sherry, and Huish noticed that the captain’s glass was passed.

It seemed strange, but the conversation took off his attention, and he thought no more of it till Daniel set down the decanter, when, picking up the little round roll that lay by his napkin, the captain threw it with so good an aim that he hit the solid servitor a smart crack on the back of the head.

“Now, Captain Lawdor,” said Miss Stonor, in tones of bland reproof, “have I not told you that if you will persist in doing that you must not dine with us?”

“Hush! hush!” he whispered apologetically. “Don’t scold me before the company. Poor fellow! I don’t like to see a new patient upset. That fellow always passes me with the sherry.”

John Huish’s countenance was so ludicrous at being taken for a new patient that the doctor exchanged glances with his sister, and it was all they could do to keep from bursting into a hearty fit of laughter. The doctor, however, suppressed his, and said quietly:

“My sister is quite right, Lawdor, and you must get rid of that habit.”

The captain drew out his pocket-handkerchief, shed tears, wiped his eyes, and ended by taking out a half-crown, which he slipped into Daniel’s hand as he removed his empty plate.

John Huish felt a little disturbed as he saw the real state of affairs, but he tried to appear at his ease, and plunged into conversation with Miss Stonor, not, however, before he had directed an uneasy glance or two at his quiet, pensive companion across the table, who, however, was carrying on a discussion with the doctor.

Huish could not help thinking of the knives as the captain turned to him with a pleasant smile lighting up his ruddy face, from which all trace of sorrow had now passed.

“That’s a nasty trick,” he said; “but I never knew a man without some bad habit or another. I could hit him, though, with a biscuit at fifty paces.”

“Indeed,” said Huish.

“Yes, that I could. If I’ve hit Daniel once, I’ve done it a hundred times. But we were talking about yachting. Now, I’ve got a plan for a ship which I have submitted to the Admiralty.”

“Oh,” said Huish to himself, “here, then, is the sore place.” Then aloud, “Indeed!”

“Yes; a splendid idea. But, by the way, you know how fond we sailors are of talking about pitching a biscuit?”

“To be sure,” said Huish.

“Excuse me a few moments. A sailor always eats when he has a chance. May be called on deck at any moment. Would you oblige me?” said the captain suddenly to Huish.

“I beg your pardon, certainly,” said Huish; and, partly from habit, he placed his glass in his eye and brought it to bear on the speaker.

“This is rather a good story—eh, doctor?”

“Yes. Go on, Captain Lawdor.”

“Well, you see, I had been communicating with the Admiralty for six years about my invention when—would you oblige me by taking that glass out of your eye?” said the captain, breaking off short in his narrative. “It irritates me, and makes me feel as if I must throw something at it.”

John Huish’s eyeglass dropped inside his vest, while, in spite of all his efforts to master his emotions, he glanced uneasily at the door.

“But you would not do anything so rude, Lawdor,” said the doctor gravely, as he fixed his eye upon the captain.

“Thank you, doctor. No; of course I would not. I should be extremely sorry to insult a patient of yours.”

Huish began to feel for his glass, but remembered himself, and listened eagerly to the captain, while Mr Roberts seemed to have sunk into a pensive, thoughtful state, paying no heed to what was going on at the table.

“If I had danced attendance in Whitehall once,” said Captain Lawdor, “I had hung about that entrance a thousand times, and it was fill up forms, make minutes, present petitions to my Lords, address this department and come back to that, till it nearly drove me—till,” he added hastily, “I was very wroth with them, and one day—let me see, I think I told you,” he continued, rolling up a piece of new bread into a marble, “that I was an excellent shot with a biscuit?” and he stared hard at Huish.

“Yes, you did,” said Huish, smiling.

“Don’t laugh, sir,” exclaimed the captain. “This is not a ribald jest.”

“Breakers ahead, captain,” said the doctor, holding his glass to be refilled.

“To be sure, of course, doctor. Wear ship—you are listening, sir?”

“With the greatest attention,” replied Huish, who was becoming reconciled to his position.

“Well, sir, one day I went with my pockets filled with the roundest, smallest, and hardest ships’ biscuits I could procure, and—you are not attending, Roberts,” he exclaimed, filliping the bread marble at John Huish’s *vis-à-vis*, who bowed and smiled.

“Well, sir, as I told you, I went loaded with the biscuits, and marched straight into a board room, or a committee room, or something of the kind, and there I stormed them for quite ten minutes before they got me out. Ha, ha, ha! I emptied my pockets first, and the way I rattled the biscuits on one bald-headed fellow’s pate was something to remember. I did not miss him once, Mr Huish,” he said, turning sharply round.

“Indeed?” he said, smiling.

“In—deed, in—deed,” said the captain. “It was such a head! He was one of those youngish men whose heads are so aggravatingly white and smooth and shiny that they do not look bald, but perfectly naked. He was a Junior Lord of the Admiralty, and I declare to you, sir, that his head was perfectly indecent till I coloured it a little with the biscuits.”

“Yes, an amusing story,” said the doctor, as the dinner went on. “Come, Roberts, you are very quiet. Have a glass of that dry champagne?”

“And once again I see that brow,” said Mr Roberts in a low, soft, sweet voice: “no bridal wreath is there, a widow’s sombre cap conceals—thank you, doctor,” he continued, sighing as he altered the position of the glass.

The dinner passed off without any further incident, save that Mr Rawlinson returned looking very quiet and calm, and in time for the second course, of which he partook heartily, rising after the dessert to open the door for Miss Stonor to leave the room, and all in the most natural manner.

“Suppose we go into my room a bit now,” said the doctor. “We can have a cigar there;” and Daniel entering at that moment with coffee, it was taken into the doctor’s sanctum, the patients following the tray, the doctor hanging back with his principal guest.

“Well, my dear John, do you think you are going mad now?”

“No,” was the quick reply.

“Of course not. You see now what even a mild form of mania is.”

“I do,” was the reply. “But look here, doctor,” said Huish earnestly; “this feeling has troubled me terribly just lately.”

“And why?” said the doctor sharply, for Huish hesitated.

“Well, the fact is, doctor, it is possible that I may marry some day, and I felt—”

“Yes, of course, I know,” said the doctor; “you felt, and quite rightly, that it would be a crime to marry some sweet young girl if you had the seeds of insanity waiting to develop themselves in your brain.”

“Yes, doctor, that was it.”

“My dear John Huish, you are a bit of a favourite of mine, and I like you much.”

“Thank you, doctor, I—”

“I made the acquaintance of your father and mother in a peculiar manner, and they have always trusted me since.”

“Yes; I have heard something of it from it my father, but—”

“Just hold your tongue and listen to me, sir. You have, I am sure, chosen some sweet, gentle, good girl; nothing else would suit you. So all I have to say is this: your brain is as right as that of any man living. Marry her, and the sooner

the better. I like these young marriages, and hang all those musty old fogies who preach about improvidence and so many hundreds a year! Marry early, while you and the woman you love are in the first flush of your youth and vigour. It’s nature—it’s holy—and the good God smiles upon it. Damn it all, sir! it makes me savage to see a wretched, battered old fellow being chosen by a scheming mother of the present day as a husband for her child. Money and title will not compensate for youth. It’s a wrong system, John Huish, a wrong system. I’m a doctor, and I ought to know. Marry, then, my dear boy, as soon as you like, and God bless you!”

“Thank you, doctor, thank you,” said Huish, smiling. “But I say, doctor, if it is not impertinence, why didn’t you marry young?”

“Because I was a fool. I wanted to make money and a name in my profession, and did not calculate what would be the cost. They cost me thirty years, John Huish, and now I am an old fogey, content to try and do some good among my poor patients. But come away; they will think me rude. Eh, going now? Well, I will not say stop, as you have so far to go back. One more word: think your head’s screwed on right now?”

“Yes, doctor.”

“So do I. If it ever goes wrong, come to me, and I’ll turn it back.”

But John Huish did not feel quite satisfied, all the same.

Volume One—Chapter Eight.

In Borrowed Plumes.

There was a good deal of excitement in the Hampton Court dovecote, and a general touching up of plumage, for Lady Littletown, who resided at Hampton, so as to be near her dear old friend Lady Anna Maria Morton, who had rooms up a narrow dingy stone staircase in the corner of a cloistered court, in the private apartments at the Palace, had sent out cards for her dinner-party and “at home.”

Lady Littletown was rich, and her position in the society of the neighbourhood was that of queen. A widow for many years, she was always thinking of marriage. Not for herself. She had been through the fire, and found it hot. In fact, she bore her mental scars to her elderly age, for it was a well-known fact that the late Viscount Littletown was the extreme opposite of an angel. He had possessed a temper which grew and blossomed in wild luxuriance, and the probabilities are that he inoculated her ladyship with this peculiarity of spirit, for more than one of her domestics had been known to have declared that they would not live with the “old devil” any longer.

This was very wicked, and the domestic young ladies who had made use of such expressions were much to be censured. But certain it was that the Viscountess was far from perfect, and that she was an inveterate match-maker.

Probably she was of opinion that it would be a pleasant little piece of revenge on human nature to inveigle as many of her sex as possible on to the stormy sea of matrimony. At all events, a good many fashionable marriages resulted from plans laid by her ladyship and her female friends.

Lady Littletown’s friends were many, and included Lady Millet, whom she always addressed as “my dear,” in spite of a pique which had arisen consequent upon the latter marrying her eldest daughter to that wealthy *parvenu*, Mr Frank Morrison.

Now, according to Lady Littletown’s code, this was not correct. Dear friends as they had been, Lady Millet should have obtained her help, seeing that marriages were her *métier*; but she had obstinately gone her own way, invited her to the wedding, and latterly had actually shown that she was scheming something about two gentlemen whom Lady Littletown had marked down for her own—to wit, Lord Henry Moorpark and Mr Elbraham, the great financier.

“But, poor thing! she did not know how to manage Elbraham,” said Lady Littletown to herself; “and as for dear Lord Henry, not if I know it, dearest I think I can manage that, and you may marry pink-and-white wax-doll Gertrude to someone else.”

So her ladyship issued her cards most discriminatingly and well, in her determination to let no rival in her circle interfere with her rights as high-priestess of Hymen to her dearest friends.

Lady Littletown’s invitations on this occasion had included the Honourable Misses Dymcox and their nieces Clotilde and Marie Riversley; and, like Cinderella of the story, Ruth had rather a hard time with her cousins. For, to the astonishment of the latter, a fashionable dressmaker had been down expressly from London, and their excitement over the handsome robes that had arrived knew no bounds.

Their aunts had been a long time in making a move, and divers had been the consultations with Viscountess Littletown and Lady Anna Maria Morton. When at last that step was taken, it was with firmness and judgment combined.

Poor Ruth was divided between longings to go to the dinner-party and admiration of her cousins’ appearance, which, when they stood at last dressed, an hour before the time, parading the shabby bedroom and sweeping the skimpy pieces of Kidderminster carpet here and there with their stiff trains, was dazzling.

Certainly a handsomer pair of women rarely graced a party, and the Honourable Misses Dymcox, after a careful inspection through their square florid gold-edged eyeglasses, uttered sighs of satisfaction.

For the *modiste* had done her duty well. The dresses were in the latest style, they fitted to perfection, and the girls' youth and the luxuriance of their hair quite made up for the want of jewellery to enhance their charms.

The Honourable Misses Dymcox were almost as excited as their nieces, for they, too, managed to get dressed an hour before time in their lavender silk straight-up-and-down garments, to which were tacked a few old pieces of very yellow lace, supposed to be an heirloom, but certainly very unattractive, whatever it may have been when young.

A very weak cup of tea had been taken, the elder ladies being in fear and trembling all the while.

"No, no, children, wait!" exclaimed Miss Philippa. "Joseph, put down the cups, and tell Markes to bring here two large pocket-handkerchiefs."

In due time Markes appeared.

"Now, children," said Miss Philippa, "stand up. Markes, have the goodness to tie a handkerchief by two of the corners just under the young ladies' chins. It would be ruin to those dresses if they spilt any of their tea."

"If you please, aunt, I don't want any tea," said Clotilde.

"Neither do I, aunt," said Marie.

"Hush, children! You must take your tea. It is imperative that you should enter Lady Littletown's drawing-room calm, self-possessed, and without any sign of being flushed. Markes, tie on those handkerchiefs."

A red spot burned in the girls' cheeks as they submitted to the childish indignity, and when they were duly provided with their bibs they were allowed to drink their thin, washy, half-cold tea, exchanging glances the while, for their emancipation had not yet arrived.

"Ruth, ring the bell," said Miss Philippa, as soon as the tea was finished, and the handkerchiefs, which had been rising and falling in a troubled fashion, had been removed.

"Take away these teacups, Joseph," said Miss Philippa. "Has the carriage arrived?"

"No, mum. It wants more than half an hour to the time. Buddy hasn't been in yet."

"Hush! Silence!" cried Miss Philippa harshly; "and dear me, Joseph, there is a large place on the back of your head not powdered."

Joseph was heard to mutter something, and then he went forth in his best livery of pale blue with yellow facings and black knee-breeches, to finish his toilet for the night.

"Oh, here you are, then," exclaimed Joseph, upon reaching his pantry, a peculiarly close, stuffy little room, smelling very strongly of sink, and furnished with two cupboards, a bracket-flap, and what looked like a third detached cupboard, but which was really the turn-up bedstead on which Joseph slept.

"Yes, here I am, Joey," said a husky-voiced little red-nosed man, with a very blotchy, pimply face, to wit Isaac Buddy, the sole proprietor of a roomy old-fashioned Clarence fly, which was drawn by a very small shambling horse.

This conveyance was Mr Isaac Buddy's means of livelihood, for it was to let, as his cards said, "by the day, night, or job," and the hiring of Mr Isaac Buddy's fly meant not only, as a matter of course, the hire of the horse to draw it, but of Mr Isaac Buddy himself.

For, out of deference to the feelings and aristocratic ideas of certain of the ladies residing in the private apartments, Mr Buddy had become an actor, who played many parts, and though the fiction was perfectly well understood, nobody ever thought of smiling if they saw Mr Isaac Buddy in a hat with a tarnished gold band on Mondays as Lady Anna Maria Morton's coachman, or in a hat with a silver band on Tuesday, as Miss Tees', or on Wednesday in a very hard shiny glazed hat without any nap, as Mrs Mongloff's, or on other days in costumes to suit.

The Clarence fly of course remained the same, but it was always disguised in a more sounding name, and became "the carriage."

"There ain't a drop o' nothing about handy, is there, Joey?" said Mr Buddy, as the thin footman set the tray down upon the bracket-flap.

"No, that there ain't," said Joseph, "without you'd like the pot filled up and have a cup o' tea."

"G'orn with yer. Did you ever know me wash myself out with warm water? How's the old gals?"

"Old style," replied Joseph; "but I say, Buddy, just cast your eye round as they're getting in: the young ladies have been done up to rights."

"I wish someone would find the money to get my old fly done up to rights," said Mr Buddy, who, apparently quite at home, was standing before a shaving-glass hung against the wall, persuading, with Joseph's brush, a couple of very obstinate little whiskers to stand out straight forward in the direction their owner wished. "'Spose there'll be a wedding, then, some day."

"Well, I dunno," said Joseph.

"Looks like it, if they're having 'em fresh painted," said Mr Buddy, who now touched up his very greasy grey hair,

making it stick up in points, in unconscious imitation of that of a clown.

“Here, you’d better look sharp, old man,” said Joseph, “they’re all ready and waiting, and time’s getting on.”

“Which we ain’t, Joey, or we should be doing better than we are, eh?”

“Ah, we should,” said Joseph, making a powder-box squeak as he unscrewed the top; and then taking out the puff, he placed a tea-cloth over his shoulders, and gave his hair a few dabs. “Now then, old man. Have the tea-cloth on?”

“Ah, you may as well,” was the reply; and the cloth having been adjusted by Joseph, the little man stood blinking solemnly while his dingy hair was duly powdered and turned white.

“Why, you might stand a bit o’ wilet powder cump’ny nights, Joey,” said the flyman, solemnly removing a little white meal from amongst the ruddy pimples of his face with the corner of the cloth in regular use for wiping the tea and breakfast service.

“How am I to stand best vi’let powder out o’ what they allow?” replied Joseph. “Flour’s just as good, and don’t cost me nothing. Now then, look sharp.”

As he spoke Joseph pulled open a drawer, from which he drew a drab greatcoat, inside which the little man placed himself, for it was manifestly so much too large that he could hardly be said to have put it on. Then a blue hat-box was pushed off the top of one of the cupboards, out of which a rather ancient hat was extricated, and mounted by the flyman, whose head seemed to have become suddenly wonderfully small; for it was an imposing structure of beaver with very curly brims, apparently kept from coming uncurled by a rigging or series of stays of tarnished silver cord, which ran from the lining up to a Panjandrum-like round button at the top, also of tarnished silver; while a formidable-looking and very spiky black cockade rose something like a patent ventilator from one side.

“That’s about the ticket, ain’t it, Joey?” said the little man, shaking his head so as to get the big hat in a good state of balance, and buttoning himself to the chin.

“Yes, that will do, old man.”

“The ladies want to know if the carriage has come, Joseph,” said Markes, suddenly making her appearance.

“Which you may take your solemn oath it ain’t,” said Mr Buddy, “for not one inch will that there horse stir till I wakes him up.”

“Then do for goodness’ sake, man, look sharp and fetch it,” exclaimed Markes. “I’m sure it’s past the time!”

“Wants five minutes,” said Mr Buddy, nodding his head, and having to dart one hand up to save the hat, which came down over his nose, and would have continued its course to the floor. “I say, your old coachman must have had a head like a bull, to have worn that hat without stuffing. There, I’m off. Soon be back. I say, though,” he whispered, thrusting back his head, and this time holding on by the rigging of the hat, “if it comes to a wedding, the old gals ought to stand some new togs.”

Within a quarter of an hour Mr Isaac Buddy, who had entered the private apartments as flyman, and came out the Honourable Misses Dymcox’s coachman, was at the door with the transformed fly. The ladies were duly packed inside, with many tremors as to their dresses, and Joseph, also in a drab greatcoat and a fearful and wonderful hat—the twin-brother of that upon Mr Buddy’s head—mounted to the seat. Then the carriage jingled and jangled off—a dashing brougham and pair, with flashing lights and the windows down, rattling by them, making Buddy’s nervous nag shy to the near side, as if he meant to mount the side walk out of the way.

“Rie,” whispered Clotilde, with her ruddy lips touching her sister’s ear.

“Yes.”

“That funny little officer was inside.”

“Yes,” muttered Marie to herself, “and the tall one as well; and you know it. I wonder who they are?”

Volume One—Chapter Nine.

The Slave of Fortune.

“I say, look here! You know, Litton, I’m the last man on earth to complain; but you know, damn it, you don’t do your duty by me.”

“You don’t give me credit for what I do do, Elbraham, ’pon my soul you don’t!” said the gentleman addressed—a rather fashionably-dressed, stylish young fellow of eight-and-twenty or thirty, whose hair was closely cropped in the latest style, his well-worn clothes scrupulously brushed, and his hands particularly white.

As he answered he screwed his glass very tightly into his eyes and gazed at the first speaker—a little, pudgy, high-shouldered man, with a very short neck and a very round head, slightly bald. He was carefully dressed, and a marked point in his attire was the utter absence of everything in the shape of jewellery or ornament. His fat white hands did not display so much as a ring; and though a slight prominence in his vest proclaimed the presence of a watch, it was attached to his person by a guard of the finest black silk. His countenance, however, did not match with the

refinement of his attire, for it betrayed high living and sensual indulgence. There was an unpleasant look, too, about his eyes; and if to the least cultured person he had asserted in the most emphatic manner that he was a gentleman, it would not have been believed.

But, all the same, he was a man of mark, for this was Samuel Elbraham, the financier, the man who was reputed to have made hundreds of thousands by his connection with the Khedive. Men in society and on ’Change joked about Elbraham, and said that he was a child of Israel, who went down into Egypt and spoiled the Egyptians for everybody’s buying but his own. They called him Potiphar, too, and made it a subject of jest that there was no Potiphar’s wife; but they also said that it did not matter, for these were days when people had arisen who knew not Joseph.

Then they laughed, and wondered whether Potiphar of old went in for a theatre, and supplied rare subsidies of hard cash to a manager, and was very fond of taking parties of friends to his private-box to witness the last new extravaganza, after the said friends had dined with him and drunk his champagne.

Somehow or other, it was the friends who ate his dinners and drank his champagne that made the most jokes about him; but though these witticisms, real or would be, came round to him at times, they troubled him very little.

The conversation above commenced took place in Mr Elbraham’s library, at the riverside residence at Twickenham, the handsomely-furnished place that he, the celebrated converted Israelite, had taken of Lord Washingtower, when a long course of ill-luck on the turf had ended in nearly placing his lordship under the turf, for rumour said that his terrible illness was the result of an attempt to rid himself of his woes by a strong dose of a patent sedative medicine.

As Mr Elbraham spoke he hitched up his shoulders, thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked up and down in front of the books he never read.

“Not give you credit for what you do?” he retorted. “Why, what do you mean?”

“Don’t talk to me like that, Elbraham, please. I’m not your servant.”

“Hang it all, then, what the devil are you? I pay you regular wages.”

“No. Stop, please. I accept a regulated stipend from you, Elbraham.”

“Oh, very good! let’s have it like that, then, Mr Rarthur Litton. I took you up, same as I did your bills, when you were so hard hit that you didn’t know where to go for a fiver. You made certain proposals and promises to me, and, I ask you, what have you done?”

“More than you give me credit for,” was the reply, rather sullenly made.

“You dine with me, you sleep here, and make this place your home whenever you like; and when I look for your help, as I expected, I find that your name is in the papers as the secretary to some confounded Small Fish Protection Society, or as managing director of the Anti-Soap and Soda Laundry Company.”

“I’m sure I’ve done my duty by you, Mr Elbraham,” said the young man hotly. “If you want to quarrel and get rid of me, say so.”

I don’t want to quarrel, and I don’t mean to quarrel, Mr Rarthur Litton. I made a bargain with you, and I mean to keep you to it. You boasted to me of your high connections and your *entrée* into good society, and undertook to introduce me into some of the best families, so that I might take the position that my wealth enables me to hold. Now, then, please, have I paid up like a man?

“Yes; you have,” was the sulky response.

“And you’ve taken jolly good care to draw more than was your due. Now, what have you done?”

“Well, I taught you to dress like something different to a cad.”

“Humph! You did knock off my studs and rings and things.”

“And I’ve dined with you till I’ve got you to be fit to eat your meals in a Christianlike manner.”

“Look here, Mr Rarthur, sir,” said Elbraham hotly, “is that meant as a sneer?”

“No; of course not.”

“Oh!”

“Then I wanted time to get these things in proper course. Well, come now, I did get you the invitation to Lady Littletown’s.”

“Yes; to a beggarly dinner with an old woman at Hampton. Are you going to dine there?”

“I? No! I come in afterwards at the ‘at home’.”

“Ah! I wanted to talk to you about that affair to-night. You promised without my consent.”

“Of course I did. It was a great chance.”

“A great chance?”

"Of course. You don't know how big a thing it is to be."

"Bah! stuff! rubbish! A feed given to all the old pensioned tabbies at Hampton Court."

"Don't you make any mistake, sir. There'll be some big people there."

"Big! Why, I could buy up dozens of them."

"Their incomes, perhaps, Mr Elbraham, but not their position and their *entrée* to good society. Sir, you could not even buy mine."

"But I could your bills," said the other, with a grin.

"And hold them over me, you wretched little cad!" said the young man to himself. Then aloud:

"I can assure you, Mr Elbraham, that this dinner will give you the step you wanted. Lady Littletown stands very high in society. The Duchess of Redesby will be there, and Lord Henry Moorpark."

"What! old Apricot—old yellow and ripe!" said Elbraham with a chuckle.

"Lord Henry Moorpark is a thorough specimen of an English nobleman, Mr Elbraham," said the secretary stiffly; "and I consider that if the only thing I had done was to gain you an introduction to him, I should have earned all the wages, as you call them, that you have condescended to pay me."

"Yes, of course—yes, to be sure. There, there, don't be so hot and peppery, Litton. I'm a bit put out this morning. By the way, would you have the brougham and pair or one horse?"

"Pair, decidedly," said the young man.

"You'll not go with me?"

"No; I come afterwards. You shall bring me back if you will."

"Yes; of course. I'll put some cigars in the pocket. Would you wear the diamond studs?"

"*No*. Not a ring, even. Go in black, and hardly speak a word. Do nothing but look the millionaire. The simpler you dress, my dear sir, the richer they will think you."

"My dear Litton, you're a treasure—damme, that you are, sir! I say, look here: you don't happen to want five, or ten, or twenty this morning, do you?"

Mr Arthur Litton did happen to want twenty, not five or ten; and a couple of crisp notes were thrust into his hand.

"Well, I suppose it's all right, Litton. I shall look out for you there, then; but it's a deuce of a way to go."

"It's worth going to, if it were double the distance, I can assure you. You have money; you want position."

"All right, then; that's settled. I'm going to the City now. Are you going in?"

"No, thanks; I shall sit down and do a little writing."

"Very good; you'll find the cigars on the shelf."

"What, those cigars?" He spoke with a slight emphasis on the "those." "No, thanks; they have too strong a flavour of a hundred-pound bill."

"What do you mean?"

"Forty pounds in cash, forty in old pale East India sherry, and twenty in weeds."

"You're an artful one, you are, Litton—'pon my soul you are. Deuced artful," said Mr Elbraham, with a curious puckering about the corners of his eyes, intended to do duty for a smile. "But that reminds me, Huish's bill falls due to-morrow—hundred pounds; mustn't forget that. Here, pull out your case."

He unlocked a little cabinet with a tiny key, and opened two or three drawers full of cigars, each with a paper band round its middle.

"Which is it to be?"

The young man smiled, and filled his case, selecting one as well for present smoking. The cabinet was reclosed; there was an interchange of nods; Elbraham went off to the station; Litton sat down and wrote a letter, after which he made a little study of a time-table, hurried off, and, catching a train, was soon after on his way to Hampton, where he was just in time to catch Lady Littletown entering her carriage for a drive.

"Ah, *mon cher* Arthur!" she exclaimed; "you nearly missed me. There, come in, and I'll take you part of your way back."

Litton mounted beside her ladyship, and took his seat as invited.

"Drive slowly," cried her ladyship; and as the handsome barouche, with its well-appointed pair of bays, went gaily

along the pleasant riverside road towards the Palace, Lady Littletown turned her sharp dark eyes searchingly upon her companion.

She was one of those elderly ladies upon whom the effect of time seems to be that of making them sharper and possessed of a keener interest in worldly matters, and one in whose aquiline features there was ample promise of her proving to be a most implacable enemy if offended. Too cautious to allow her heart to be stirred by instincts of an amatory nature, she had found consolation in looking after the matrimonial business of others; and hence her interest in her companion of the hour.

"Well?" she said sharply; "what news?"

"I've fixed him for certain. He would have backed out, but for a bit of a chat this morning."

"Then the nasty, scaly, slippery gold-fish will really come?"

"Yes."

"Not disappoint me as he did Judy Millet?"

"You may depend upon him this time."

"Good boy, good boy. Now, look here, Arthur: you are behaving very well over this, and if the affair comes off as I wish, and you behave very nicely, I'll see next what I can do by way of finding you a wife with a snug fortune; only you must not be too particular about her looks."

"I leave myself in your ladyship's hands."

"There, now you may get down. I'm going to make two or three calls in the Palace."

"One moment, Lady Littletown," said Litton eagerly; "I'm just starting a society for the preservation of ancient trees and old—"

"Now, *mon cher*, that will do," said the old lady decidedly. "You know I never give money or—"

"I only ask for your name as a patroness or supporter."

"And you will not have it; so now be a good boy, and go. I've got your name down upon my tablets, Arthur, so wait your time. Stop!"

The horses were checked; the footman descended and opened the door, rattling the steps loudly; Arthur Litton leaped out, raised his hat; Lady Littletown kissed the tips of her gloved fingers to him, and the carriage passed on.

"I wonder whether she will," said the young man, as he walked towards the station. "However, we shall see."

Volume One—Chapter Ten.

A Dinner for an End.

"My income, my dears, just suffices for my wants," said Lady Littletown; "and I have never anything to spare for charities and that sort of thing."

So said her ladyship to her aristocratic friends living in pinched circumstances in the private apartments; and it may or may not have been intended for a hint not to try and borrow money.

"One would like to be charitable and to give largely, but what with one's household expenses and the horses and carriages, and my month in town in the height of the season, I really sometimes find myself obliged to ask his late lordship's agent for a few hundreds in advance of the time when the rents are due. But then, you see, one owes so much to one's position."

The Honourable Misses Dymcox said one certainly did; Lady Anna Maria Morton, who had been longing for a new silk evening dress for three years, said the same; and, thoroughly feeling it to be a fact, Lady Littletown tried to pay honourably what she owed to society by rigidly living up to the last penny of her fairly handsome income in the pleasant mansion near Hampton Court.

She gave about four dinner-parties in the course of the year, and afterwards received.

This was one of her special parties for a special purpose, and when the last of her fifteen guests had arrived and been looked at through her great gold eyeglass held with the left hand, while the tips of the fingers of the right were given in assurance of her being "so delighted," her ladyship proceeded to marshal her forces for the procession to the dining-room.

"Here's what it is to be a lone widow!" she exclaimed playfully. "Moorpark, might I ask you to take the foot of the table?—Miss Marie Riversley."

Lord Henry had murmured to himself a good deal about being dragged down all the way from Saint James's Square to Hampton just at a time when his heart told him that he ought to be married, and though terribly dissatisfied with the success which had attended his attentions to Gertrude Millet, his brain was full of her bright, refined features. He,

however, now advanced, quite the handsome, stately gentleman, with a pleasant, benevolent look upon his thin face, and at once entered into conversation with the dark beauty to whom he had been introduced.

"Mr Elbraham," continued Lady Littletown, in a confidential whisper, as she inspected him as if he were for sale, "would you oblige me?—Miss Dymcox's niece."

The reputed millionaire started, and a scowl began to dawn in his face, for the name Dymcox brought up the faces of the honourable sisters; but as he was led to dark, glowing, southern-faced Clotilde, the scowl reached no farther than its dawn, and the ruddy sun of his coarse round face rose out of the fog, and beamed its satisfaction upon the handsome girl.

"Oh, I say, Glen, what a shame!" whispered little Dick Millet to his chosen companion, who, consequent upon his being an officer and the friend of dear Lady Millet's son, had been invited, like his major, to the feast.

Dick began grinding his white teeth in the corner, where he had been making eyes at Clotilde and Marie in turn, whichever looked in his direction; and for the moment he seemed as if he were going to tear either his curly hair or the dainty exotic from his button-hole.

"Hush! be quiet," was the reply.

"Hurrah! viva!" whispered Dick again. "The Black Douglas is being tacked on to that old scrag."

"That old scrag" was the Honourable Philippa Dymcox, and "the Black Douglas" Major Edward Malpas, who, probably from disappointment in connection with a late marriage, was contemplatively watching Clotilde; but his courtesy was perfect as he bent toward the Honourable Philippa.

"Now there's that other old she-dragon, Glen," whispered Dick. "Oh, I say, it's too bad of the old woman! I won't, that I won't. I didn't come here to be treated so, and if she says I'm to march in that dreadful skeleton I'll be taken ill and make a bolt of it. I say, Marcus," he continued, "my nose is going to bleed," and as he spoke he took out his delicately-scented pocket-handkerchief.

"Captain Glen, will you take in the Honourable Isabella Dymcox?" said Lady Littletown, showing just a trifle of gold setting as she smiled.

Marcus Glen told the truth when he said he would be most happy, for he recognised in the lady of the old-fashioned lavender poplin one of the companions of Clotilde and Marie in their walk in the Palace gardens.

Dick Millet thrust his scented cambric back into the pocket of his silk-lined coat, and after a glance at the ladies, either of whom he longed to take in to dinner, he had a look round the room to see which would be the most eligible dinner-table companion of those that were left; but to his disgust he began to find that he was being left entirely in the cold, for the hostess, with all the skill of one who has well made her plans beforehand, was rapidly finishing her arrangements.

"It's enough to make any man's nose bleed, and compel him to bolt," muttered the handsome little fellow, who had got himself up in the most irreproachable manner, having even been to town that afternoon on purpose to place himself in a hairdresser's hands.

"Hang it all! am I nobody?"

It was hard work getting hold of the ends, but Dick managed to give a vicious twist to his delicate floss silk moustache, and he was contemplating a fresh appeal to his scented handkerchief and making the threatened bolt, as he termed it, with the cambric held to his nose, when Lady Littletown approached.

"Now, my dearest Richard," she exclaimed, and her many years, the speck of gold near one top tooth, the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, and the suggestions of untruthfulness about her hair, all seemed to be softened down and seen through an eyeglass tinted *à la rose*, "I'm a very covetous person, and I always make a point, like the wicked old widow I am, of reserving the most *beau chevalier* for myself. Now you have to take me in, we two last; and you'll be obliged to help me out of my difficulties if there is anything to carve."

Dick coloured a little with pride:

"And we, too, must have a pleasant chat about mamma and the dear girls; and, oh, I am so glad you took to the army and are quartered down here. It will be so pleasant for me; but I shall, for mamma's sake, watch all your doings. I am not going to have you turn out a *roué* like your wicked Major. Come along."

So Dick took in her ladyship, feeling taller, and actually seeming to swell a little, as he found himself seated at his hostess's right hand. Then, the places being found, every guest's name neatly written on a porcelain *ménu*, Lord Henry, at the foot of the table, closed his eyes, bent forward, and in a low, reverent voice said grace, to which Mr Elbraham added a very audible "Amen!" and the dinner commenced.

Of course it was all by way of paying her dues to society that things were done so well, for certainly the dinner was as exquisite as the table itself, with its decorations of plate and glass, amidst which, half hidden in almost a redundancy of exotic flowers, was a thoroughly choice dessert. Richard Millet, who rather trembled in the midst of his pride, and had twice in imagination seen wings of chicken, as he dismembered a bird, flying in a cloud of brown sauce into people's laps, was spared all trouble, for the viands were served *à la Russe*, and were perfect of their kind.

"I'm deuced glad I came," thought Mr Elbraham, as the choice, well-iced wines reached him in turn, and after several rather awkward attempts at conversation with Clotilde he found himself getting on much better. For his companion,

in spite of her delight at being present at such a party, and having been affectionately kissed by Lady Littletown, and called "My dearest child," was disappointed because Captain Glen had not spoken to her, neither had he been chosen to take her in to dinner. But, then, he had looked at her—looked at her several times. He admired her. There was no doubt about that. His looks said so plainly; and, for her part, there was something very pleasant to her eyes in the well-built, manly fellow, with his easy, indifferent ways and his gentlemanly, chivalrous attention to her aunt; who, poor soul! was nervous, and fluttered with the unusual excitement.

"I don't like him; he's a dreadful creature," said Clotilde to herself, as her companion grew more at home, and, after a glass or two of a very choice champagne of unusual potency, began to talk to her in a fashion somewhat suggestive of his style at a private supper at the Rantan or at Latellier's, and ladies who were in the habit of performing show parts in public were present.

"I'm deuced glad I came. She's a devilish handsome girl, and I like her," thought Mr Elbraham, and during his next remark, of course inadvertently, his coat-sleeve touched Clotilde's firm, white, well-rounded arm.

"And so you lead a very quiet, very retired life," said Lord Henry to Marie, as, scarcely partaking of anything himself, he chivalrously devoted his attention to his companion, enjoying her evident delight and hearty young appetite, which as a rule was none too well satisfied.

She, too, had been, in the midst of her delight in her charming dress, the reflection of her handsome self in Lady Littletown's mirror, that lady's affectionate greeting, and the brilliant dinner-table, rather disappointed that she had not been taken in by Captain Glen, or that dark handsome Major, or even by the funny pretty little page style of officer; but by degrees that wore off, and she listened with real pleasure to Lord Henry's words.

He was quite an elderly gentleman, but, then, he was a nobleman, with a truer feeling of admiration for the beautiful woman he had been called upon to escort. There was something delightfully new, too, in her ways. She was very different to the society young ladies he was accustomed to meet, all gush and strained style of conversation. Marie was as if fresh from a convent, and he was even amused with some of her naïve remarks.

The Honourable Misses Dymcox had given their nieces the most stringent instructions upon etiquette; above all, they were not to taste wine; but while Marie was answering a remark made by Lord Henry, one of the servants filled that faintly prismatic glass, like half a soap-bubble in its beauty, and from old habit Marie lifted the drinking vessel by her hand, tasted, found the clear sparkling wine delicious, and had sipped again and again.

The effect was trifling, but it did remove some of her diffidence, and she found herself chatting willingly enough to her cavalier.

"Oh yes; a very, very retired life. We spend most of our time in the schoolroom, and when we take walks it is in the gardens or in the park with our aunts, at times when none of the London people are down."

"Have you been on the Continent?"

"Oh no," replied Marie, "not since Mr Montaigne brought us over to the Palace?"

"May I ask who is Mr Montaigne?"

"He was a very old friend of poor mamma's."

"Poor mamma?" said Lord Henry inquiringly.

"Oh yes; poor mamma and papa died when we were very little girls, and we have been with our aunts ever since."

Lord Henry sipped his wine, gazed sidewise at his beautiful companion, and sighed. He thought of Gertrude Millet, and let his eye rest from time to time upon her brother, vainly trying to trace a resemblance, and also that though Lady Millet had undoubtedly seemed pleased by his advances, Gertrude had been chilling, and Marie Dymcox was not.

Possibly, too, as the old man sighed, he thought that he had no time to lose now that he had been thinking that he would marry, and he sighed again as if in regret of something he had lost, something he might have had, but had been too careless or indifferent to win.

A close observer would have noticed that there were tears in his eyes just then. Lady Littletown was a close observer, and by the aid of her eyeglass she did notice it, and secretly hugged herself.

"But you go out a good deal—to parties, to concerts, or balls?"

"Oh no!" laughed Marie, and her white teeth showed beneath her coral lips, while Major Malpas, who was nearly opposite, looked at her intently from beneath his heavy eyelids, and softly stroked his moustache. "I was never at a party before."

"And do you like it?" said Lord Henry, beaming upon her, as, with a secret kind of satisfaction, he quietly admired the animated countenance beside him.

"Oh yes, yes," she said softly. "I can't help liking it very much."

"Well," said Lord Henry, smiling in quite a pleased manner, "why should you help liking it?"

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully; "only we are always so quiet at the Palace, and aunts have often said that too

much gaiety was bad."

"Too much, my dear child. Yes, certainly; but a little is very pleasurable, and innocent, and good."

Marie's eyes, as they met his, said that they were delighted to hear it, and as she sat and let the quiet, chivalrous old gentleman draw her out, no one would have credited her with being one of the heroines of some of the schoolroom scenes in which poor little Ruth had been the victim.

Lord Henry Moorpark grew more and more thoughtful as he chatted on with his companion. There was something inexpressibly refreshing in Marie's words and ways, and he, too, congratulated himself upon the dinner-party, which he had looked upon as a nuisance, and to which he had come solely out of respect for Lady Littletown, turning out so pleasurable and fresh.

He was not the only elderly guest who thoroughly enjoyed the dinner, for the Honourable Isabella Dymcox partook of her share of the courses in a state of, for her, unwonted flutter. In accordance with the plotting and planning that had been at work in the Palace coterie, she had come fully prepared to give a furtive observation to what was going on with Clotilde and Marie, the children who, with her sister, she was fain to confess had arrived at a marriageable age; but from the moment she had laid her tremulous hand upon Marcus Glen's arm, and had been led by him to her seat, her nieces had been forgotten.

Certainly Glen had several times over exchanged glances with Clotilde, and taken notice of the fact that Elbraham was growing more and more familiar and loud; but all the same he had found ample time to devote himself with a good deal of assiduity to Miss Isabella, making her at first surprised and cold, soon after pleased and full of agreeable thoughts, and at last thoroughly gratified at the way in which her companion attended to her lightest wishes and conversed upon society at Hampton Court.

"I—I won't be so foolish as so think he means anything," said Miss Isabella to herself; "for he is quite young and manly-looking, almost handsome, while I am getting very old indeed, and all hope of *that* is past; but he is very nice and gentlemanly, and so very different to officers as a rule. I must say I like him very much."

She showed, too, that she did as soon as the cold formal crust had been melted away, and Marcus was not slow to realise the fact.

He was perfectly honest, for he knew that the Honourable Isabella was the aunt of Clotilde, and being as impressionable as most young men of his age, he had felt to some extent the power of that lady's eyes. Under the circumstances, as he had been thrown with the relative, he had thought it fair campaigning to make friends with her, and this he had done to such an extent that the attentions she had received, and a glass or two of wine, made the lady very communicative, and far happier than her sister, who found the dinner much less to her taste.

For Major Malpas was not best pleased at having to take her in, and he had confined himself to the most frigid civilities. He was perfectly gentlemanly, but as the dinner wore on he grew more polite, and by consequence the Honourable Philippa became icy in her manner, till at last she seemed to be frozen stiff.

"Humph!" he thought, "better have gone and sat with Renée Morrison. Yes," he continued, staring hard at Dick, "your sister, my half-fledged cockerel."

The other guests merely formed chorus to the principal singers in the little social opera, but they were wonderfully led by Lady Littletown, whose tongue formed her conductor's baton, by which she swayed them with a practised ease.

She had a word in season for everyone where it was needful to keep up the balance of the parts, and wonderfully skilful was her way. She gave a great deal of her time to everybody, but little Richard Millet never missed any of her attentions. In a very short time she had quite won his confidence, and knew that Major Malpas was a regular plunger, that Captain Glen was the dearest and best fellow in the world, that he hadn't any more vice in him than a child, that they were the dearest of friends, and that Marcus had only about two hundred and fifty a year besides his pay.

"I begin to like Hampton Court, Lady Littletown," said the boy warmly, for the champagne had been frequent.

"I'm sure you'll love the place when you begin to know us better. Of course you will come to all my 'at homes?'"

"That I will," exclaimed the delighted youth. "By the way, Lady Littletown, what lovely girls those Miss Dymcoxes are!"

"Yes, are they not?" replied Lady Littletown; "but oh, fie, fie, fie! This will not do. I will not listen to a single word. I'm not going to lend myself to any match-making. What would Lady Millet say?"

"But, really, Lady Littletown—"

"Oh dear me, no; I will not listen. I know too well, sir, what you officers are—so wicked and reckless, and given to breaking ladies' hearts. I think I shall absolutely forbid you even approaching them when you come up to the drawing-room. I would not for the world be the means of causing any heart diseases amongst my guests."

"But surely, Lady Littletown, a fellow may admire at a distance?"

"Oh dear no," said her ladyship playfully; "I think not. I'm afraid you are a very bad, dangerous man, and I shall have to withdraw my invitation."

Dick Millet pleaded; the invitation was not withdrawn; and the little fellow was better satisfied with himself than he

had felt for months.

“It’s an uncommonly well got-up affair, after all,” he thought; “but I wish the ladies would go now. I want to get the wine over, and go up to the drawing-room.”

To the little fellow’s satisfaction the long-drawn-out repast did come to an end, that cleverly-managed signal was given which acts electrically at a certain stage of a dinner; the ladies rose, and in place of one of the younger gentlemen opening the door, Lord Henry performed that duty, a genial but half-sad smile playing about his thin, closely-shaven lips, as Marie looked up in his face in passing. Then the last lady went out, and the gentlemen closed up to their coffee and wine.

Somehow or other, Marcus Glen found himself now near Lord Henry, and while a knot of listeners heard Mr Elbraham’s opinion upon the Eastern Question, especially with regard to the new Sultan and the position of Egypt, the young officer entered into a quiet discussion upon the history of the old Palace, and was surprised and pleased to find how much his companion knew of the past days of the old red-brick building, but above all at the genial, winning manner the old gentleman possessed.

Acting the part of host now for the time being, he soon proposed that they should adjourn, for there was a strange longing within him to be within sight and hearing of Marie.

“Ah, to be sure,” said Elbraham; “if I wanted to invest, gentlemen, I should say Egyptian bonds. By all means, let’s join the ladies.”

He, too, had come to the conclusion that he should like “another talk to that girl.” But the drawing-room was filling fast, and there were no more *tête-à-têtes*. Arthur Litton arrived soon after ten, and his chief approached him to shake hands, as if they had not met for some time.

“Well?” said Litton.

“Stunning, sir, stunning! ’Bove par.”

“Oh!”

“Deuced good dinner, Litton, ’pon my soul. People not half so snobbish as I expected to find them. I say, look here. What do you think of that piece of goods?”

He indicated Clotilde, about whom Dick Millet was now hovering; but who had turned from him to listen to a remark just made by Glen.

“Hum, ha!” said Litton critically. “Oh, that’s one of the Dymcox girls, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t ask you anything about who she is; I said what do you think of her?”

“Not bad-looking, I should say,” replied Litton coolly; “but nothing particular.”

“Oh, you be blowed!” said the great financier, and he screwed his short thick neck down a little lower into his chest, and turned away.

“Well, Lady Littletown, how do matters make themselves?” said Litton quietly, when, after a time, her ladyship passed his way.

“Oh, *Arturo, mio caro*!” said her ladyship, tickling the centre stud in his shirt-front with the end of her closed fan. “*Maravigliosamente*. My dear boy, it is wonderful. You shall have a rich wife, Arthur, if you are good, and this affair is *un fait accompli*.”

“Why didn’t you try a bit of German, too?” muttered Litton, as her ladyship passed on. “Here, I must get on with some of these officers; perhaps they’d take me to their quarters, and give me a smoke and an S. and B. Hang this tea! I forgot, though, I promised Potiphar to go home with him. Hang the beast! but it will save me a fare.”

Everyone was delighted. Lady Littletown was charmed over and over again, but when at last an obsequious footman, who seemed to be shod with velvet, whispered to the Honourable Philippa that her carriage had arrived, that lady, who felt very tired and sleepy, said mentally, “Thank goodness!”

But it was half an hour later before she made a move, and the drawing-rooms were growing unbearably hot with the chattering, buzzing crowd.

Suddenly there was silence, as the Honourable Misses Dymcox rose to go.

Lady Littletown was so sorry the evening had been so short, but she managed to exchange meaning looks.

“I think, yes,” she whispered; and the Honourable Philippa nodded and tightened her lips.

“Good-night, my sweet darling,” said Lady Littletown, kissing Clotilde affectionately. “Mind you come and see me soon. Good-night, dearest Marie. How well you look to-night, child!”

Then her ladyship saw through her square eyeglass, with the broad chased gold rim, Elbraham, podgy, stout and puffy, take Clotilde down to the carriage, followed by Lord Henry with Marie, and Captain Glen with the Honourable Isabella, and little Richard Millet with the Honourable Philippa; everyone but Joseph being perfectly ignorant of the fact that Mr Buddy had been imbibing largely of the stimulants plentifully handed round to the various servants

outside.

But the ladies were duly packed inside, the jangling door was banged to, and Joseph, having mounted to the box beside Mr Buddy, perhaps only out of regard for his own safety, assumed the reins of government himself, and steered the fly to the Palace doors.

“Good-night, children,” said the Honourable Misses Dymcox in duet. “Take care of your dresses whatever you do!”

“Oh, Rie!” cried Clotilde, as soon as they were in their bedroom.

“Oh, Clo!” cried Marie. Then, crossing to the farther door to the cupboard in which Ruth’s bed was squeezed—“’Sleep, Ruthy?”

“No, Marie,” was the reply, as a troubled, pale face was lifted from the pillow.

“Why, I declare she has been crying!” said Clotilde. “There, jump up and help us to undress, Cindy, and we’ll tell you all about the prince and the ball. You weren’t there, were you?”

No; Cinderella, otherwise Ruth Allerton, had not been there; but she had been crying bitterly, for she had had a fright.

Volume One—Chapter Eleven.

Family Matters.

Captain Robert Millet’s lunch was carried up to him upon a very stiff, narrow tray, which took dishes and plates one after the other in a long row. It was evidently something or several somethings very savoury and nice from the odours exhaled, but everything was carefully covered over.

It was no easy task, the carriage of that long, narrow tray from the basement to the back drawing-room on the first floor, especially as there were gravies and other liquids on the tray; but Valentine Vidler and his wife had taken up breakfasts, lunches, and dinners too many thousand times to be in any difficulty now.

So, starting from the dark kitchen, where coppers, pewters, and tins shone like so many moons amidst the gloom, the odd couple each took an end of the tray, which was quite six feet long, and Vidler’s own invention. Salome went first, backwards, and Vidler followed over the level, when, as the little woman reached the mat at the foot of the kitchen stairs, there was a pause, while she held the tray with one hand and gave her long garments a hitch, so as to hold one end in her teeth and not tread upon them as she went up backwards. Then, stooping and holding the tray as low as she could, she began to ascend, Vidler following and gradually raising his end to preserve the level of the tray till he held it right above his head.

This raising and lowering in ascent and upon level was all carried out in the most exact and regular way—in fact, so practised had the old couple grown in the course of years, that they could have carried a brimming glass of water up the gloomy stairs without spilling a drop. Hence, then, they reached the drawing-room with the tray preserving its equilibrium from bottom to top.

As soon as they were inside Salome placed her end upon the little bracket while Vidler retained his; then she went out of the room, took up a big, soft drumstick, and gave three gentle taps on a gong that hung in its frame—three taps at long intervals, which sounded like the boomings of a bell at the funeral of a fish and a fowl—and then returned to the drawing-room and stood on the right-hand side of the panel close to the wall with one hand raised.

As she took her place the panel was softly slid back towards her. Then she took off the first cover, Vidler acting in conjunction, made the long tray glide slowly forwards into the opening, its end evidently resting on something within. Then two hands appeared, a knife and fork were used, with a glass at intervals, and the fish was discussed.

As soon as the knife and fork were laid down Salome whipped off two more covers, and the tray glided in a couple of feet further, both the lady and her lord keeping their eyes fixed upon the floor.

The calmness and ease with which all this was carried on indicated long practice, and for precision no amount of drilling could have secured greater regularity. As the knife and fork fell upon the plate again there was a pause, for a pint decanter and glass were pushed opposite the thin white hands that now approached, and, removing the stopper, filled the glass. Then a cover was raised, and the tray glided onward once more, with some steaming asparagus on toast; and after a short pause the cold, colourless voice was heard to repeat a short grace, the tray was slowly withdrawn, the panel glided to, and Vidler and his little wife bore the remains of the luncheon to the lower regions.

Hardly had the tray been set down before there was a double knock, and on going upstairs Vidler found John Huish at the front door.

“Would Captain Millet give me an interview, Vidler?” he asked.

The little man looked at him sidewise, then tried the other eye, and ended by standing out of the way and letting the visitor enter, shutting out the light again as carefully as before.

“I’ll try, sir,” he said; “I don’t think he will. I was just going to take up that,” he continued, pointing to a basket of coloured scraps of print. “He’s about to begin a new counterpane to-day.”

“A new what?” said Huish.

“A new counterpane for the Home Charity. That’ll be six he has made this year. I’ll show you the last.”

He led Huish into the darkened dining-room, and showed him a wonderfully neat piece of needlework, a regular set pattern, composed of hundreds upon hundreds of tiny scraps of cotton print.

“Makes ’em better than many women could, and almost in the dark,” said the little man; “but I’ll go up and see. Miss Millet and her sister have not been gone long.”

“What!” cried Huish, “from here?”

“Gone nearly or quite an hour ago, sir. Been a good deal lately.”

“My usual fortune,” muttered Huish excitedly. “But go up,” he said aloud; “I particularly want to have a few words with him.”

“I don’t think it’s of any use, sir; but I’ll see,” repeated the little man; and he went upstairs, to return at the end of about five minutes to beckon the visitor up, and left him facing the panel.

It was evident that the young man had been there before, as he took a seat, and waited patiently for the panel to unclose, which it did at last, but not until quite a quarter of an hour had passed.

“Well, John Huish,” said the voice, “what do you want?”

It was rather a chilling reception for one who had come upon such a mission; but he was prepared for it, and dashed at once into the object of his visit, in spite of the peculiarity of having to address himself to a square opening in the wall.

“I have come for advice and counsel,” said Huish firmly.

“You, a man of the world, living in the world, come to such an anchorite as I!” said the voice—“as I, who have for pretty well thirty years been dead to society and its ways?”

“Yes,” said Huish. “I come to you because you can help.”

“How much do you want, John Huish?” said the voice. “Give me the pen and ink.”

The thin white hand appeared impatiently at the opening, with the fingers clutching as if to take the pen.

“No, no, no!” said the young man hastily. “It is not that. Let me tell you,” he exclaimed, as the fingers ceased to clutch impatiently at the air and the white hand rested calmly upon the edge of the opening—“let me speak plainly, for I am not ashamed of it—I am in love.”

There was a faint sigh here, hardly audible to the young man, who went on:

“I come to you for help and advice.”

“What can I do to help? As for advice,” said the voice coldly, “I will do what I can. Is she worthy of your love?”

“Worthy?” cried Huish, flushing. “She is an angel.”

“Yes,” said the voice, with a sigh. “They all are. But, tell me, does she refuse you.”

“No, sir.”

“Then what more do you want? Who and what is she?”

These last words were said with more approach to interest, and the fingers began to tap the edge of the opening.

“It is presumption on my part,” said Huish, growing excited, and rising to stride up and down the room, “for I am poor and unworthy of her.”

“No true honourable man is unworthy of the woman he loves,” said the voice calmly, “though he may, perhaps, be unsuited. Go on. Who is the lady?”

“Who is she, sir? I believed that you must know. It is your niece—Gertrude.”

“My God!”

It was almost a whisper, but John Huish heard it, and saw that the thin white hand seemed to be jerked upwards, falling slowly back, though, to remain upon the edge of the opening trembling.

“I shock you, sir, by my announcement,” said Huish bitterly.

“No—yes—no; net shock—surprise me greatly.” There was a pause, and the fingers trembled as they were now and again raised, then grew steady as they were laid down. “But tell me,” it continued, trembling and becoming less cold, “does Gertrude return your love?”

“Oh yes, Heaven bless her, yes!” cried the young man fervently; and there was another silence, such as might have ensued had the owner of the voice been trying to master some emotion.

“What more, then, do you want?” said the voice, now greatly changed. “You, an honourable young man, in love with a girl who is all sweetness and purity. It is strange; but it is the will of God. Marry her, and may He bless the union!”

“Captain Millet, you make me very, very happy,” cried the young man; and before the hand could be removed it was seized and pressed in his strong grasp.

It was withdrawn directly, and a fresh silence ensued, when the voice said softly:

“And my brother, does he approve?”

“Oh yes; I think so,” replied Huish; “but—”

“The mother objects—of course. She has made her choice. Who is it?”

“Lord Henry Moorpark.”

“A man nearly three times her age. It would be a crime. You will not permit such an outrage against her youth. Moorpark must be mad.”

“What can I do, sir?” cried Huish. “That is why I ask your help and counsel.”

“Bah!” said the voice contemptuously. “You are young and strong; you have your wits; Gertrude loves you, and you ask me for help and counsel! John Huish, at your age, under such circumstances, it would have been a bold man who would have robbed me of my prize. There, go—go, young man, and think and act. Poor Gertrude! she has a mother who makes Mammon her God—a woman who has broken one of her children’s hearts; do not let her break that of the other. Go now, I am weary: this has been a tiring day. You can come to me again.”

“Do not let her break that of the other,” said John Huish to himself as the panel slowly closed; and from that moment the dim twilight of the shuttered house became to him glorious with light, and he went away feeling joyous and elastic as he had not felt for days. As he neared his chambers a thin, grey, hard-faced-looking woman, who had stood watching for quite an hour, stepped out of a doorway and touched him on the arm.

He turned sharply, and she said in a low voice:

“I must see you. Come to-morrow night at the old time.”

Before he could speak she had hurried away, turned down the next street, and was gone.

“To-morrow night—the old time?” said Huish, gazing after her, and then raising his hat to place his hand upon his forehead. “Quite cool. Is it fancy? Why should that woman speak to me?”

Then, turning upon his heel, he entered the door of his chambers, and set himself to work to think over his interview, and to devise some plan for defeating Lady Millet in her projected enterprise.

“It would shock her,” he said at last; “but when she knows of her uncle’s views she might be influenced. She must, she shall be. The poor old man’s words have given me strength, and I shall win, after all. But what slaves we are to custom and prejudice! I ought not to be the man to study them in such a case as this.”

Then the words just spoken to him at the door came back to puzzle and set him thinking of several other encounters—or fancied encounters with people whom he felt that he had never seen before.

“I don’t know what to say to it,” he thought; “Stonor ought to know; but somehow I feel as if he had not grasped my case. There, I will not trouble about that now.”

He kept the thoughts which troubled him from his brain for a time, but they soon forced themselves back with others.

“I wonder,” he mused, “what took place in the past? There must have been something. My father and mother must have known Captain Millet very intimately. He received his injury from some fall, and Dr Stonor saved his limb, I believe. But there’s a reticence about all that time which is aggravating. I suppose I must wait, and when I learn everything which puzzles me now, it will be only shadowy and vague. Only my mother always asks about the Captain with so tender a tone of respect. Ah, well! I must wait.”

At about the same time that John Huish was pondering over his state in connection with his love affairs, Renée Morrison called in her carriage for her sister, bore her off to where she thought they could be alone, and sent the carriage back. The place chosen was the Park, which, though pretty well thronged with people, seemed to them solitary, as they strolled across toward the Row.

Gertrude was very silent, for she felt that Renée had something important to say; but the minutes sped on, and their scattered remarks had been of the most commonplace character, and at last, as she glanced sideways, Gertrude saw that if her sister were to confide her troubles and be the recipient of those effervescing in her own breast she herself must speak.

“You do not confide in me, Renée dear,” she said tenderly, as they took a couple of chairs beneath one of the spreading trees. “Why do you not always make me more your confidant? One feels as if one could talk out here in the park, where there are no walls to listen. Come, dear, why do you not tell me all?”

“Because I feel that my husband’s secrets are in my keeping, and that I should be doing wrong to speak of what he does.”

“Not wrong in confiding in me, Renée. You are not happy. Oh, Ren, Ren, why did you consent? Trouble, and so soon!”

“Don’t talk to me like that, now, Gerty,” cried Renée in a low, passionate voice, “because it was mamma’s will that we should marry well and have establishments, and satisfy her pride. Sometimes I think it would have been better if I had never been born.”

“Oh, Ren, Ren,” her sister whispered, pressing her hand. “But Frank—he is kind to you?”

“Yes,” said Renée sadly; “he is never angry with me.”

“But I mean kind and loving and attentive, as your husband should be?” said Gertrude softly.

Renée looked at her with a sad, heavy look, and now that the first confidence had been made, her heart was open to her sister.

“Gertrude,” she whispered to her, “he never loved me!”

“Oh, Ren dear, think what you are saying!”

“I do think, dear, and I say it once more. He never loved me.”

“But, Renée, you have been kind and loving to him.”

“Yes, as tender as a woman could be to the man she had sworn to love; but he does not care for me, and I am haunted.”

“Haunted, Renée?”

“Yes; hush! Here is Major Malpas.”

Gertrude glanced in the direction taken by her sister’s eyes, and her heart seemed to be compressed as by a cold hand, as she turned indignantly to her sister.

“Renée!” she said, in a horrified whisper, “oh, do not say you care for him still!”

“Gertrude!” cried Renée, catching her hand, “how dare you say that! I hate—I detest him! I thought him a gentleman once, and I did love him; but that was over when I married Frank, and since then he has haunted me; he follows me everywhere, and Frank makes him his constant companion, and he leads him away.”

“Oh, this is dreadful!”

“Dreadful!” cried Renée, “I feel at times that I cannot bear it. Come away: he has seen us, and is coming here.”

“Is—is that Mr Huish?” whispered Gertrude, gazing in another direction.

“Yes. Who is the dark lady on his arm?”

“I do not know,” said Gertrude quietly. “Some friend, perhaps; but, look, is not that Frank?”

She drew her sister’s attention towards a phaeton in which Frank Morrison was driving a handsome-looking woman dressed in the height of fashion; and directly Renée saw him plainly the Major came up.

“What a delightful meeting, Miss Millet!” he said. “Mrs Morrison, I hope I shall not be *de trop*?”

“My husband’s friends have too great a claim on me,” said Renée quietly, as she left her seat and moved in the direction of her own home; but she kept glancing in the direction taken by the phaeton.

It was cleverly-managed, and as if Malpas knew exactly when the carriage would next come by, timing his place so well that the sisters were close to the railings as the dashing pair scattered some of the earth over the young wife’s dress.

“Who is that with Frank Morrison, Major Malpas?” said Gertrude quickly.

“I beg your pardon?” he said.

“That fashionably-dressed lady in my brother-in-law’s phaeton. There they go.”

“Indeed!” said the Major. “I was not looking. Are you sure it was he?”

“Certain,” replied Gertrude.

“My dear Mrs Morrison, is anything the matter?” cried the Major, with a voice full of sympathy.

“No, nothing,” said the young wife, who was now deadly pale. “May I ask you—to leave us?”

“Yes,” he said earnestly; “but I shall not go. Pray take my arm. Miss Millet, your sister is ill. I fear you have been imprudent and have taxed her strength. I must see her safely home, or I could not face Morrison again.”

“He haunts me!” thought Gertrude to herself, as she recalled her sister’s words, and found that the Major persisted in walking by her side till they reached Chesham Place, where, murmuring his satisfaction that Renée seemed better,

he left the sisters in the hall.

“All things come to the man who waits,” he muttered to himself, as he went off smiling.

“Renée,” said Gertrude, as soon as they were alone, “have you ever encouraged him in any way since your marriage? How is it he seems to have such a hold upon you?”

“I do not know—I cannot tell,” said Renée wearily, as, with brow contracted, she sat thinking of the scene in the Park. “But do not mention him—do not think of him, Gertrude dear; he is as nothing in face of this new misery.”

“New misery?” said Gertrude innocently.

“Yes,” cried Renée passionately; “do you not see? Oh, Frank, Frank!” she moaned, “why do you treat me so?”

Gertrude, upon whom all this came like a revelation, strove to comfort her, and to point out that her fears might be mere exaggerations, but her sister turned sharply.

“You do not understand these things, Gertrude,” she said. “He does not love me as he should, and, knowing this, Major Malpas has never ceased to try and tempt him away from me—to the clubs—to gambling parties, from which he comes home hot and feverish; and now it seems that worse is to follow. Oh, mother, mother! you have secured me an establishment which I would gladly change for the humblest cottage, if it contained my husband’s faithful love.”

Gertrude’s heart beat fast at these words, and a faltering purpose became strengthened.

“But, Ren darling,” she whispered; “have you spoken to him and tried to win him from such associations? Frank is so good at heart.”

“Yes,” sighed Renée; “but so weak and easily led away. Spoken to him, Gertrude? No, dear. As his wife, I have felt that I must ignore such things. I would not know that he visited such places—that he gambled—that he returned home excited. I have put all such thoughts aside, and met him always with the same smile of welcome, when my heart has been well-nigh broken.”

“My poor sister!” whispered Gertrude, drawing her head to her breast and thinking of the husband and establishment that her mother had arranged for her to possess.

“But this I feel that I cannot bear,” cried Renée impetuously. “It is too great an outrage!”

“Oh, Ren, Ren!” whispered Gertrude, “do not judge him too rashly; wait and see—it may be all a mistake.”

“Mistake!” said Renée bitterly; “did you not see him driving that woman out? Did you not see her occupying the place that should be mine?”

“Yes—yes,” faltered Gertrude; “but still there may be some explanation.”

“Yes,” said Renée at last, as she dried her tears and sat up, looking very cold and stern; “there may be, and we will wait and see. At all events, I will not say one single harsh word.”

Gertrude left her at last quite calm and composed, the brougham being ordered for her use, and she sat back thinking of John Huish with the dark lady; but only to smile, for no jealous fancy troubled her breast.

End of Volume One.

Volume Two—Chapter One. The Story - Years Ago - (Continued).

Mr Montaigne Establishes a Bond of Sympathy.

Mr Paul Montaigne was one of those quiet, bland gentlemen who, apparently without an effort, seemed to know everything that went on in his immediate neighbourhood. He never asked questions, but waited patiently, and the result was that, drawn, perhaps, by his quiet, persuasive way, people told him all he wanted to know.

Somehow, he had the knack of winning the confidence of women, and if he had been a confessor his would have been an easy task.

There were those who said that he was a Jesuit, but when it came to his ears he merely smiled pityingly, and made a point of attending church at all the week-day services, and repeating the responses in a quiet, reverent way that, combined with his closed eyes, gave him the aspect of true devoutness.

How he lived none knew, but it was supposed that he had an income from a vineyard in Central France, one which he had inherited from his father, an English gentleman who had had a taste for wine-growing.

Mr Paul Montaigne never contradicted the rumour, and he never entered into particulars about his past. He had been the friend of the mother of Clotilde and Marie. He had brought the children over to England when quite a young man, with a very French look and a suggestion of his being a student at a French religious seminary. He had brought letters of introduction with him, and he had been in England ever since.

Time seemed to have stood still with Paul Montaigne. Certainly, he was just a shade stouter, and there were a few

bright, silvery-looking hairs about his temples; in other respects he looked quite a young man, for his smoothly-shaven face showed scarcely a line, his dark eyes were bright, and his black brows were as smoothly arched as if drawn with a pair of compasses.

Upon that smooth face there was always a pensive, half-sad smile, one which he seemed to be constantly trying to wipe off with his soft, plump, well-shaped, and very white hand, but without success, for the smile was always there—the quiet, beseeching smile, that won so many women's confidence, but sometimes had the contrary effect upon the sterner sex.

Those who said that he was a student were to some extent right, for his modest lodgings at Teddington were well furnished with books, and he was a familiar object to many, as with his white hands clasped behind him he walked in his semi-clerical habit to and from the Palace at Hampton Court—through Bushey Park, and always on the same side of the road, making a point of pausing at the inlet of the Diana Pool to throw crumbs of bread to the eager fish, before continuing his walk in by the Lion Gate into the Palace gardens to the large fountain basin, where the great gold and silver fish also had their portion.

He never spoke to anyone; apparently nobody ever spoke to him, and he went his way to and fro, generally known as "the priest," making his journeys two or three times a week to call at the apartments of the Honourable Misses Dymcox to see his young pupils, as he called them, and to converse with them to keep up their French.

Upon these occasions he partook of the weak tea handed round by Joseph, and broke a portion off one of the thin biscuits that accompanied the cups. In fact, he was an institution with the Dymcox family, and had been duly taken into the ladies' confidence respecting the movement proposed by Lady Littletown.

"My dear ladies," he had responded, "you know my position here—my trust to the dead; I watch over the welfare of their children, and you tell me this is for their well-being. What else can I say but may your plans prosper?"

"But I would not mention it to the children, Mr Montaigne," said Miss Philippa.

"I mention it! My dear madam, all these years that you have known me, and is my character a sealed book to you still?"

"For my part, I don't like him," said Joseph once to Markes, and he was politely told not to be a fool. Cook, however, who had a yearning after the mysterious, proved to be of a more sympathetic mind, and when Joseph told her his opinion, that this Mr Montaigne was only a Jesuit and a priest in disguise, cook said she shouldn't a bit wonder, for "them sort often was."

Now, cook had not seen Mr Montaigne, so her judgment should be taken *cum grano*, as also in the case where Joseph declared Mr Montaigne to be "a deep 'un," when she declared that was sure to be the case.

On the night of the dinner-party at Hampton, the carriage—to wit, Mr Buddy's fly—had no sooner departed than Markes announced her intention of going next door to see Lady Anna Maria Morton's maid; at which cook grunted, and, being left alone, proceeded to take out a basket from the dresser drawer, and seated herself to have what she called a couple of hours' good darn.

One of those hours had nearly passed, and several black worsted stockings had been ornamented with patches of rectangular embroidery, when the outer door-bell rang.

"If that's one of them dratted soldiers calling with his impudence, he'll get sent off with a flea in his ear," cried cook.

She bounced up angrily, and made her way to the door. It was no gallant Lancer in undress uniform and a cane under his arm, but Mr Paul Montaigne, whom cook at once knew by his description.

"The ladies in?" he said quietly.

"No, sir; which, please, they've gone to dine at Lady Littletown's."

"To be sure, yes, I had forgotten," he said, smiling nicely—so cook put it—at the plump domestic. "But never mind, I will have a few minutes' chat with Miss Clotilde and Miss Marie."

"Which they've gone as well, sir."

"To be sure, yes, I ought to have known," said the visitor absently, "I ought to have remembered; and is Miss Ruth gone as well?"

"Oh no, sir; she's in the schoolroom all alone!"

"Indeed!" said Mr Montaigne, raising his eyebrows. "Ah, well, I will not disturb—and yet, I don't know; I am rather tired, and I will have a few minutes' chat with her before I walk back."

"Such a nice, mild-spoken kind of gentleman, though he had rather a papish look," said cook; and she ushered the visitor into the empty drawing-room, going directly after to tell Ruth.

It was growing dark, and Ruth, who was in bad spirits at having been left alone, felt a kind of shrinking, she could not have told why, from meeting Mr Montaigne.

He had always been quiet and paternal in his treatment, and she had, as a rule, shared the lessons of Clotilde and Marie; but, somehow, Ruth was one of the women whose confidence he had never won.

"Ah, Ruth, my child," he said, advancing with quiet, cat-like step as she entered, and his voice sounded soft and velvety in the silence of the gloomy place, "and so you are all alone?"

"Yes; I will ring for candles," she said hastily.

"No, my child, it is not necessary," he replied, taking her hand, and leading her to the stiff, formal old sofa at the side of the room. "I had forgotten that the dinner-party was this evening, or I should not have walked over. As it is, dear child, I will sit down and rest for ten minutes, and then stroll back."

"Would you like a cup of tea made for you? cook would soon have it ready," asked Ruth.

"Oh no, no, my child," he said softly, as he sat there, evidently forgetting that he still retained the little white hand, which, after an effort to withdraw, Ruth felt obliged to let rest where it was, prisoned now between both of Mr Montaigne's soft sets of well-cared-for fingers, as he spoke.

"What a calm, delicious repose there always seems to be here, Ruth, within these Palace walls! The gay, noisy throng of pleasure-seekers come from the busy hive of industry, and flit and flutter about the park and gardens; their footsteps echo through the state chambers, as they gaze at the relics of a bygone time, and their voices ring with merry, thoughtless jest; but, somehow, their presence never seems to penetrate to these private apartments, where all is calmness, purity, and peace."

"Yes; I often wonder at the way in which we seem to escape hearing them as we do," replied Ruth, making an effort to respond; for her heart was beating painfully, and she was afraid that the visitor might note the tremor in her voice.

"Peace and repose," he said softly, as he played with the hand he held. "The world seems far away from you here, and I often envy you the calm, unruffled existence that you enjoy. But tell me, child, did you feel disappointed at not forming one of the party this evening?"

"I—I must confess that I should have liked to go," faltered Ruth.

"Well, yes, it was very natural," he replied; and as Ruth glanced quickly at him, she felt that there was a grave smile upon his face. She could barely see it, for the room was growing darker, and now, for a few moments, her tremor began to increase.

"But Clotilde and Marie are older than I, and it was only natural that they should be preferred. And then, Mr Montaigne, they are so beautiful."

"Not more beautiful than you are, Ruth."

"Mr Montaigne!"

She made an effort to withdraw her hand, but it was tightly retained.

"Not more beautiful in person, less beautiful in mind and temperament, my child," continued Montaigne. "Don't try to withdraw your hand; I wish to talk seriously to you."

Ruth felt that to struggle would be unseemly, and though she felt an undefined dread of her position, her reason seemed to combat what she was ready to condemn as fancy, and Mr Montaigne had known her from, and still addressed her as, a "child."

"I should feel deeply disappointed if it were not so, Ruth; for I look upon you as one whose mind I have helped to train, whose growing intellect I have tried to form, and bias towards a love of the beautiful and pure and good."

Ruth felt more at her ease, and less troubled that the visitor should retain her hand.

"I have, I think—nay, I boldly say—led your mind in its studies, and guided your reading," continued Montaigne in the same low, bland voice, every tone of which was musical, deep, and sweet. It had not a harsh, jarring tone, but all was carefully modulated, and lent a charm to what he spoke.

Ruth murmured something about feeling very grateful, and wished that he would go.

"Tell me, child," he said gently, and now one soft hand glided to Ruth's wrist, and a finger rested upon her pulse, probably that the mental physician might test the regularity of the beats produced by his long-administered moral medicine, "what are you reading now?"

"'Froissart's Chronicle,'" replied Ruth.

"An excellent work—one which leads the mind to an appreciation of chivalry and the noble deeds of the past. Any work of fiction?"

"Ye-es," faltered Ruth; "I have read part of a novel."

"That the Misses Dymcox placed in your hands?"

"No," faltered Ruth, speaking like a found-out child. "Ought I to tell you, Mr Montaigne?"

"Assuredly, my child. What should you keep from me?"

"It was a work by George Eliot that Clotilde had obtained from the library."

"Unknown to her aunts?"

"Yes, Mr Montaigne; but please don't be angry with her."

"No, my child, I will not."

"Clotilde did not like it, and threw it aside, and I happened to see it; but I have not read much."

"They get novels, then?" said Mr Montaigne.

"They will be very angry with me for telling you, Mr Montaigne."

"I shall not tell them, dear child; perhaps it is natural. What is Clotilde reading now?"

"A French story, 'Annette'."

"In-deed!" said Montaigne softly; and he drew his breath between his teeth. "And have you read it, child?"

"No, Mr Montaigne. Miss Philippa expressly forbade our ever reading French novels; she said they were bad."

"Well—yes—perhaps, my child; but your pure, sweet young mind would eliminate the evil, and retain only the true and good. I should not debar you from such works. So you young ladies obtain novels from the library?"

"I do not," said Ruth simply. "But pray do not ask me such things, Mr Montaigne; it makes me seem to be tale-bearing about my cousins."

"Don't be afraid, my child," continued Montaigne; "let there be more confidence between us. Believe me, Ruth, you may trust me always as your best friend, and one to whom your welfare is very, very dear."

"Thank you, Mr Montaigne," faltered Ruth; "I will try to think of you as you wish. Will you let me ring for candles now?"

"Oh no, it is not necessary, my dear; I am going directly. Come, Ruth, my child, why do you shrink away? Am I so very dreadful, my little girl? There, sit still," he said in a whisper. "I shall have to make you a prisoner, while I read you a lesson on obedience and duty to those who have your welfare at heart."

Ruth was growing alarmed, for he had softly passed one arm round her little waist, and in spite of her feeble struggles drawn her to his side.

"There, my child, now I feel as if you were my own loving, dutiful little girl whom I had adopted; and I am going to cross-examine you like a father confessor," he continued playfully. "Ruth dear, I hope this little heart is in safe-keeping."

"I—I do not understand you, Mr Montaigne," cried Ruth, whose womanly instincts were now alarmed.

"Will you loose me, please, and let me ring for the candles? It is quite dark."

"But you are not afraid of being in the dark, my child," he whispered; "and—hush! not a word."

He laid his hand upon her lips, for just then Markes' voice was heard outside.

"Ruth! Miss Ruth!"

"Sit still, foolish child!" he whispered, holding her more tightly; "that woman would perhaps chatter if she knew you were here like this with me."

A chill of horror came over Ruth, and she sat like one paralysed, as the handle turned, the door opened, and Markes looked into the darkened room.

"Why, where has the girl gone?" she muttered angrily.

She went away directly, and a moment or two later her voice was heard crying:

"She isn't in the drawing-room, cook."

"You had better go up to your own room, child," said Montaigne softly. "I will go now. Do not trouble about this; for I think it weak to trust servants, whose ignorance and prejudice often lead them to wrong ideas. Good-night, my child. You have neither father nor mother, but remember that while Paul Montaigne lives you have one who is striving to fill the place of both, as he tries to watch over you for your good."

He had allowed her to rise now, but he still retained her hand as he stood beside her, his words for the moment disarming the resentment in her breast.

"Good-night, my dear child. I shall let myself out after you have reached your room. Good-night—good-night. Nay, your lips, Ruth, to me."

Before she had well realised the fact, he had folded her in his arms, and pressed his lips to hers. Then, loosening her from his embrace, he let her go, and, trembling and agitated as she had never been before, she ran quickly to her room.

Innocent at heart, and unskilled in the ways of the world as girl could be, as she seated herself upon the edge of the bed she ran rapidly over what had taken place.

She did not like Mr Montaigne, and his acts towards her that night made her tremble with indignation; but these thoughts were met by another current, which seemed to tell her that she was misjudging him. He had spoken to her as to one who was very dear to him. His words had been those of a father to his child; and why should she resent it? Mr Montaigne was not a young man, and it might seem to him that their positions had in no wise changed since she, a trembling, heart-broken little girl, fresh from a wretched home, had sat and listened to his soft, bland voice, followed his instructions, and had her curls smoothed by his soft white hand.

“But I am a woman grown now, and it is dreadful,” she cried, bursting into a passion of indignant tears. “I don’t like it. I will speak to Miss Philippa. I don’t think it is right.”

“Are you there, Miss Ruth?”

“Yes, Markes.”

“Oh, that’s right. I thought you was lost. Cook told me you were in the drawing-room when I came in. There, child, don’t sit and mope in the dark because you did not get asked to the party. You’ll be a woman soon, my dear, and maybe they’ll find you a husband like the rest.”

“Child!” Yes, it was always “child”; but the girl’s heart rebelled against the appellation. These elderly maidens could not think of her as one whose mind was ripening fast, in spite of the sunless seclusion in which she lived.

“I’ll tell Markes,” she thought, as her heart throbbed with the recollection of that which had passed. But no; she could not. There was something repellent in this woman’s ways, and at last, with her brain in a tumult with conflicting ideas, Ruth sought her pillow, while Paul Montaigne, with a curious smile upon his face, was still pacing his room after his dark walk back to Teddington, one hand clasping the other, as if he still held Ruth’s.

“No,” he said, “she will not say a word. It is not likely. There is a bond of sympathy between us now.”

He walked up and down a little longer, and then stood still, talking softly—half aloud.

“Woman is our master, they say; but let her be led to compromise herself, however slightly, and she becomes the slave. Poor little Ruth, she is very innocent and sweet.”

Volume Two—Chapter Two.

Love Paints and Decorates.

The change at the Honourable Misses Dymcox’s home was something so startling that Ruth was almost bewildered. Even on the following morning at breakfast, after Joseph had brought in the urn, the alteration had begun.

The wine of the last night’s party might have been fancied to be still having its influence, the ladies were so much less austere.

“I’m very, very glad you enjoyed yourselves so much, my dears,” said the Honourable Philippa, smiling.

“You feel none the worse, my loves?” said the Honourable Isabella.

“Oh no, aunt,” said Clotilde; “I feel better. Don’t you, Marie?”

“Oh yes,” said that young lady; “it was a delightful party.”

“It was, my dears,” said the Honourable Philippa, letting the water from the urn run over the top of the teapot. “Bless me, how careless! I am glad I consented to allow you both to go, for you see how necessary to a proper state of existence a due amount of money becomes.”

“How admirably dear Lady Littletown manages her income!” said the Honourable Isabella.

“Yes, and how needful a good income really is! Yes, it was a very *distingué* dinner. Marie, my child, Lord Henry Moorpark is most gentlemanly, is he not?”

“Oh yes, I like him very much,” replied Marie, with animation, and a slight flush in her cheek, for she had been suddenly appealed to when thinking about Marcus Glen, and the way he had glanced at her more than once. “He seems a very nice old gentleman.”

“Hem!” coughed the Honourable Philippa austerely. “I do not think him old.”

“Certainly not!” exclaimed the Honourable Isabella; “hardly elderly.”

“Decidedly no,” continued the Honourable Philippa. “By the way, Clotilde, my love, you found Mr Elbraham very pleasant?”

“Oh yes, aunt.”

“I am glad of it,” said the Honourable Philippa, smiling graciously, while Ruth, open-eyed and listening, went on with

her breakfast, wondering at the change. “He is the great financier—enormously wealthy. I hear that he is to be made a duke by the Austrian emperor. He is already a chevalier.”

“Indeed, aunt?” said Clotilde, who also was thinking of Captain Glen.

“Yes, my dear; his houses are a marvel, I believe, for their wealth and display.”

“Is he a Jew, aunt?” said Marie innocently.

“My dear child, no! How can you ask such a question, Marie? I have heard something about his family being of Hebrew descent—Eastern Hebrew descent—Elbraham, Abraham, very ancient, no doubt; but I don’t know for certain, and really I do not care to know: for what does it matter?”

“Yes, what indeed?” said her sister. “A very gentlemanly, highly-cultured man.”

“With a wonderful knowledge of the world and its ways. He has been a deal in Egypt, did not Lady Littletown say, Isabella?”

“Yes, with the Khedive,” was the reply. “Enormously wealthy.”

The breakfast ended, the young ladies were dismissed.

“I would not go to the schoolroom this morning, my dears,” said the elder sister; “go and lie down for an hour or two and rest. After lunch Lady Littletown is coming with the carriage to take you for a drive, and I should like you to look your best.”

“Rie,” exclaimed Clotilde, as soon as they were in their room with Ruth, who was debating in her own mind whether she ought not to take her cousins into her confidence about Mr Montaigne, but shrinking from relating the communication to such unsympathetic ears.

“Well?”

“You, Ruth, if you dare to say a word about what we talk about, I’ll kill you!” cried Clotilde.

“I think you may trust me,” said Ruth, smiling.

“Then mind you do keep secret,” continued Clotilde. “Rie,” she cried again, “I can see through it all; I know what it means.”

“Do you?” said Marie quietly.

“Yes, they’re going to sell us both—a bargain.”

“Are they?” said Marie, who was thinking she would like to be sold to Marcus Glen.

“Yes, it’s going to be like it was in that novel of Georges Sand. We’re to be married to rich old men because we are young and beautiful; and if they marry me to one, I’m sorry for the old man.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes, I do,” exclaimed Clotilde: “else why were we dressed up, and sent down to dinner with that old Jew, and that old, yellow Lord Henry Moorpark, when there were those young officers there?”

“I don’t know,” said Marie thoughtfully, as once more her mind reverted to Captain Glen.

“Then I do,” cried Clotilde, with flashing eyes. “I should like to be married, and have an establishment, and diamonds, and servants; but if they make me marry that dreadful man—”

“Well, what?” said Marie, with a depth of thought in her handsome eyes.

“You’ll see!” cried Clotilde; and thrusting her hand in between the mattress and the palliasse, she dragged out the highly-moral paper-covered French novel that had lain there *perdu*.

After the genial thawing of the ice there could be no more such severe and cutting behaviour as that which marked the meeting of Captain Glen and Richard Millet with the Dymcox family; and a day or two later, when the two officers were idling about the broad walks, with the boy’s eyes watching in all directions, but only to be disappointed at every turn, they came suddenly upon the party taking their morning walk.

“No, my dears,” the Honourable Philippa was saying, in reply to a request made by Clotilde; “the park is impassable, for the scenes that take place there are a disgrace to humanity, and the Government ought to be forced to interfere. It is not so very long ago that your aunt and I were thoughtfully walking beneath the trees—that glorious avenue of chestnuts, that we poor occupants of the Palace can only view free from insult at early morn or late in the evening—I say your aunt and I were pensively walking beneath the trees, when we stumbled full upon a coarse-minded crew of people sitting eating and drinking upon the grass, and a dreadful-looking man with a shiny head held up a great stone bottle and wanted us to drink. You remember, Isabella?”

“Yes, sister; and we fled down the avenue, to come upon another party engaged in some orgie. They had joined hands in a circle like savages, and one dreadful man was pursuing a woman, whom he captured, and in spite of her shrieks—”

"I think we had better not pursue the subject further, Isabella," said the Honourable Philippa; "it is not a seemly one in the presence of young ladies. I need only tell you, my dears, that they were engaged in a rite popular among the lower orders—a sort of sport called 'kiss-in-the-ring'."

"Hush, sister!" whispered the Honourable Isabella; "the gentlemen."

Poor Isabella's hands began to tremble in a peculiar, nervous way as tall, English-looking Marcus Glen approached, appearing so much the more manly for having dapper Richard Millet by his side. The lady was not foolish enough to imagine that Glen wished to be attentive to her, but there was a sweet, regretful kind of pleasure in his presence, and when he spoke her withered heart seemed to expand, and old affections that had been laid up to dry, like sweet-scented flowers between leaves, began to put forth once again their forgotten odours, as if they were evoked by the presence of the sun.

The Honourable Philippa looked stern, and would have passed on with a bow; but when her sister put forth her trembling hand, and smiled with satisfaction at meeting the young officer again, such a line of conduct was impossible; and, as a matter of course, there was a very friendly greeting all round.

The Honourable Philippa felt frigid as she saw Marie's eyes brighten, and that a charmingly ingenuous blush rose in her cheeks; she felt more frigid as she saw the greeting between Clotilde and Glen; for if ever girl looked her satisfaction at seeing anyone again, the ascetically-reared Clotilde was that maiden, and, truth to tell, in the innocency and guiltlessness of her heart she returned the pressure of the young officer's hand as warmly as it was given.

As for Richard Millet, he began by blushing like a girl; then, making an effort, he mastered his timidity, and shone almost as brightly as his new patent-leather boots, thinking, too, how well he managed to get the young ladies all to himself; while Marcus talked quietly, and in a matter-of-fact way, to the Honourable Misses Dymcox, till Philippa grew a little less austere, and her hand felt at parting not quite so much like five pieces of bone in as many finger-stalls.

There was another unmistakable pressure from Clotilde's hand, too, and a far more timid one from that of Marie, whose eyes wore a curiously pensive look, as the gentlemen doffed their hats and went their way.

It is worthy of note that poor Ruth passed an exceedingly uncomfortable day, being made aware of what was as nearly a couple of quarrels as could take place between ladies. The first took place in the drawing-room, where, after bidding Clotilde and Marie go and take off their things, the Honourable Philippa fiercely attacked her sister upon her levity.

"*Shocked*, Isabella! I can find no other word for it—*shocked*," she exclaimed. "Your conduct to-day with those two young men was really objectionable."

"I deny it, sister," retorted the Honourable Isabella. "We met two of dear Lady Littletown's guests whom we knew, and we spoke to them. They are both officers and gentlemen, and nothing, I am sure, could have been nicer than the behaviour of Captain Glen."

"Is—a—bella!" exclaimed her sister, "when you know what is being arranged. It is like madness to encourage the intimacy of those young men."

"Perhaps they wish to be intimate for politeness' sake," said the Honourable Isabella demurely, though her nervous hands were trembling and playing about the puckers of her dress.

"I declare, sister, you are absurd, you are almost childish; as if young men—young officers—cared about politeness when there were ladies like our nieces in the case."

"Well, sister," replied the Honourable Isabella tearfully, "I am sure I don't know, but for my part I would rather see Clotilde and Marie married to Captain Glen and Mr Millet than as you and dear Lady Littletown had arranged."

"And you!" cried her sister; "you were as eager as anyone, and you know how it will be for their good. Our family will be raised from penury to affluence, and we shall have done our duty, I am sure."

"But it seems very sad, sister—very sad indeed."

"Fie, Isabella!" exclaimed the Honourable Philippa; "what would Lady Littletown think if she heard of such miserable weakness? Think, too, what would Lord Henry Moorpark or Mr Elbraham say if they knew that these young men were encouraged here? It must be stopped, or encouraged very coldly indeed. Yes, Markes, what is it?"

"This box, please'm, and this little basket, please'm," said the woman.

"How often have we told you, Markes, that all these things should be left to Joseph to bring up? It is not your duty," exclaimed the Honourable Philippa. "Now, let me see."

The box was directed to her, so was the basket; and reading the direction by the aid of her large gold eyeglass, she afterwards cut the box string, and on opening the loose lid set free a marvellously beautiful bouquet of very choice flowers.

The basket was opened, and contained another bouquet, but there was no message, no letter, with either.

The Honourable Philippa gazed at the Honourable Isabella, and that lady returned the meaning gaze; then they sent Markes away with the empty box and basket, leaving the elderly sisters to commune alone, and to whisper their satisfaction, in spite of a little hanging back on the part of the Honourable Isabella, that matters had progressed so

well.

Meanwhile there was a cloudiness in the moral atmosphere upstairs which betokened a storm.

Ruth saw it and trembled, for hour by hour her cousins had seemed to her to change.

She did not know how it was—in fact, she was puzzled; but the change was very natural. The two girls had been treated somewhat after the fashion of flowers, and grown on and on in their cool retirement until they had attained to their full development and beauty, though as yet only in a state of bud. Then they had suddenly been placed in the full blaze of society's sunshine.

The effect was what might have been expected. The buds had suddenly expanded; every latent thought of suppressed womanhood had burst into light and passionate life; every kept-down fancy and desire that had been in abeyance had started forth, and the buds were in full bloom, just as some choice exotic will in a few hours be completely transformed.

Very little was said for a time, but as the sisters removed their walking apparel there was more than one fierce look exchanged.

"I saw her look at him," thought Clotilde; "and I'd kill her sooner than she should."

"Such outrageous effrontery!" thought Marie; "but she does not know me if she thinks I am going to sit down quietly and let her win."

"Enjoy your walk, dear?" said Clotilde, attitudinising before the glass, and admiring herself with half-closed eyes.

"Oh yes, Clo dear, it was delightful; but you shouldn't flirt so with that little boy."

"Now that's too bad, dear," retorted Clotilde, turning half round to smile sweetly at her sister. "You know that it was you. I felt quite ashamed sometimes to see how you went on."

Ruth's eyes grew a little more wide open as she heard this, for she thought that poor little Richard Millet seemed to be left to talk to her more than he liked.

"Oh, nonsense, love," replied Marie. "But you don't mean it, you know;" and then the sisters smiled most affectionately one at the other, and gazed curiously in each other's eyes.

But as they smiled and looked affectionately at each other, they seemed to need an outlet for the wrath that was gathering fast, and poor Ruth's was the head upon which this poured. The tears stood in her eyes again and again, as first one and then the other displayed her irritation in words, pushes, and more than once in what seemed greatly like blows, all of which was borne in a patient, long-suffering manner. For Ruth was far worse off than a servant, the least independent of which class of young lady would not have submitted to a tithe of the insult and annoyance that fell to the poor girl's share.

Upon the present occasion the loud jangling of the bell, that was swung about and shaken by Joseph as if he detested the brazen creation, announced that lunch was ready, the mid-day repast by a pleasant fiction retaining that name, though no late dinner followed, the evening meal taking the form of tea and thick bread, and butter of the kind known as "best Dorset, and regarding whose birth there is always a mystery."

The looks of the sisters were anything but bright and loving as they went down, followed by Ruth, who secretly drew up her sleeve, displaying her white, well-moulded arm as she ruefully inspected a black mark—to wit, the bruise made by a forcible pinch from Clotilde's nervous finger and thumb.

The poor girl heaved a little sigh as she drew back her gingham sleeve—gingham and alpaca being fabrics highly in favour with the Honourable Misses Dymcox—though they always insisted upon calling the latter by the name of "stuff"—on economical grounds. Then she meekly took her place, grace was said, and the Honourable Isabella proceeded to dispense the mutton broth, richly studded with pearls of barley to the exclusion of a good deal of meat, Joseph giving quite a dignity to the proceedings as he waited at table, removing the soup-tureen cover with an artistic flourish, and turning it bottom upwards so as not to let a drop of the condensed steam fall upon the cloth, though a drop reached Ruth, whose fate it seemed to be to get the worst of everything, even to the boniest portions of the substance of the mutton broth, and the crustiest, driest pieces of the day before yesterday's bread.

But there was a becoming dignity in Miss Philippa's manners upon the present occasion, and she sipped her broth and played with the barley as if she anticipated finding pearls in place of unpleasant little sharp splinters of scrag of mutton bone.

"Thank you, yes, Joseph," she said quietly, as the man brought round a very small jug of the smallest beer, and poured out a wineglassful each for the elderly sisters, without froth, so that it might look like sherry, or that delicious elderly maiden lady's beverage known as marsala.

"Oh, by the way, sister," said Miss Isabella, "did you think to mention about town?"

"Oh no, I did not," said Miss Philippa. "By the way, Joseph, you will order the carriage for nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Yes, ma'am," said Joseph, who was handing potatoes to the mutton broth.

"We must go in good time, for we shall have to visit the tailor's about your new livery, Joseph."

Joseph's jaw dropped like the lower lids of his eyes, and a very waxy potato from the dish as he sloped it down, the said potato gambolling gaily across the cloth as if under the idea that it was a vegetable cricket-ball, and that its duty was to hit Ruth's high-backed chair wicket fashion on the other side. It was, however, carefully blocked by that young lady with a spoon, and after a moment's hesitation deposited in her soup-plate, her cousins, however, eyeing it jealously from old habit, as if they thought she was getting more than her share.

"Be careful, Joseph," said Miss Philippa with severity; and Joseph was careful as he went on waiting; but the perspiration broke out profusely over his forehead, and he seemed, as he gazed from one to the other of his mistresses, as though the news, so unaccustomed in its way, was almost greater than he could bear.

"Bring those bouquets from the drawing-room, Joseph," said Miss Philippa, just before the removal of the soup-tureen.

Joseph went out, and, to the astonishment of the young ladies, returned with the presents.

"Take that one to Miss Clotilde," said Miss Philippa, beaming on the eldest of the young ladies, as she indicated the gayest of the carefully built up bunches of flowers. "Yes; and now that one to Miss Marie."

The bouquets were handed to the young ladies in turn.

"Now remove the soup-tureen," said Miss Philippa.

"Oh, aunt!" exclaimed Clotilde, as Joseph left the room.

"What lovely flowers!" cried Marie, holding them to her face.

"Yes, yes; yes, yes!" cried Miss Philippa in a highly pitched and very much cracked but playful voice. "I don't know what to say to it, I'm sure; do you, sister?"

"No, indeed—indeed," cried Miss Isabella, in an imitation playful tone.

"It seems to me that our quiet little innocent home is being laid siege to by gentlemen," prattled Miss Philippa.

"And—and I don't know what's coming to us," said Miss Isabella gaily; and her hands shook, and her head nodded as she laughed, a sad ghost of a youthful hearty sign of mirth.

"But is this for me, aunt?" cried Clotilde, flushing up, and looking handsome in the extreme.

"And this for me, aunt?" cried Marie, whose cheeks could not brook the rivalry displayed by those of her sister.

"Oh, I don't know, my dears, I'm sure; but it's very, very, very, very shocking, and you are both very, very, very, very naughty girls to look so handsome, and go to dinner-parties, and captivate gentlemen."

"And make them lay offerings before your shrines," prattled Miss Isabella.

"Floral offerings before your shrines," repeated Miss Philippa, who nodded her approval of her sister's poetical comparison.

"But, aunt, who sent them?"

"Oh, it's no use to ask me, my dear," exclaimed Miss Philippa. "There may be a wicked little note inside. I don't know. I don't understand such things. They are beyond me."

"Oh yes, quite beyond us, my dear," said Miss Isabella; and she laid her hand upon her side as she felt a curious little palpitation, and there was a pathetic sadness in her withered face, as she began thinking of Captain Glen.

"But somebody must have sent them, aunties," said Marie, who dropped into the diminutive, and slightly endearing, appellative quite naturally, now that she found herself being exalted by her relatives.

"Oh yes, my dears, of course—of course," said Miss Philippa: "someone must have sent them. Mind," she cried, shaking one finger, "I don't say that those beautiful, those lovely exotics were sent to you by Lord Henry Moorpark. And I don't say—no: you don't say, sister—"

"Yes, of course," cried Miss Isabella, clumsily taking up the cue given to her, and shaking her thin finger very slightly, for it shook itself naturally a good deal, "I don't say, Clotilde, my dear, that that delicious and most expensive bouquet was sent by the great wealthy Mr Elbraham; but I've a very shrewd suspicion. Haven't you, sister?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," cried Miss Philippa playfully. "A little bird at dear Lady Littletown's whispered a little something in my ear. But it's very, very shocking, isn't it, sister?"

"Oh yes," cried Miss Isabella, repeating her sad little laugh, her head nodding very much the while; "but fie—fie—fie! Hush—hush—hush! Here is Joseph coming to change the plates."

Joseph it was, and as he changed the plates Clotilde held her bouquet to her flushed cheeks in turn, and gazed at Marie, who held the flowers to her own cheeks, both of which were creamy white as some of the blossoms; and she, too, gazed rather curiously at her sister, trying to read her meaning in her eyes.

But nobody paid any heed to Ruth, who looked wistfully at the gorgeous colours in Clotilde's bouquet, and the delicate tints in that of Marie, and she could not help wishing that someone sent her flowers—someone, say, like

Captain Glen. Then she thought of Mr Montaigne, and she shivered, she hardly knew why, as she asked herself whether she ought not to have told her aunts of his visit and his ways. Then her thoughts were brought back to the happy present by Joseph placing a large section of "roley-poley" pudding before her upon a plate—not the ordinary homely "roley-poley" pudding, with flaky pastry and luscious gushings of the sweetest jam; but a peculiarly hard, mechanical style of compound which kept its shape, and in which the preserve presented itself in a rich streak of pink, starting from the centre, and winding round and round to the circumference, as if cook had turned artist, and was trying to perpetuate the neighbouring Maze in pastry at the least expenditure in cost.

The cheese which followed was Glo'ster of the ducal sound and soapy consistency, and then the empty plates, representing dessert, were placed upon the table—there was no fruit that day; grace had been said, and the ladies rose, Clotilde and Marie being kissed, and advised to place their bouquets in water in the drawing-room.

"They would look so nice if anyone called, my dears," said Miss Philippa.

"Which they might, you know, my darling," added Miss Isabella, smiling, and nodding her head.

So the flowers were placed in vases, duly watered, and the young ladies went up once more to their room, under orders to quickly redescend.

"There!" cried Clotilde maliciously, as soon as they were alone, "I knew it—I knew it! Ruth! Cindy! Do you hear! Go down on one knee, and kiss the hand of the future Viscountess or Baroness, or whatever she is to be, Lady Moorpark."

"No, don't, Ruth," cried Marie fiercely. "Go and salute the future Mrs Elbraham. Let me see, Clo dear; do ladies who marry Jews become Jewesses?"

"Perhaps they do," cried Clotilde, who had no repartee ready.

Marie laughed. "Jew—Jewess! Clo—old Clo! I wonder whether Mr Elbraham made his money that way? Eh, Clo dear?"

"I shall throw the water-bottle or the jug at you directly," cried Clotilde, as she washed her hands. "Never mind: he is rich, and not old. I wouldn't marry a yellow, snuffy old man, if he were ten thousand lords. There!"

"Who's going to marry him?" said Marie scornfully.

"You are. You'll be obliged to," retorted Clotilde.

"I wonder," said Marie, "whether Mr Elbraham is going to buy you of aunties, and if so, how much he is going to give."

Clotilde faced round at this sting.

"If you think I'm going to marry him, or if aunts think so, they are mistaken!" she cried. "I know what I am going to do. I know something that you would give your ears to know, my lady."

She looked mockingly at her sister, and waved her hand, as if wafting a kiss through the air.

Marie did not respond, but there was something in her eyes that troubled Ruth, who, being near, laid her hand in a sympathetic fashion upon her arm.

A summons from Markes put a stop to further conversation.

"What is it, Markes?" cried Clotilde.

"Aunts want you," said the woman roughly. "Gentlemen visitors;" and before she could be further questioned she closed the door.

"I know," cried Clotilde, darting a malicious glance at her sister: "it's Captain Glen, and he has brought his little squire with him. Come along down, and speak to Richard Millet, while I talk to the Captain. I say, Rie, dear."

"Well?"

"What a nice little husband he would make—quite a lady's page!"

> "'My pretty page, look out afar,
> Look out, look out afar,'"

she sang; but Marie seemed hardly to notice her, for she was very quiet and thoughtful, as she gave a touch or two to her hair.

"There, that will do; come along—you won't be noticed."

Marie glanced at her sharply, and the blood suffused her cheeks; but she said nothing, only beckoned to Ruth to come, and they had nearly reached the drawing-room door when they met Markes, who took Ruth into custody.

"Not you, my dear," she said quietly—"you're to stop; it's them that's to go."

As she laid her hand upon the door Clotilde's heart beat fast, while a look of delight flushed her countenance. At the same time, though, she wondered that Marcus Glen and his friend should have called so soon.

"The silly old things!" she thought; "they could not see that the bouquets came from the Captain and Mr Millet."

Then she glanced round to see that her sister was close beside her, opened the door, and entered.

Disappointment!

Seated with their backs to the window were Mr Elbraham and Lord Henry Moorpark. The Fates had ordained that they should make their calls both at the same hour, and they now rose to meet Clotilde and Marie.

"Then they did send the bouquets," thought Clotilde; and her heart sank at the thought of their aunts' innuendoes meaning anything serious.

Had she or her sister any doubts, they were soon chased away; for, though this was made quite a formal visit, there was a something quite unmistakable in their visitors' ways.

Lord Henry and Elbraham had encountered close by the door, and a look of distrust overspread their features as they exchanged an exceedingly cool salutation; but soon after their meeting the elder and the younger sisters, matters seemed so satisfactory, that their breasts expanded with quite a brotherly feeling.

Elbraham had the natural dislike of a man of his stamp for one who happened to be high-born, and was by nature refined and amiable; while Lord Henry, with his gentlemanly notions of polish, felt rather a shrinking from the blatant man of the world, whose manners were not always separated from the dross that clings to badly-refined metal. But in a very short time each saw that he was on a different route, and that there was no likelihood of their clashing in their onward journey.

The Honourable sisters were amiability itself, and played most cleverly into their visitors' hands; while, in spite of a feeling of repugnance and disgust at the idea of their being, as it were, sold into bondage to men so much older than themselves, and so very far from their hearts' ideal of a lover, both Clotilde and Marie felt flattered.

For as Clotilde listened to Elbraham's deep voice, and gazed unflinchingly in his coarse face, she saw through him, as it were, and beyond him, visions of life and gaiety, of a princely establishment, with servants and carriages and plate, and, for her own special use, the richest of dresses, the brightest of bonnets, and jewels as many as she would.

Marie, too, as she listened to the polished, deferential remarks of Lord Henry Moorpark, and saw the deep interest and admiration that beamed from his eyes, could not help thoughts of a similar character crossing her mind. Lord Henry was certainly old, but he was the perfection of all that was gentlemanly, and his deference for the young and beautiful woman to whom he was certainly paying his court had for her something that was very grateful to her feelings, while it was flattering to her self-esteem.

But interposing, as it were, between them and the visitors, the frank, manly countenance of Marcus Glen was constantly rising before the young girls' vision, making them thoughtful and distant as their visitors chatted on. This, however, only added to their attraction, especially in Lord Henry's eyes. To him even the shabby furniture and their simple dresses lent a piquancy that he would have missed had they been elsewhere; and at last, when he rose to take his leave, both gentlemen stepped out into the open air feeling as if their paths were in future to be strewn with roses, and ready to become brothers on the spot.

"Shall we take a walk in the gardens for a few minutes, my lord?" said Elbraham, as they stood together outside.

"With much pleasure, Mr Elbraham," replied Lord Henry.

"Then I'll just hook on," said Elbraham.

He did "hook on"—to wit, he took Lord Henry's arm; and that gentleman did not shrink, but walked with the millionaire down one of the broad walks between the trim lawns, both for the time being silent.

"I'm a man of the world," said Mr Elbraham at last.

"Indeed," said Lord Henry.

"Yes, my lord, and I'm going to speak out like a man of that sort."

Lord Henry bowed and smiled, for he had Marie's great dark eyes before him, and the memory was very pleasant at the time.

"Just an hour ago, my lord, when I met you at that door, I felt as if we two were to be enemies."

"Indeed," said Lord Henry again. "Yes, my lord; but now I don't think we are."

"Surely not."

"To be plain then, my lord, I am going to propose in due form for the hand of Miss Clotilde."

Lord Henry stopped short, with his eyes half-closed, and one foot beating the gravel as if he were thinking out an answer to the remark made by the man who held his arm.

"Well, my lord, what have you got to say?"

"Not much," said Lord Henry, rousing himself; "but I will be frank and plain to you, Mr Elbraham, though no one is more surprised at this change in my prospects than I. You are going to propose for the hand of Miss Clotilde, one of

the most beautiful women I ever saw.”

“Eh!” exclaimed Elbraham, whose jaw dropped, “don’t say that.”

“But I do say it,” said Lord Henry, smiling, and looking very dreamy and thoughtful: “the most beautiful woman I ever saw—except her sister—for whose hand I shall become a candidate myself.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Mr Elbraham, with a sigh of relief; “then look here, my lord, under these circumstances we shall be brothers-in-law.”

“Probably so.”

“Then we’ll have no more ceremony. Look here, my lord, I’m a plain man, and I don’t boast of my blood nor my position, but I’m warm; and a fellow can’t find a better friend than I can be when I take to a man. I like you. You’ve got blood, and a title, and all that sort of thing; but that isn’t all: you’re a gentleman, without any haw-haw, sit-upon-a-fellow airs. Moorpark, there’s my hand, and from henceforth I’ll back you up in anything.”

“Thank you, Mr Elbraham,” said Lord Henry, smiling, for in his then frame of mind the coarse manners of his companion were kept from jarring by the roses that metaphorically hedged him in. “There, then, is my hand, and I’m sure we shall be the best of friends.”

“And brothers,” exclaimed Elbraham, giving Lord Henry exquisite pain, which he bore like a martyr, by crushing his fingers against a heavy signet ring.

“God bless you, Moorpark! God bless you!”

There was more than a trace of emotion in Lord Henry’s eyes just then, as he warmly returned the other’s grasp; and then they walked on together.

“I shan’t shilly-shally, Moorpark,” exclaimed Elbraham hoarsely. “I shall send her down a few diamonds and things at once. What’s the use of waiting?”

“Ay, what, indeed!” said Lord Henry, smiling.

“Besides, my friend, we are too old.”

“Well, I don’t know so much about that, Moorpark. A man’s as old as he feels; and hang it, sir, when I’m in the presence of that woman, sir, I feel two-and-twenty.”

“Well, yes; it does make one feel young and hopeful, and as if we imbibed some of their sweetness and youth, Elbraham.”

“Sweetness and youth! Ah, that’s it, Moorpark. Sweetness and youth—they’re full of it. Miss Riversley’s lovely, ain’t she?”

“Truly a beautiful woman.”

“That she is,” said Elbraham. “Though, for the fact of that, Marie is not to be sneezed at.”

“No, by no means,” assented Lord Henry, whose brow knit a little here. “They are very charming, and thoroughly unspoiled by the world.”

“That’s the beauty of them, Moorpark, and that’s what fetches me, my dear boy. Lord bless your heart! with my money I could have married a thousand women. I’m not boasting, Moorpark, but I can assure you I’ve stood up like a stump, and duchesses, and countesses, and viscountesses, and my lady this and my lady that, have for any number of years bowled their daughters at me, and I might have had my pick and choice,” said Elbraham—apparently forgetting in his excitement that there was a trifling degree of exaggeration in his words, for his efforts to get into high-class society had not been successful on the whole.

“I am not surprised—with your wealth,” said Lord Henry.

“Yes, I am warm,” continued Elbraham; “and the best of the fun is, that they were all ready to forget that I was a Jew. For I don’t mind speaking plainly to you: I have some of the chosen blood in my veins, though I have changed over. But that’s neither here nor there.”

“Of course not,” assented Lord Henry.

“And what I like in our beauties is, that they look as if they’d got some of the chosen blood in them.”

“Ye-e-es,” assented Lord Henry; “they are dark, with the Southern look in their complexions. But it improves them.”

“Improves! I should think it does. Why, look here, Moorpark, you saw Clotilde to-day in that plain cotton dress thing, or whatever it was?”

“Yes, and she looked beautiful as her sister,” said Lord Henry warmly.

“She did—she did. But wait a bit, my boy. I’ll hang diamonds and pearls round that girl’s neck, and stick tiaras in her hair, and bracelets on her arms, till I make even the princesses envious—that I will. But now, look here, I’m glad we’ve come to an understanding. You’ll dine with me at my club, Moorpark? Don’t say no.”

"With pleasure, if you will dine with me."

"Done. Where do you hang out?"

"Four hundred and four, Berkeley Square."

"Say Monday for me, at the Imperial—seven sharp; and we'll settle when I come to *you*."

"At seven on Monday," said Lord Henry, "I will be there."

"And now I must be off back to town. Good-bye, God bless you, Moorpark. One word first: you'll like to do it handsome, of course, in presents, and that sort of thing."

"Indeed I shall not be ungenerous as soon as I know her tastes."

"Then look here, Moorpark, these things cost money."

"Assuredly."

"Then can I do anything for you? A few thousands on your simple note of hand? Only say the word. No dealing—no interest. Just a simple loan. How much?"

"My dear Elbraham," said Lord Henry, "you are very kind; but I have a handsome balance at my bank. I am a man of very simple tastes, and I have never lived half up to my income."

"Then you must be worth a pot," exclaimed Elbraham. "I mean, you are really rich."

"Well, I suppose I am," said Lord Henry, smiling; "but I care very little for money, I assure you."

"That'll do," exclaimed Elbraham, crushing the other's hand once more. "Good-bye. Monday."

By this time they had reached the spot where their carriages were waiting—Elbraham's a phaeton, with a magnificent pair of bays, whose sides were flecked with the foam they had formed in champing their bits; Lord Henry's a neat little brougham drawn by a handsome roan.

Then there was a wave of the hand, and Elbraham took his whip, the bays starting off at a rapid trot, while, having let himself into his brougham, Lord Henry gave the word "Home," and leaned back with the tears in his eyes to think how soon he was finding consolation for the coldness with which he had been treated by Gertrude Millet. Then he felt slightly uneasy, for though he had never spoken to Lady Millet, his visits had been suggestive, and he could not help asking himself what her ladyship would say.

But that soon passed off, as he began to glide into a delightful day-dream about beautiful Marie, and to think how strange it was that, at his age, he should have fallen fairly and honestly in love with an innocent, heart-whole, unspoiled girl.

"Yes, so different to Gertrude Millet," he said to himself. "She loved that young Huish, I am sure."

Volume Two—Chapter Three.

Lady Millet's Choice.

Rich men are not always to be congratulated, especially if they are good-looking and weak. Frank Morrison was both, and in early days after her wedding Renée found that a loveless marriage was not all bliss.

But she had marked out her own course, and, with the hopefulness of youth, she often sat alone, thinking that she would win her husband entirely to herself, and that when he fully saw her devotion he would give up acquaintances whom he must have known before they were wed.

One Sunday evening, and she was seated waiting, when she heard a well-known step upon the stairs.

It was quite dinner-time, and she was waiting, dressed, for her husband's return, looking sad, but very sweet and self-possessed; and as he entered the room she ran to meet him, put her arms round his neck and kissed him on lips that had been caressing others not an hour before.

"Ah, Renée," he said quietly, "waiting dinner? So sorry, little woman. I could not get near a telegraph office, or I would have sent and told you."

"I have not waited long, Frank," she said cheerfully. "I am so glad you have come back."

"But that is not what I meant, dear," he replied. "I am only returned to dress. I dine out."

"Dine out, Frank?" she said, trying hard not to seem troubled.

"Yes—obliged to. Two or three fellows at the club. Couldn't refuse. You will excuse me to-night, little one?"

"Oh yes, Frank," she said quickly, "if you must go, dear. I will not say I am not disappointed; but if you must go—"

“Yes, I must, really,” he said. “Don’t fidget, and don’t wait up. There may be a rubber of whist afterwards, and I shall be late.”

“How easy it is to lie and deceive!” thought Renée, as, with the same calm, placid smile, she listened to her husband’s excuses. “You are going, Frank, to that handsome, fashionable-looking woman? You will dine with her, and spend the evening at her house, while I, with breaking heart, sit here alone, mad almost with jealousy I dare not show.”

Thoughts like these flitted through her mind as she put up her face and kissed him before quietly ringing the bell for her dinner to be served, and going down to the solitary meal.

Her husband came in for a moment to say good-bye, cheerfully, and then she was alone.

It was a hard and a bitter task, but she fulfilled it, sitting there calmly, and partaking of her solitary dinner. It was for his sake, she said, for no servant must dream that they were not happy; all must go on as usual, and some day he would come back repentant to her forgiving arms, won by her patience and long-suffering.

She sat thinking this over and over again later in the drawing-room with a sad smile upon her lips, pitying, but telling herself that she could be strong enough to fulfil her self-imposed task. Not one word of reproach should be his, only tenderness and kindness always. She was his wife, and would forgive; yes, had already forgiven, and granted him a dispensation for the sins against her that he might commit.

“Poor Frank, he never loved me as he thought he did; but I shall win him yet,” she murmured; and then started, for she fancied that she heard a door close.

She saw nothing, though, and paid little heed, for if it was, it might easily be one of the servants in the farther drawing-room, one of the set of three, the third being quite a small boudoir, where she was seated, while the others were only half lit.

She leaned back in her low chair dreaming of the happy days to come, when her husband would return to her, and then her thoughts glided off to Gertrude and her projected marriage.

“I wonder whether I shall have a child,” she thought, “and if so, whether I shall be, in time to come, as mamma is. Poor Gerty! it seems very shocking that she, too, while caring for another, should be almost forced to accept the addresses of an old man like Lord Henry Moorpark. For that’s what mamma means,” she said half aloud.

Then she sat dreaming on and wondering whether some reports she had heard about John Huish were true—reports of a very dishonourable nature, but which she had carefully hidden from her sister.

“It may be all scandal,” she murmured; “but I am getting hard now—so soon! ah, so soon! Where there is smoke, they say, there is fire. Poor Gerty! Better Lord Henry—who seems to love her—than that she should waste her days on a worthless man. And yet I liked John Huish. Uncle Robert likes him, too; and I never knew him wrong, in spite of his retired life.”

But it would be strange, she thought, if both she and her sister should have set the affections of their young hearts upon men who upon being tried proved to be unworthy of trust. “Poor Gerty!—poor me!” she said, half laughing. “It is a strange world, and perhaps, after all, our parents are right in choosing our partners for life.”

Then she started once more, for she knew that she was not alone, and on turning, there, in evening dress, his crush hat in his hand, and looking calm, handsome, and sardonic enough for an incarnation of the spirit of evil himself, stood Major Malpas.

“Nervous, Mrs Morrison? Good-evening. Did you not hear me announced? No? Your carpets are so soft.”

He almost forced her to hold out her hand to him as she sat up, by extending his own, and he took it and raised it respectfully to his lips.

“But where is Frank?” he asked.

“My husband dines out this evening,” said Renée coldly.

“Indeed! how unfortunate! He asked me to run over one evening for a cup of coffee and a cigar. Perhaps he will return soon.”

“Not till quite late,” said Renée, who tried hard not to show that she was troubled by the visit.

“I am so glad to see you better, Renée,” he said, taking a chair near her, and speaking in a low, earnest voice.

Renée started, for it was the first time since her marriage that he had called her by her name; and as she met his eyes she felt that it was also the first time since the same event that he had gazed at her with such bold admiration.

What could she do? She could not bid him leave her; and, besides, she felt that in a few minutes his gentlemanly instincts must lead him to go, and, indeed, what was there to fear? He was a gentleman—a friend of her husband—and he had called to see them.

“How times are changed, Renée!” he said, after a pause, as he gazed at her pensively. “Once your eyes used to brighten and the colour flushed into your cheek when I came near. Now, is it a dream—a trick of fancy? I find you another’s, and you turn from me with coldness.”

"Major Malpas," said Renée quietly, "is this a suitable way of addressing the wife of your friend?"

The mask fell off at these words.

"Friend!" he cried bitterly, as he drew his chair close to the couch on which she sat; "he is no friend of mine. Friend! What, the man who has robbed me of all that was dear—who has made my life a desert! Friend? Renée, you mock me by using such a word."

"Major Malpas!" she cried loudly.

"Hush!" he exclaimed, throwing down his hat. "Hear me now, for the time has come, and I must speak, even though it be to wound the heart of the tenderest and sweetest of women. Renée, can I call the man friend who deliberately forsakes you for the society of a notorious woman—an actress!"

"Friend? No," cried Renée with flashing eyes, as she rose to ring; but he caught her wrist and stayed her. "No; nor he you, if this is your friendship—to come and blacken my husband's name with foul calumny to his wife."

"Stop!" he said. "You shall not ring. Calumny! foul! Is it a foul calumny to say that he was driving her in the Park to-day, that he is dining with her and her friends to-night? Shame, Renée, that you should speak thus to the man who has ever been your faithful slave."

"Major Malpas, I insist upon your leaving me this instant. There is the door!"

"Leave you! No," he cried, seizing her other hand, as he fell upon his knees at her feet, "not till I have told you, Renée, that the old love never died in my heart, but has grown up stronger, day by day, till it has mastered my very being."

That same night there was a party given by Madame Dorinde, limited to eight, fairly balanced between the sexes. The dinner was to be good, the supply of wines very liberal, especially as they cost the hostess nothing.

But they were a curious collection of guests, such as would have puzzled a student of human nature. Certainly he would have understood the status of Madame Dorinde, a handsome, showy woman, with plenty of smart repartee on her lips, and an abundance of diamonds, rubies, and emeralds for neck, arms and fingers—the gifts of the admirers of her histrionic powers. He would have told you that this would be a bright and gay career for a few years, and then probably she would drop out of sight.

There was a pretty, fair girl with good features and the glow of youth on her cheeks, putting to shame the additions of paint, and who seemed to think it right to laugh loudly and boisterously at everything said to her; there was Miss Grace Lister, the first burlesque actress of the day, dark, almost gipsy-looking in her swarthy complexion, whose colour was heightened by the novelty and excitement of the scene; Lottie Deloraine, *née* Simpkins, of the Marquise Theatre; Frank Morrison and a couple of washed-out habitués of the stalls lounged about the room, and the assembled company were beginning to wonder why dinner was not announced.

"What are we waiting for, Dory?" said Morrison at last. "Aren't we all here?"

"Only for an old friend of mine. You know him—John Huish," said the hostess rather maliciously; and then she added to herself, "He'll keep your eyes off Gracy Lister, my gentleman."

Morrison screwed up his face a little, laughed in a curious way, uttered the ejaculation "Oh!" and then smiled as the door was opened and a smart soubrette loudly announced "Mr John Huish!" the bearer of that name entering hurriedly, looking flushed and full of apologies, which were at once received and the dinner commenced.

It was intended to be free and easy and full of spirit; but somehow it seemed as if a spirit of discontent had crept in, and from time to time, though there was no open unpleasantly, flashes of annoyance played like the summer lightning which prefaces a storm over the table with its sparkling glass.

Madame Dorinde had a great favour to ask of her admirer, Frank Morrison, and sought to put him in the best of humours; but to her great annoyance she found him preoccupied, for his attention had from the first moment been taken up by Grace Lister, and his eyes were being constantly turned in her direction as, after a time, forgetting past troubles and neglect in the gaiety and excitement of the scene, Madame Dorinde looked brighter and more animated than she had seemed for weeks.

All this annoyed Huish, who was not long in detecting the glances directed by Frank Morrison at the glowing beauty of Grace, and he was the more annoyed because, just before dinner, he had whispered to the giver of the feast:

"Have the cards on the table as soon as you can. You propose."

"There will be no cards to-night, my friend, so you need not expect to win any money," the hostess had replied; and the young man had bitten his lip, and sat thinking how he could turn the little party to his own account.

"Why, I say, Huish," Morrison cried gaily, a little later on, "what a canting humbug you are! I never thought to meet you at a party like this;" and he smiled significantly. "We always thought you were a kind of saint."

"I am—sometimes."

"It's wonderful," sneered Morrison.

"Yes, it is a wonder, my dear fellow; but you set me such an example."

The two habitués of the stalls nodded to one another their approbation of the retort, and Madame Dorinde, to calm what threatened to be one ebullition with another, called for champagne.

As the dinner went on, the elements of discord began to leaven the party with greater effect, and a calm observer would have felt sure that the evening would not pass away without a quarrel. Morrison slighted his hostess more than once, and a redder spot burned in her cheeks right in the centre of a rather unnatural tint, while Huish, out of sheer bravado, on seeing how Morrison kept trying to draw Grace into conversation, directed his to Madame Dorinde.

“By the way, why hasn’t Malpas come?” said Morrison at last. “I expected to see him here with little Merelle.”

“Better employed, perhaps,” said Madame Dorinde tartly; and the young girl with the youthful look laughed very heartily.

“I say, Huish,” said Morrison at last, on finding that his attentions to Grace were resented by her companion, “I shall see little fair somebody to-morrow. You know whom I mean. What tales I might tell!”

“Tell them, then,” said Huish sharply; “perhaps I shall retort by telling too.”

“Oh, tut, tut, tut!” cried Dorinde. “Nobody tells tales out of school.”

“This is not the School for Scandal, then,” said one of the habitués of the stalls; and the fair young lady laughed again.

“I say, Dorinde,” said Morrison at last, rather uneasily, “why is not Malpas here?” and as he spoke he directed a peculiar smile at Grace.

Huish drew his breath hard, but said nothing. He set one of the *menu* cards close to his plate, wrote something on the back, and, waiting his time, doubled it up at last.

“Give that to the gentleman opposite,” he whispered to a waiter, slipping a florin into the man’s hand. “Don’t say where it came from.”

The man nodded, and Huish turned to chat gaily with Dorinde; then, filling his glass slowly, he directed a sidelong glance at Morrison as he took the card, glanced at its writing, crushed it up in his hand, and closed his eyes, as a spasm ran through his countenance and he turned pale as death.

No one else noticed it, and he opened his eyes and glanced quickly round to see that the company were all busily conversing. Then, rising quietly, he left the room, walked slowly to the lobby of the great building, where he had left hat and coat, and went out of the house.

Then he let his excitement have its full vent.

“Hansom!” he shouted, leaping into the first he saw. “Chesham Place—double fare—gallop.”

The horse dashed off in answer to the sharp cut of the whip, and as it tore along Piccadilly Frank Morrison strove to get rid of the fumes of the wine he had been drinking, and to think calmly.

“She is too pure and sweet and true a woman—I don’t believe it,” he said, grinding his teeth. “Whom I am cursed scoundrel enough to neglect. Who could have written that? Curse him! that John Huish, of course. What a scoundrel he has turned out!”

“Bah! what am I railing at?” he cried. “Whom do I call scoundrel? Damn you!” he roared, forcing up the little trap in the roof of the hansom. “Faster, man, faster.”

There was another lash of the whip, and the horse galloped furiously.

“Scoundrel, indeed! he is no worse scoundrel than I. He is an open roué, while I stoop to all kinds of beggarly petty subterfuges to conceal the life I lead. I won’t believe it, though; it is a malicious trick of John Huish’s because he was jealous—and he has fooled me.”

“Well,” he muttered, after a pause, “a good thing too. I’m sick of the whole thing—cards, lose, pay, feast a woman who does not care a *sou* for me. Heavens, what a fool I am! John Huish, you have ousted me; take my place and welcome. Renée, little woman, I’ll come back, and be a good boy now.”

He said this with a mocking laugh, and then changed his position impatiently in the cab, growing, in spite of his words, more excited every moment.

“How could Huish know?” he said, gnawing his nails. “Impossible; and, besides, he is too good and tried a friend. Suppose he did drop in, what then? Why, he is wiser than I: he prefers the society of a sweet good little woman to that of a set of painted animals, who have not a scrap of reputation big enough to make a bow for their false hair.”

“There, I’ve been tricked,” he exclaimed, as the cab turned down out of Knightsbridge and he neared Chesham Place. “Never mind; I’ll forgive him for fooling me, and I’ll try to leave all this wretched, stupid life behind. We’ll go abroad for a bit; or, no, we’ll go yachting—there’ll be no temptations there. I’m going to begin afresh. We’ll have a new honeymoon, Renée, my little girl. But—but—if that fellow’s words were true!”

The gas-lamps seemed to spin round as he stopped the cab, and he leapt out to hastily thrust some money in the drivers hand, and then walked sharply down the Place till he came opposite his own house.

“Curse it—it can’t be so!” he groaned, as he saw the dimly-lit drawing-room. “If it were true, I should go mad or go to the bad altogether. I won’t believe it. Malpas, old fellow, I beg your pardon,” he muttered. “Renée, my child, if heaven will give me strength, I’ll confess to you like an honest man that I’ve been a fool and an idiot, and ask you to forgive me.”

“Yes, and she’ll forgive me without a word,” he said, as he opened the door, quickly threw off hat and coat, and ran up the great stone staircase three steps at a time, then, trying to control the agitation that made his heart beat so heavily against his side, he threw open the door, closed it hastily, and walked across the faintly-lit room into the next, where he could see into the little boudoir with its bright furniture, flowers, and graceful hanging-lamp, which shed a softened light through the place.

The next instant he had entered, and was standing there face to face with his wife, who with flushed face stood trembling before him, supporting herself by-one hand upon the chimney-piece.

“Renée,” he cried, turning white with rage, as his worst suspicions seemed confirmed, “what does this mean?”

“Frank, Frank!” stretching out her hands towards him as she tottered a couple of steps and then reeled and would have fallen, but he caught her and swung her round on to the couch, where he laid her, and stood gazing down for a few moments.

Then, looking dazed, and trembling in every limb, he turned round, his eyes rested on the curtains which shut off the little conservatory, and with two strides he reached them, tore them aside, and then started away.

It was exactly what he had wound himself up to expect; but his faith in his injured wife was so strong that, as he drew back, he could scarcely believe his eyes, and with a giddy feeling stealing over him, he stood staring wildly at the apparition that he had unveiled. The blood seemed to swell in a chilling flood to his heart, and for a few moments he could neither speak nor move.

Then with an electric rush it seemed to dart again through every vein in his body, making his nerves tingle, and he flew at the man who had crept like a serpent into his Eden.

“Devil!” he cried hoarsely; and he tried to seize his enemy by the throat.

With a deft movement of the arms, though, Malpas struck his hands aside, caught them by the wrist, gave them a dexterous twist, and forced the other, stronger man though he was of the two, upon his knees.

“Fool! idiot!” he said, in a low voice. “Do you wish to publish it all over Belgravia?”

“You crawling, deceitful fiend!” cried Frank Morrison, making a savage effort to free himself, and succeeding so that he closed, and a sharp struggle ensued, which again went against the young husband. For his adversary was an adept in athletic exercises, and taking advantage of a low ottoman being behind, forced him backwards so suddenly that he fell, and in a moment was down with Malpas’s hands in his necktie and a knee on his chest.

“Are you mad?” he said, panting and trying to recover his breath; “what do you want?”

“Your life, you crawling, lying villain,” gasped Morrison.

“Look here, Morrison, be a man of the world,” said Malpas quietly. “So far, I don’t suppose they have heard anything downstairs, so why make a scene? If you wish it, I’ll meet you in Belgium; that is,” he added, smiling, “if you consider that your honour has suffered.”

“You scoundrel!” panted Morrison. “You have blasted my home!”

“Bah! don’t go into high sentiment. Blasted your home? Hang it, man, talk sense! What did you care for your home? Where have you been to-night?”

“Where I pleased,” cried Morrison, with subdued rage in his eyes; but he lowered his voice.

“Exactly, you had your little affair to attend to: why should not madame have her guest by way of solace, in the absence of so true and faithful a husband?”

“You villain!” panted Morrison again, as he caught the wrists that held him down.

“Villain, if you like to use such strong language, *mon cher*; but for heaven’s sake be calm—be a man of the world! We don’t live in the old, sentimental Darby-and-Joan days, my dear fellow, but in times when it is fashionable to follow one’s own sweet will. You are like the dog in the manger: obstinate—selfish—brutal. Go to, my dear friend, and enjoy yourself, but let others live and enjoy themselves too.”

For answer Frank Morrison made a desperate struggle to rise, but he was quite helpless under the strong pressure of his opponent’s knee.

“For goodness’ sake, be calm,” said Malpas angrily. “Hang it, man, what did you expect in our matter-of-fact world! You brought me here constantly, and you left us together constantly. Do you forget that we were old lovers before you came between us? There, you are coming to your senses, I hope.”

He stepped away quickly towards the door, and Frank Morrison sprang up and made as if once more to seize him, but with a violent thrust Malpas sent him backwards and was gone.

Frank Morrison stood motionless till he heard the front door close; then with a moan of anguish he turned towards where Renée still lay insensible upon the couch.

"My punishment!" he groaned: "and I believed in her so thoroughly; I thought her so pure, so sweet that—out upon me! I left her, dog that I was, for garbage. Curse him!" he cried in a paroxysm of rage, "curse her, with her smooth, white, innocent looks! The whole world is blasted with villainy, and there is not one among us worthy of a moment's faith."

"Frank—husband," moaned a voice, and Renée, pale as death, rose trembling to clasp her hands before him.

He caught them in his, dragged her up savagely, and then swung her down upon her knees.

"And you, too, of all women in the world! Curse you! curse you! may you—"

"Frank, my own, I—"

"Out upon you!" he cried. "I'll never look upon your smooth false face again!"

Choking with her emotion, she tried to speak—to cling to him; but he snatched himself away, and as she fell heavily upon the carpet he rushed from the house.

Volume Two—Chapter Four.

Late in the Field.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Matter!" panted Dick Millet, dancing excitedly into Marcus Glen's room, where the latter was sitting back, cigar in mouth, reading the most interesting parts of a sporting paper. "Why, everything's the matter. While you are sitting here at your ease, those two old patriarchs have been stealing a march upon us."

"When you get a little less excited," said Glen coolly, "perhaps you will explain."

"Oh, it's easily explained: those two—that Jew fellow, Elbraham, and that old yellow apricot, Lord Henry Moorpark—have been in at the private apartments this hour."

"Visit of ceremony," said Glen, sending up a little cloud of smoke.

"Yes, and then they've been walking up and down in the gardens, talking earnestly together."

"While you have been in the Maze and got lost," said Glen.

"I tell you they were walking together, and shaking hands in the most affectionate manner."

"While you played the spy, Dick? I say, my lad, that's not square."

"But it's a horrible sell. My mother was always asking those two to our place."

"With matrimonial intentions?"

"I suppose so. Elbraham never came, but old Moorpark often did, and it was on the cards—"

"Visiting-cards?"

"No. That he was to be my brother-in-law. I say, Glen, who is a fellow to trust?"

"But he was not engaged to your sister?"

"No, of course not. Our Gertrude thought a deal of another fellow; but the mater's word is law, you see, and it might have come off. Good heavens! she will be mad."

"Your sister?"

"Not she—the mother. Well, I'm not going to stand it. My dear fellow, we are being cut out."

"Nonsense, my dear boy; those two are old enough to be their grandfathers."

"But they are rich—at least, Elbraham is rolling in wealth."

"Then Lord Henry was getting the Jew to do a bill."

"You seem as if nothing would move you, Glen; I tell you I am sure they have been to propose to those girls."

"And if they had, what then?"

"I should go mad."

"Nonsense! you'd go and fall in love with someone else."

“I? with another!” cried the little fellow tragically. “I tell you I never knew what it was to love till now I can’t bear it, Glen; pray get up, and come and see.”

“Nonsense, man, nonsense! We couldn’t call. Wait till to-morrow, and we shall meet them in the grounds.”

“You’ll drive me mad with your coolness. You can’t care for her. Oh, Glen, ’pon my soul, it’s too bad! I loved Clotilde almost to distraction, but seeing how you seemed to be taken with her, I gave her up to the man I looked upon more as brother than friend, and devoted myself to Marie. If I had known, though, I should have taken up very different ground.”

Glen had felt troubled at his little companion’s remarks, and he had begun to think seriously of the possibility of what he had announced being true; but the tragic manner in which he had spoken of the transfer of his affections in obedience to his friendship was more than Glen could bear, and he burst out into such a hearty fit of laughter that little Richard faced round, and marched pompously and indignantly out of the room.

No sooner had he gone than Glen began to think, and very seriously now. Somehow he seemed to have been stirred by Clotilde from the depths of his ordinary calm life; he did not know that he loved her, but the thought of her dark, passionate eyes had such an effect upon him that he got up and began to pace the room. Never had woman so moved him from his apathy before; and the more he thought of her simplicity and daring combined, the more he told himself that this woman was his fate.

It was plain enough to him, with his knowledge of the world, that he was the first who had ever intruded upon her maiden repose. He knew that she had led an almost conventual life, and that her young heart seemed, as it were, to leap to meet him, so that what would have appeared brazen effrontery in a girl of several seasons, was in her but the natural act of her newly-awakened love.

“I can’t help it,” he exclaimed at last; “she is not the sort of girl that I thought I should have chosen to call wife; but she is all that is innocent and passionate, and, well, I feel sure she loves me, and if she does—”

He stopped short for a few moments, thinking:

“We shall be as poor as the proverbial church mouse; but what does that matter, so long as a man finds a wealth of love?”

He continued his two or three strides backwards and forwards, and then threw himself down in his seat.

“The girl’s a syren,” he exclaimed, “and she has bewitched me. Hang me if I ever thought I could feel such a fool!”

Glen’s folly, as he considered it, increased in intensity like a fever. For years past he had trifled with the complaint—rather laughed at it, in fact; but now he had it badly, and, with the customary unreason of men in his condition, he saw nothing but perfection in the lady who had made his pulses throb.

Certainly, as far as appearance went, he was right, for nature could have done no more to make her attractive. To what art had made her he was perfectly blind, and, intoxicated by his new delight, he began to think of how he should contrive to see her again.

Glen’s mind went faster than his body, which, in spite of energetic promptings, refused to do more than go on in a stolidly calm, well-disciplined way, and the utmost it would accord, when urged by passion to go and loiter about the Palace gardens or the private apartments in the hope of seeing Clotilde, was a stroll slowly towards Hampton.

“I’m not going to behave like a foolish boy,” he said to himself. “I’ve tumbled head over ears in love with her, and if I can read a woman’s face she is not indifferent to me. Till I have a chance to say so I must wait patiently in a sensible way. It would be pleasant, though, to walk as far as Lady Littletown’s and make a call. The old lady might, perhaps, talk about her, and I should hear a little more.”

He started with the idea of walking straight to Hampton, but he met Major Malpas, who detained him some little time. Then he encountered Maberley, the surgeon, and had to hear an account about one of the corporals who had been kicked by a vicious horse.

The consequence was that he did not get to Lady Littletown’s on that day, while the next was pretty well taken up with a march out and other military duties; but free at last, he hurriedly got rid of his uniform, and once more set off to walk to Hampton.

He had hardly seen Dick Millet since he left his quarters in dudgeon. They had met at the mess dinner, and also during the march out, but the little fellow had held himself aloof, and seemed hurt and annoyed.

“I must have a talk with Master Dick,” said Glen to himself, as he walked on. “He’s a good little fellow at heart, and I don’t like to hurt his feelings.”

He had hardly formed the thought when he heard rapid steps behind, and directly after his name was uttered.

Turning round, there was the boy coming on at as nearly a run as his dignity would allow.

“I say, old fellow, how fast you do walk! Either your legs are precious long or mine are precious short.”

“Little of both, perhaps. Take the happy medium, Dick.”

“Ah, that’s better,” exclaimed the boy, whose face was now bright and beaming. “I do hate to see you in one of those

sulky, ill-humoured fits of yours.”

“Yes, they are objectionable; but where are you going?”

“Going? I was coming after you. I say, I’ve made it right.”

“Made what right?”

“Why, *that*. I hung about till I saw the Dymcoxes’ maid, a regular old griffin; and when I spoke to her she looked as if she would have snapped off my head. Couldn’t make anything of her, but I’ve secured the footman.”

“Under military arrest?”

“No, no, of course not. You know what I mean. I tipped him a sov., and the fellow seemed to think I had gone mad; then he thought I meant to have given him a shilling, and told me so. I don’t believe he hardly knew what a sov. was, and he’d do anything for me now. He’ll take letters, or messages, or anything; and he says that I was right.”

“What about?”

“What about? Why, those two ancient patriarchs; and that he is sure the old women are going to make up a match and regularly sell the girls. Glen, old fellow, this must be stopped.”

“How?”

“By proper advances first, and if diplomacy fails, by a dashing charge—an elopement.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Marcus. “Should you inform Lady Millet, your mamma, before you took such a step?”

“I should take the lady I had chosen for my wife straight home.”

“And a very good place, too,” said Glen, who remained very thoughtful, saying little till they reached Lady Littletown’s gates.

“Are you going to call here?”

“To be sure. Come with me?” replied Glen; and receiving an answer in the affirmative to the inquiry as to whether Lady Littletown was at home, they were shown in, to find to their great delight that her ladyship had been over to the Palace that afternoon, and had brought back Clotilde and Marie to dine with her and spend the evening.

“It will help to form their minds, my dears,” her ladyship had said to the Honourable Misses Dymcox; “and really, now that we have this project in hand, I feel towards them as if they were my own children.”

This was while the young ladies had gone up to dress and frighten Ruth by their exigencies and sharp ways, after which they had an airing in Lady Littletown’s carriage, and, when the young officers were announced, were sipping their five o’clock tea.

“Now, now, now,” cried Lady Littletown in tones of playful menace, as she gave her fingers to the officers in turn, “I shall not allow this sort of thing. You soldiers are such dreadful men. You knew my poor children here had come over to cheer my solitude, and you mount your chargers and gallop over at once.”

“I can assure your ladyship that my visit was frankly intended to yourself, and that I was in utter ignorance of your having company; but of course I am the more delighted.”

Glen had never delivered so courtly a speech before, and he felt uncomfortable when he had said it; but he recovered directly as he met Clotilde’s eyes, which were fixed earnestly upon his, and her hand spoke very plainly as they exchanged salutations; Marie, on the contrary, seeming as cold as her sister was warm.

“Then that dreadful little Don Juan knew of it,” cried her ladyship sharply. “I shall forbid him the house.”

“I assure your ladyship”—began Dick.

“Eh? What, Edward?” said Lady Littletown, as a servant made a communication to her in a low, respectful tone. “Dear me, how tiresome! My dears, pray excuse me a minute, I’m called away. You can give these dreadful men a cup of tea each if they will condescend to drink it;” and she rustled out of the room.

“I did not think to have seen you again so soon,” said Dick, crossing to where Marie sat, looking pale and troubled, while Clotilde rose from her seat, looking fixedly at Glen, and walked out into the great conservatory, where, of course, he followed.

Marie turned paler and her breath came faster as she made as if to rise and follow them; but Dick set down the emotion as being caused by his presence, and catching her hand in both of his, he repeated his words, “I did not expect to see you again so soon.”

“Let us go,” replied Marie hoarsely. “My sister; do you not see?”

“Yes,” whispered Dick, full of boyish ardour. “But don’t—pray don’t go.”

Lady Littletown was very proud of her conservatory, which was kept lavishly filled with the choicest flowers and foliage plants. Following on the example of Hampton Court, there were oranges of goodly size, with their bright-green

leaves, yellow fruit, green fruit, and delicious blossoms all growing at the same time.

It was into this semi-tropical region, where the atmosphere was redolent of sweet and cloying perfume, that Clotilde had slowly walked, her eyes dreamy and downcast, and her fingers idling amongst the beautiful blossoms on either side.

As Glen followed, and noted her soft undulating form, her bent head with masses of dark hair clustering about her neck, he felt his heart go throb, throb, heavily and slowly, while his blood seemed to bound through his veins.

Clotilde went on down the central path of the great glass-house, and then, without glancing back, she turned off at the bottom, where she was completely hidden from the drawing-room windows, and it was here that Glen overtook her.

“Miss Riversley! Clotilde!” he said softly.

She did not speak, but he saw her shudder, as if a tremor had run through her frame.

“Have I offended you?” he whispered, holding out his hands.

“Oh no,” she cried, starting round with her face flushed; and placing her hands in his, she looked up full in his eyes for a moment, and then let them fall.

It was very shocking, very unusual, and it was all entirely opposed to the etiquette of such matters, but there was a something in Clotilde’s looks and ways that made Glen turn giddy; and he behaved giddily. Some people will say it was his fault, some others may blame the lady for her want of reserve, but the fact remains the same, that, forgetting everything in the moment but the look that had spoken so much to his eyes, the young officer pressed his lips to the hand that not only seemed to, but did invite the caress; but just then there was a sharp “Oh!” and in an instant Clotilde and Glen were admiring the beauty of the colours in some caladiums of which Lady Littletown was very proud.

The ejaculation was not uttered by that lady, however, but by Marie, who, closely followed by Dick Millet, had come down the conservatory tiles silent as a cat and seen all.

“Clotilde!” she exclaimed in a low, angry voice, and then she darted an imperious look at Glen.

“Well, Marie?” said Clotilde coolly, as the rich red slowly died out of her cheeks, “did you find the drawing-room too warm, love? Look, Captain Glen, this one is lovely.”

“Lovely indeed!” cried Marcus, giving a beseeching glance at Marie; but she turned from him scornfully, only to look back at him with a fierce, passionate gaze which startled and surprised him, for he did not then realise the truth.

There was nothing to be done then but to go on admiring the flowers, and as they went from group to group, Glen’s feelings were a strange contradiction. His pulse throbbed with pleasure, but this was marred by the bitterly reproachful look he had received from Marie; while upon catching Dick’s eyes fixed upon him, and receiving a half-droll, half-reproving shake of the head from that young gentleman, he felt so angry and annoyed at his having witnessed the scene, that he could have freely kicked him out of the conservatory.

A gorgeous display of blossoms cultivated to the highest pitch of perfection Lady Littletown had gathered together in her conservatory, but these nobles of Flora’s train might well have felt offence at the treatment they received, for, though the occupants of the glass-house babbled and talked flowers, any disinterested listener would have been astonished at the rubbish that was said.

“Ah, you are admiring my pets,” cried Lady Littletown, returning hastily; “I’m so sorry to have had to leave you, my dears. One of my old pensioners was ill, and had sent on for some wine I promised. Yes, those are my gloxinias, Captain Glen. Delightful, are they not? Did you have some tea? No! Ah, I see how it is. Next time I receive a call at this hour from you military gentlemen, I shall have a pot with two teaspoonfuls of soda in it, and then fill it up with brandy. You would be happy then.”

They stayed very little longer, and when at parting, after receiving a long, earnest pressure from Clotilde’s hand, Glen turned to Marie and took hers, most grudgingly held out, he found time to whisper:

“Don’t be angry with me; surely we ought to be the best of friends.”

Marie’s heart gave a great throb as she felt the warm pressure of his hand, and in spite of herself she could not help her eyes lifting to meet his in a gaze that was full of sadness and reproach.

“Oh, come, I say, Glen, old fellow,” cried Dick as soon as they were well outside the gates. “You do go it, you do! Only just known her.”

“Hold your tongue, do! Hang it, Millet, there are things a man ought not to see.”

“Oh, very well, then, I’m as blind as a beetle and as quiet as a fish. I didn’t see anything; but, I say, didn’t it make Marie cross!”

“Oh, of course. She was surprised.”

“I tried to keep her in the drawing-room, but she was nervous and frightened—poor little darling!—at being alone with me, and I was obliged to let her come at last, or there would have been a scene.”

There was something very suggestive of a dapper little bantam paying his addresses to a handsome young pullet in the boy's remarks anent the "poor little darling"; but Glen was too much troubled just then to pay much heed, so his companion prattled on.

For Glen was not satisfied: he wished that Clotilde had not been so yielding.

Then he excused her. She was so sweet and innocent. She had been so restrained and kept down; all was so fresh to her, that her young love, he told himself, was like Haidee's, and like some bird she had flown unhesitatingly to his breast.

It was very delicious, but, all the same, he wished that it was all to come, and that she had been more retiring and reserved.

Still, she loved him. There was no doubt of that, and perceiving that he was dreamy, and strange, and likely to excite notice from his companion, he roused himself from the reverie.

"Well, Dick," he cried, laughing, "what have you to say now to your story of the patriarchs?"

"Well, I don't know. I suppose it must be all a flam."

"Yes, there's no doubt about that, and you have wasted a sovereign that might have gone in buttonholes and gloves."

"Oh, no—not wasted," cried the little fellow. "Decidedly not. Oh, no, my dear boy, my experience teaches me that it is always as well in such matters to have a friend at court."

"I say, young fellow," cried Glen, who had cast off his reserve, and was now making an effort to be merry, "you say, 'in these affairs'! In the name of commonsense, how many love affairs do you happen to have had?"

"Well, really," said the boy importantly, "I don't exactly know. Somehow or another, I did begin early."

Glen laughed merrily, and went on chatting away; but somehow the thoughts of Marie's reproachful eyes were mingled largely with those of Clotilde's longing, loving gaze, and there were times when he did not know whether he was most happy or most vexed.

Volume Two—Chapter Five.

A Walk in the Gardens.

The days glided on, with the younger sisters wondering at the change that had taken place, for everything now seemed to be done with an idea to their comfort.

Mr Montaigne called, according to his custom, pretty frequently, and he was quite affectionate in his ways. He and the Honourable Misses Dymcox had long conversations together, after which he used to go, seeming to bless Clotilde and Marie, he was so paternal and gentle—Ruth obtaining, too, her share of his benevolent smiles.

Then, after a good deal of waiting, came a time when Clotilde met Glen alone. The latter did not know that he had Dick to thank for the arrangement; but he it was who made the suggestion to Clotilde, by whom the idea was seized at once, and the very next morning she proposed that Marie and she should have a walk in the gardens directly after breakfast.

"My head aches a good deal, aunties, and a walk will do it good."

Miss Philippa looked at her sister, and Miss Isabella returned the look.

"Well, my dears, as it is far too early for anyone to be down from London," said Miss Philippa, "I think you might go, don't you, sister?"

"Yes, decidedly," said Miss Isabella; and the young ladies went up to dress, Markes entering the bedroom as they prepared for their walk.

"But you two ain't going alone?" said the maid.

"Indeed but we are, Markes," retorted Clotilde.

"But not without your aunts?"

"Yes, of course. How absurd you are!"

"Well, things is coming to a pretty pass! I couldn't have believed it if I'd been told."

She went out, and, according to her custom, slammed the door, but it was not heeded now; and soon after, with the affectionate kisses of their aunts moist upon their cheeks, the two girls strolled along one of the paths in the direction of the Lion Gate.

For a time they were very silent, but at last, after two or three sidelong glances at Marie, Clotilde opened the ball.

“Well, dear,” she said, “what do you think of it?”

Marie remained silent.

“For my part,” continued Clotilde, “I think it horrible. It’s like being sold into a seraglio. I won’t have him.”

“Then why did you accept that bracelet?” exclaimed Marie sharply.

“Because it was very beautiful, my dear sister; because I only had a wretchedly common *porte bonheur*; and, lastly, because it was of diamonds, and I liked it.”

“But it was like telling the man you would have him.”

“Then why did you accept that pearl ring Lord Henry sent you, sweet sissy?”

“For the same reason—because I liked it,” said Marie bitterly; “but I’ve hated myself ever since.”

“It’s a pity they are so old,” said Clotilde. “It would be very nice if they were not, for I like the idea of having plenty of good things, and being able to spend as much money as I like. Why, Rie,” she exclaimed, “let’s have a run through the Maze. We haven’t been since we were quite little children.”

“Nonsense! absurd!”

“Never mind; let’s be absurd for once. There will be no one there so soon as this. I shall go; you can stay away if you like.”

With a quiet, disdainful look, Marie followed her sister, and carelessly began with her threading the devious course through the quaint old labyrinth.

“How ridiculous of you, Clo!” she said at last. “There is not a breath of air, and it is growing terribly hot. Come back, there is someone here.”

“Very well; come back, then,” said Clotilde. “This way, Rie.”

“No; that is not the path.”

“Yes it is. I’m sure it is; and—oh, how strange! Here are those two.”

Marie’s cheeks crimsoned as she found that they had come suddenly upon the two officers. That it was a planned thing she was sure; but this was not the time to resent it, and she returned the salutations with which she was greeted, making up her mind that she would keep close to Clotilde the whole time, and prevent a *tête-à-tête*.

But such a determination would have been difficult to carry out in the gardens, when three people were arrayed dead against her. In a maze it was simply impossible; and the guide was not there.

She never knew how or when they were separated, but all at once she and Dick were on one side of a hedge, and Clotilde and Glen on the other, and when the boy laughingly tried to put matters right, he did it so cleverly that they were soon two hedges separate; then three, and likely to be four; by which time, forgetful of all his scrupulous feelings, and Clotilde’s want of perfection in his eyes, Glen had clasped her to his heart with a deep, low “My darling, at last!”

“Oh, no, no, no, Marcus,” she sobbed, as she gently thrust him away, and then clung to his arm, gazing piteously up at him the while. “You must not. I ought not to let you. I feel so wicked and despairing I hardly care to live.”

“But why, my darling—my beautiful darling?” he whispered passionately, contenting himself now with holding her hands.

“Because this is so wrong. My aunts would never forgive me if they knew.”

“That is what I want to speak about, dearest,” he said, in a low voice, as he drew her arm through his and they walked on. “May I speak to them? Let me call and ask their permission to come freely and openly to the apartments. I am only a poor suitor, Clotilde—only a captain of cavalry, with very little beside his pay; but you will not despise me for that?”

“For what?” she cried innocently, as she gazed up into his face.

“For my want of money,” he said, smiling down, and longing to clasp her once more in his arms.

“I hardly know what money is,” she said quietly. “We have never had any; so why should I care for that?”

“Then I may speak?” he whispered. “I may be better off by-and-by, and we can wait.”

“Oh yes, we could wait,” sighed Clotilde. “But no—no—no, it is madness! I ought not to talk like this. I’ve been very weak and foolish, and I don’t know what you must think of me.”

“Think of you!” he whispered; “that you are all that is beautiful and innocent and good, and that I love you with all my heart.”

“But I’m not good,” faltered Clotilde; “I’m very wicked indeed, and I don’t know what will become of me; I don’t,

really.”

“Become the woman who will share my fate—the woman I shall make my idol. Clotilde, I never saw one I could sincerely say such things to till we met, and at one bound my heart seemed to go out to meet you. Tell me, my darling, that nothing shall separate us now.”

“Oh, don’t, pray don’t speak to me like that,” sighed Clotilde. “You don’t know—you can’t know. What shall I do?”

“My dear girl, tell me,” he whispered, as he gazed in her wild eyes.

“Oh, no, no!” she sobbed.

“Not give your confidence to one who loves you as I do?”

“I dare not tell you—yes, I will,” she cried piteously. “What shall I do? My aunts say that I must marry Mr Elbraham.”

“Then Millet was right,” cried Glen excitedly. “But no, no, my darling, it cannot—it shall not be. Only tell me you love me—that I may care for you—guard you—defend you, and no aunts or Elbrahams in the world shall separate us.”

“I—I think—I believe I do care for you,” she faltered, as she looked up at him in a piteous, pleading way.

“Heaven bless you, sweet!” he cried. “Then this very day I will see them. They are women, and will listen to reason. I will plead to them, and you shall help me.”

“Oh, no, no, no!” cried Clotilde in horrified tones. “That would be to separate us for ever, and—and—and,” she sobbed, “I could not bear that.”

“But surely”—he began.

“Oh, you do not know my aunts!” she said excitedly. “It would only be to force me into that dreadful man’s arms. We must not let them know. It would be too dreadful.”

“But, my darling, I think I could show them—”

“No, no! Don’t show them—don’t try to show them, if you love me!”

“If I love you!” he said reproachfully.

“Then pray—pray keep it secret,” she said imploringly, “for the present.”

“But I must see you—I must talk to you.”

“Yes, yes; you shall sometimes. But if they thought you spoke to me as you have, I should never see you again.”

“But what am I to do?” he pleaded.

“You may write to me sometimes,” she said ingenuously; “and sometimes, perhaps, we may meet.”

“But—”

“Hush! No more now. Oh, pray—pray—pray! Here is sister Marie.”

Glen did not notice it, but Clotilde recovered her calmness very rapidly, as, after a very awkward time spent in trying hard to keep her from joining the others, Marie found out the way for herself, and snubbed Dick so sharply that he came up with her looking exceedingly rueful, and telling himself that the sacrifice he had made to friendship was far too great, and that he ought to have kept to Clotilde.

“Why, Marie,” exclaimed the latter, “where have you been?”

Marie did not reply, only darted an angry glance at her sister, and then one full of scorn at Glen, who made a sign to Millet, one which the little fellow eagerly obeyed, going on with Clotilde, while Glen lingered behind with Marie.

“I am not so blind or so foolish as not to see that you are displeased with my attentions to your sister,” he said in a low voice, which made her thrill with pleasure, in spite of the jealous anger she felt. “Yes, you need not tell me,” he continued, meeting her eyes. “But come, let us be friends—more, let us be like brother and sister, for, believe me, my feelings towards you are warmer than you think. I know that I am no worthy match for your sister, but if love can make up for poverty—there, you will not be angry with me, for I want you to be my ally.”

Marie turned to him again to look scorn and anger, but as she met his eyes her resolution failed, and it was all she could do to keep from bursting into a passionate fit of sobbing.

“He loves her,” she sobbed to herself; “and he cannot see her, he cannot know her, as I do.”

The next moment she was upbraiding herself with her own unworthiness, while he was interpreting her silence into a more softened feeling towards him; and when they parted a few minutes later, and he pressed her hand, Marie felt that if he wished it she could become his slave, while somehow Glen did not feel quite satisfied with his idol.

The sisters did not speak on their way back, while when they re-entered the Palace their aunts were loud in praise of the animation their walk had imparted to their countenances.

“Such news, my dears!” cried Miss Philippa.

“Such good news, my dears!” echoed Miss Isabella.

“Mr Elbraham is coming down to-day,” said Miss Philippa.

“And he will drive Lord Henry Moorpark down in his phaeton.”

“Yes, my sweet darlings,” said Miss Philippa affectionately. “I think, dears, I would sit quietly in the drawing-room all the morning.”

“And go up just before lunch to dress.”

“Yes, dears. Your new morning dresses have come home.”

“Oh, have they, aunt dear?” cried Clotilde. “Come upstairs, then, at once, Rie, and we’ll try them on.”

Volume Two—Chapter Six.

The Anchorite is Consulted Again.

“I wonder whether I shall ever have any children of my own,” said John Huish; “and, if I do, whether I shall ever be so hard, cruel, and worldly to them as some people are. Money is very nice, and one would like to see one’s young folks well off; but how a mother and father can deliberately match a beautiful, innocent young girl with some old fellow because he is rich and has a title, is something beyond my comprehension. Sixty and twenty! Oh, it is a disgrace to our boasted civilisation!”

John Huish’s breakfast was on the table in his snug room, and the coffee, French rolls, and delicately-brown ham looked enticing, but they did not tempt him. He had made several beginnings, such as taking off the cover that concealed the ham, opening his napkin, pouring out the steaming amber coffee, and the like; but he had touched nothing, for a letter he had received from Gertrude that morning had taken away his appetite.

“Poor girl!” he mused; “suffering agonies, and I seem as if I can do nothing to help her. Money! Why have I not plenty of money? I always felt well enough off till this happened, and then all at once I discovered that I was a poor man.”

He wrinkled up his brow, and let his cheek down upon his hand, with his elbow in dangerous proximity to his coffee.

“I was dreaming of going up to Stonor’s again last night. Good heavens! Is it likely that I shall ever become like one of those poor fellows—unhinged, doing all kinds of things involuntarily? There must be something wrong with me; only Stonor spoke as he did, like all doctors do, to take one’s thoughts away from one’s malady. It is so strange, that perhaps I ought not to think any more of my poor darling; only Stonor encouraged me so. It would be a sin against her to marry if I really am wrong. But am I? Let me think.

“Robson, for some reason, cut me dead yesterday; but then he is one of Lady Millet’s intimates. Then Rock Anderson apologised for not paying me that money. What money? I remember no debt. It’s softening of the brain, that’s what it is—memory gradually going; and yet I think of Gertrude and dare—Well, the doctor said I was all right; he ought to know. He said it was only a lapse of memory now and then.

“But there are so many things which are so puzzling. Friends seem to be dropping away from me. Man after man with whom I used to be intimate cuts me dead.

“No, no, no!” he cried impatiently; “I will not think of it. And as to that woman who came to me and made me worry my brains, it must have been some town trick.”

But the cloud hung over him still, various little matters connected with his daily life clinging together like snowflakes from that cloud, till the recollection of his position with regard to Gertrude came back, and her face shone through the darkness to dissipate the mental mist.

“Yes!” he cried, brightening up; “the doctor must be right. He encouraged me in my ideas; and my darling will keep away all these wretched morbid fancies. But what am I to do?

“Act!” he cried sharply; “act!—not sit down here like a morbid, dreamy fool, and let that old woman have her way in making two people wretched for life. I’ll go to Captain Millet’s and see him. Not so easy, though,” he said, laughing. “Never mind; I’ll go. He must have plenty of influence. Oh, of course; and if he fails, why, there’s the doctor. Hang it! he might interfere, and put in a certificate saying that it would be the death of the poor girl if she is forced into a wedding with that fellow. But the old man told me to—Oh, what a hesitating fool I am!”

Meanwhile, matters were progressing in no very pleasant way at the Millet’s. Renée made no confidant of her mother, but clung to her sister, from whom Lady Millet heard a portion of the trouble that had fallen upon her child.

“There, I can’t help it,” said her ladyship. “I do everything I can for you children, and if matters go wrong through your own imprudence, you must put up with the consequences. There, there, it is a silly young married couple’s piece of quarrelling, and they must make it up as fast as they can.”

“But, mamma!” said Gertrude.

“Don’t argue with me, Gertrude. Renée must have been imprudent, and she must take the consequences. She had

no business to encourage Major Malpas to visit her; and I trust that this will be a warning to you when you are married.”

“Mamma!”

“Oh yes, I understand you, Gertrude,” said her ladyship; “but I know your obstinacy, and I maintain that it would be utter madness for you to see that man after your marriage.”

“But, mamma, you would not think of pressing on that affair now Renée is in such trouble.”

“What has that to do with it, child? What has Renée’s trouble to do with your marriage? Lord Henry has been put off long enough. I wish you to accept him; and I am convinced that a word, even a look, would make him propose.”

“Oh, mamma!”

“Gertrude, I insist! I know he likes you, and if he is to be kept back like this, a scheming woman will secure him for some creature or another. Why, it is nearly a month since he called, and no wonder, after your icy conduct! I shall take steps at once. Let me see, a dinner-party will be best. There, I’m going out; I’ll resume the subject on my return.”

“Oh, mamma, mamma!” cried Gertrude as soon as she was alone. “But I will not; I’d sooner die.”

Lady Millet was put off from resuming the subject on her return, and during her absence Gertrude had relieved her troubled heart by writing a letter of no small importance to herself.

Next day she was driven to Chesham Place with Lady Millet, who left her there while her ladyship went to attend to some shopping.

“Not been back?” said Gertrude eagerly, as she gazed in her sister’s pale face.

“No, Gertrude, not yet,” replied Renée; “but he will come soon, I hope,” she continued, with a sigh full of resignation; “I am waiting. And now about your troubles. Is this affair to take place?”

“So mamma says,” replied Gertrude, with a bitter smile. “Like you, I am to have an establishment.”

“Oh, Gertrude, sister!” whispered Renée, kissing her. “But it makes it less bitter, now that Mr Huish has proved to be—”

Gertrude laid her hand upon her lips.

“Hush, Renée!” she cried. “I do not know what you may have heard, and I will not listen to it. Neither will I sit and hear a word against Mr Huish.”

“I will not speak against him, dear,” said Renée sadly; and she gazed piteously in her sister’s eyes.

“And you, Renée? My poor darling! your position gives me the heartache.”

“I shall wait, Gertrude. Some day he will find out my innocence and return to ask my pardon. I can wait till then. You see, dear, that, like you, I have faith, and can abide my time.”

In place of returning home, Gertrude persuaded her sister to accompany her to her uncle’s, where Vidler admitted them both directly, and showed them up to the darkened drawing-room.

It was a curious change from the bright sunshine of the street to the gloom within; but it seemed to accord well with the sadness in the sisters’ breasts, and they sat and talked to the old man, playing to him as well, till it drew near the time for them to return to their respective homes.

All this time the pale, almost ghostly-looking hand was playing about in the little opening, and indicating by its nervous action that something was passing in the ordinarily calm mind of its owner.

“Renée, my child,” he said at last, “I can hear that you are in trouble.”

There was no reply for a few moments, and then she said softly: “Yes, dear uncle.”

“I do not ask you for your confidence,” he said, “for if it is some trouble between you and your husband it should be sacred. I dreaded this,” he muttered to himself. “Gertrude, my child, I would not, if I could help it, do anything to encourage you to act in disobedience to your parents’ wishes, but be careful how you enter on this proposed alliance. I like it not, I like it not.”

Gertrude did not answer, only stole to the opening, and pressed her warm fresh lips to the cold white hand. Then the young people took their leave, and the yellow-looking house in Wimpole Street resumed its wonted aspect of gloom.

Volume Two—Chapter Seven.

Brought to a Double Head.

“Ah, my dearest boy!” cried Lady Millet, an evening or two later; “I did not expect you.”

"'Spose not," said Dick shortly; "but I've come, all the same."

"You want money, sir, I suppose; and I will not have papa worried."

"No, I don't want money. I've come up on particular business."

"Business! Great heavens, my dear child! what is the matter?"

"Well, I don't know yet. But, I say, is Gertrude going to marry John Huish?"

"Certainly not—impossible! I have other views for your sister."

"And what are they?"

"This is a subject I should discuss with your papa, Richard; but you are a man grown now, and I am sorry to say papa does not afford me the support I should like, so I will tell you in confidence. I believe Lord Henry Moorpark will propose directly."

"Do you? I don't."

"What do you mean, Dick?" cried her ladyship sharply.

"That's what has brought me up to town. Lady Littletown has been stealing a march on you, and is trying to egg him on to propose elsewhere."

"The wretched scheming creature! Oh! No, no, it is impossible. You are mistaken, my boy."

"Oh no, I'm not. The old chap is quite on there at Hampton Court. But of course he has no chance."

"Stop! At Hampton Court? Who is the lady?"

"One of the Miss Dymcoxes' nieces, living with her aunts in the Palace."

"Philippa Dymcox's niece?"

"Yes."

"Not a Miss Riversley?"

"That's the name, mamma."

"How horrible!—Riversleys! Why, they are connected with the Huishes. That Mr John Huish's father married a Miss Riversley."

"Very likely," said Dick Millet coolly. "That's the lady, all the same—Miss Dymcox's niece."

"The Dymcoxes! the paupers! Lady Littletown's doing! Oh, that woman!"

"You don't like her, then, mamma?"

"Like her? Ugh!" exclaimed Lady Millet in tones of disgust; "I can soon put a stop to that, my son." Her ladyship compressed her lips. "But it is all Gertrude's fault, behaving so ridiculously about that John Huish. I don't know what she may not have said to Lord Henry the other night. He was almost at her feet, and now he shall be quite. John Huish indeed!—a man going hopelessly to the bad," Her ladyship rang. "There is no time to be lost. I must act at once. Lord Henry Moorpark must be brought back to his allegiance. Send Miss Gertrude's maid to ask her to step down here," continued her ladyship to the servant who answered the bell.

"What are you going to do?"

"Arrange for invitations to be sent out at once. Oh, Dick, my boy, the stories I have heard lately about Mr Huish's gambling and dissipation are terrible! Gertrude has had a marvellous escape. It is very shocking, for your uncle and father have known the Huishes all their lives. Well?"

"Richards says, my lady, that Miss Millet went out an hour ago."

"Out? Gone out?"

"Yes, my lady; and Richards found this note left on the dressing-table, my lady, stuck down on the cushion with a pin."

"Great heavens!" cried Lady Millet, snatching the note from a salver; "there, leave the room."

The man bowed and moved to the door, in time to open it for Sir Humphrey, who stood beaming at his son, while her ladyship tore open the letter and read:

> "Dear Mamma,—*I cannot marry Lord Henry Moorpark. Good-bye*."

"That's all!" cried her ladyship in a perfect wail. "What does it mean?"

"Looks suspicious," said Dick. "Hullo!" he continued, as the servant reopened the door. "Can't see visitors."

“Mr Frank Morrison, sir,” said the man, who looked rather scared at seeing her ladyship sink upon a couch, where Sir Humphrey began to fan her.

“What the deuce does he want?” grumbled Dick. “Hullo, Frank! I was coming to see you about that row with our Renée. Gertrude wrote and told me.”

“My wife here?” said Morrison, who was a good deal excited by wine.

“What, Renée? No!”

“Damn!” cried the young husband, dropping upon a chair, and looking from one to the other.

“Something fresh, then?” cried Dick, growing excited. “Here, why the devil don’t you speak, man?”

“Yes, yes! why don’t you speak?” cried Lady Millet piteously. “Oh, Frank dear, what news? Have you seen Gertrude?”

“No,” he said thickly. “I want Renée.”

“Where is she? Speak, I conjure you!” cried her ladyship.

“Don’t know,” said Morrison, glancing round. “Haven’t been home for days. Went home this afternoon. Had some words and came away again.”

“Well, well, go on! I saw you playing billiards at the club.”

“Yes,” said Morrison, whose brain was clouded with days of excess. “Went home again just now. Going to make it up, and she’d gone. Where is she? Want her directly.”

Dick stood thinking for a few moments, while her ladyship looked at him as if imploring him to speak.

“She’s in it, p’raps,” he said. “Look here, Frank, can you understand me, or have you got D.T. too bad?”

“Yes, I understand,” said the young man thickly.

“Gertrude’s gone away. We think your wife must be in the plot.”

“No,” said Morrison slowly, as he gave his head a shake to clear it, and stood up angry and fierce, while the others hung upon his words as being likely to dispel their fears. “No, poor girl! too much trouble. I’m a villain,” he groaned, “and I struck her to-night; but—but,” he cried excitedly, “she deceived me. Gone with Malpas. She’s false as hell!”

“It’s a lie!” cried Dick fiercely. “Here, father, see to my mother. It’s a lie, I say; and you, Frank Morrison, you’re a cad to dare to—Ah!” said the lad, uttering a shrill cry, and he had just time to drive up a pistol as it exploded, and save his brother-in-law’s brains from being scattered on the wall.

Then there was a fierce struggle, as Frank Morrison strove to direct the revolver at his temples once more, and Dick fought with him bravely till overpowered; but two of the frightened servants ran in, and with their help the madman was secured and held down till the arrival of the nearest doctor, a messenger having been also sent for Dr Stonor, who arrived a couple of hours later; and between them the excitement of the would-be suicide was somewhat allayed, though he was still half mad.

It was the old story—days and days of heavy use of stimulants, till the fevered madness that generally comes in its wake had seized upon an already too excited brain; and it was only by the use of the strongest measures that the medical men were able to restrain their patient’s violence, as he rambled on wildly hour after hour, the burden of his incoherent mutterings being, “My wife! my wife!”

Volume Two—Chapter Eight.

Dick Millet Feels Grown Up.

“Bad?” said Dr Stonor, when he was left alone to attend his patient at Sir Humphrey’s. “Yes, of course he is bad—very bad. But I don’t call this illness. He must suffer. Men who drink always do.”

“But her ladyship, Stonor?” said Sir Humphrey; “will you come and see her now?”

“No,” said the doctor roughly. “What for? Nothing the matter. She can cure herself whenever she likes. What are you going to do about your sister, soldier boy?”

“I—I don’t know,” replied Dick. “Ought I to fetch her back?”

“Yes—no—can’t say,” said the doctor. “Hang this man, how strong he is! Look here, Dick, my boy: here’s a lesson for you. You will be a man some day. When you are, don’t go and poison yourself with drink till your brain revolts and sets up a government of its own. Look at this: the man’s as mad as a hatter, and I shall have to nearly poison him with strong drugs to calm him down. A wild revolutionary government, with death and destruction running riot. Think your sister has gone with John Huish?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Dick, for Sir Humphrey seemed utterly unnerved.

"Don't see anything to be afraid of, boy. John Huish is a gentleman."

"I'm afraid not," said Dick hotly; "and it isn't gentlemanly to act as he has done about my sister."

"I shall have to get a strait-waistcoat for this fellow. About your sister. Bah! Human nature. Wait till you get old enough to fall in love, and some lady—mamma, say—wants to marry your pretty little Psyche to an old man. How then, my young Cupid?"

Dick changed colour like a girl.

"I hold to John Huish being a thorough gentleman, my boy. He's all right. I wish Renée's husband was as good a man. Yes, I mean you—you drunken, mad idiot I'm going to bring you round, and when I've done so, I hope, Dick, if he ever dares to say a word again about your sister Renée—"

"You've heard then?"

"Heard? Of course. Doctors hear and know everything. Parson's nowhere beside a doctor. People don't tell the parson all the truth: they always keep a little bit back. They tell the doctor all because they know he can see right through them. Lie still, stupid. Ha! he's calming down."

"Isn't he worse, Stonor?" asked Sir Humphrey.

"No; not a bit. And as I was saying, if, when he gets on his legs again, he dares to say a word against his wife, knock him down. I'll make him so weak it will be quite easy."

"Well, he deserves it," said Dick.

"Of course he does. So do you, for thinking ill of your sister. I'll be bound to say, if you sent to Wimpole Street, you'd find the poor girls there soaking pocket-handkerchiefs."

"By Jove! yes," cried Dick, starting at the doctor's suggestion. "Why, of course. Doctor, you've hit it! Depend upon it, they're gone to Uncle Robert's, father."

"Think so, my boy, eh?—think so?" said the old gentleman. "It would be very dull and gloomy."

"Nonsense!" said the doctor. "My dear boy, the more I think of it, the more likely it seems to me that they have gone there."

"Yes; that's it, doctor. Guv'nor, I don't like to be hard on you, but the doctor's a very old friend. It's a nice thing—isn't it?—that our girls should have to go to Uncle Robert's for the protection they cannot find here?"

"Yes, my dear boy, it is, it is," said the old man querulously; "but I can't help it. Her ladyship took the reins as soon as we were married, and she's held them very tightly ever since."

"Well, we'll go and see. You'll stay with Frank Morrison, doctor?"

"Stay, sir? Yes, I will. Think I'm going to be dragged down here from Highgate for nothing? I'll make Master Morrison play the shoddy-devil in his Yorkshire mill for something. He shall have such a bill as shall astonish him."

"Here, fetch a cab," shouted Dick to the man who answered the bell; and soon after the jangling vehicle was taking them to Wimpole Street.

It was four o'clock, and broad daylight, as the cab drew up at Captain Millet's door, when, in answer to a ring which Dick expected it would take half an hour to get attended to, the door was opened directly by Vidler.

"You were expecting us, then?" said Dick, as the little man put his head on one side, and glanced from the young officer to his father, and back again.

"Yes, sir. Master said you might come at any time, so I sat up."

"All right, father; they're here. What time did they come, Vidler?"

"They, sir?"

"Yes—my sisters," said Dick impatiently. "What time did they come?"

"Miss Renée came here about half-past ten, sir."

"There, dad," whispered Dick. "And Frank swore she'd gone off with Malpas. I knew it wasn't true. He wouldn't insult a brother officer like that."

"I'm very glad, my boy—I'm very glad," said Sir Humphrey feebly; and Dick turned to Vidler again.

"And Miss Gertrude, what time did she get here?"

"Miss Gertrude, sir?"

"Don't be a stupid old idiot!" cried Dick excitedly. "I say—what—time—did—my—sister—Gertrude-get here?"

“She has not been here, sir,” replied the little man—“not to-night.”

Dick looked blankly at his father, and, in spite of his determination not to believe the story suggested about his sister, it seemed to try and force itself upon his brain.

“Where is Mrs Morrison?” he cried at last.

“Lying down, sir. Salome is watching by her. She seemed in great distress, sir, and,” he added in a whisper, “we think master came out of his room and went to her when we had gone down.”

“Poor Robert!” muttered Sir Humphrey.

“Master’s very much distressed about her, gentlemen. Miss Renée is a very great favourite of his.”

“Is my uncle awake, do you think?”

“I think so, sir,” was the reply.

“Ask him if he will say a few words to my father and me. Tell him we are in great trouble.”

The little man bowed and went upstairs, returning at the end of a minute or two to request them to walk up.

“Last time I was here,” thought Dick, “I asked him for a couple of tenners, and he told me never to come near him again. A stingy old hunks! But, there, he’s kind to the girls.”

The little panel opened as Vidler closed the door, and Sir Humphrey, looking very old, and grey of hair and face, sat looking at it, leaving his son to open the conversation.

“Well, Humphrey, what is it?” said the voice behind the wainscoting.

“How do you do, Bob?” began the old gentleman. “I—I—Richard, my boy, tell your uncle; I’m too weak and upset.”

“We’re in great trouble, uncle,” began Dick sharply.

“Yes, I know,” said the voice. “Renée has fled to me for protection from her husband. You did well amongst you. Poor child!”

“Hang it all, uncle, don’t talk like that!” cried Dick impetuously. “You ought to know that we had nothing to do with it. Help us; don’t scold us.”

“I am helping you,” said the Captain. “Renée stays here with me till she can be sure of a happy home. And, look here,” he continued, growing in firmness, “she has told me everything. If you are a man, you will call out anyone who dares say a word against her fame.”

“It’s all very well, uncle,” said Dick; “but this is 18—, and not your young days. No one has a word to say against Renée. But look here, uncle, that isn’t all. Gertrude has gone off.”

“With John Huish, of course. Ah, Humphrey, how strangely Fate works her ways!”

“But, uncle, they say John Huish has turned out an utter swindler and scamp. Last thing I heard was that he had been expelled from his club.”

“Let them talk,” said Captain Millet quietly. “I say it cannot be true.”

“But, Bob,” faltered Sir Humphrey weakly, “they do make out a very bad case against him.”

“Then you and your boy can take up the cudgels on his behalf. He is son and brother now. There, I am weary. Go.”

“But Renée—we must see her.”

“No; let the poor girl rest. When you can find her a decent home, if she wishes it, she can come.”

The little wicket was closed with a sharp snap, and father and son gazed at each other in the gloomy room.

“Come back home, Dick,” said Sir Humphrey feebly. “And take warning, my boy: be a bachelor. Ladies in every shape and form are a great mistake.”

Dick Millet thought of the glowing charms of Clotilde and Marie Dymcox, but he said nothing, only hinted to his father that he ought to give Vidler a sovereign; and this done, they went back into the cab.

Half an hour later they were back in the room where Frank Morrison lay talking wildly in a loud, husky voice.

“Oh, well, so much the better,” said the doctor, when he heard all. “Capital calming place for your sister at your uncle’s. And as for Gertrude—bless her sweet face!—your uncle must be right. Bet a guinea he knew beforehand. I wish her and John Huish joy, he’ll never make her leave her home, and drink himself into such a state as this.”

“I hope not,” thought Dick; but just then some of the ugly rumours he had heard crossed his mind, and he had his doubts.

“Precious hard on a fellow,” he said to himself, “two sisters going off like that! I wonder what Glen and the other

fellows will say. Suppose fate forced me to do something of the same kind!"

Volume Two—Chapter Nine.

Going to Court.

Marcus Glen was not a man given to deep thinking, but one of those straightforward, trusting fellows who, when once he placed faith in another, gave his whole blind confidence, and whom it was difficult afterwards to shake in his belief. He had had his flirtations here and there where his regiment had been stationed, and fancied himself deeply in love; been jilted in a fashionable way, smoked a cigar over it, and enjoyed his meals at the mess as usual. But he had found in Clotilde one so different to the insipid girls of former acquaintance: she was far more innocent in most things, thoroughly unworldly, and at the same time so full of loving passion, giving herself, as it were, to his arms with a full trust and faith, that his pulses had been thoroughly stirred. She told him of her past, and he soon found out for himself that hers had been no life of seasons, with half a dozen admirers in each. He was her first lover, and he told himself—doubtingly—that she was the first woman, and would be the only one, he could ever love.

Their meetings became few and seldom, and were nearly all of a stolen nature, for there could be no disguising the fact that when the young officer called the Honourable Philippa Dymcox was cold and stately; and though her sister seemed to nervously desire to further Glen's wishes, she stood too much in awe of her sister, and with a sigh forebore.

Dick Millet then had to put his plan in force, and Joseph began to grow comparatively wealthy with the weight of the Queen's heads that accompanied the notes he bore to the young ladies, and visions of the lodging-house he meant some day to take grew clearer and less hazy in the distance that they had formerly seemed to occupy.

Visits were paid to Lady Littletown's, and that dame was quite affectionate in her ways, but Clotilde and Marie were rarely encountered there; and when fortune did favour Glen to the extent of a meeting, there were no more inspections of her ladyship's exotics, no encounters alone, for Lady Littletown was always present; and at last Glen felt that, if he wished to win, it must be by extraordinary, and not by ordinary means.

The slightest hint of this seemed to set Dick on fire.

"To be sure," he cried; "the very thing! We must carry them off, Glen, dear boy. Like you know who."

"And do you think our friend Marie will consent to be carried off?"

"Well—er—yes; I dare say she would oppose it at first, but the moment she feels certain that her aunts mean to force her into a marriage with old Moorpark, I feel sure that she will yield."

"Ah, well," said Glen, "we shall see; but look here, most chivalrous of youths, and greatest among lovers of romance—"

"Oh, I say, how I do hate it when you take up that horrible chaffing tone!"

"Chaff, my dear boy? No, no, this is sound commonsense! I do not say that under certain circumstances I might not have a brougham in waiting, and say to a lady 'Here is the licence, let us be driven straight to the church and made one;' but believe me, my dear Dick, all those romantic, elopement-loving days are gone by. We have grown too matter-of-fact now."

"Hang matter-of-fact! I mean to let nothing stand in my way, so I tell you! But, I say, have you heard?"

"About your sisters? Yes."

"Hang it, no!" cried Dick angrily; "let that rest. It's bad enough meeting Black Malpas at the mess-table, and being kept back by etiquette from hurling knives. I mean about the dinner."

"What dinner?"

"Dymcoxes'. And we're not asked. Our dinner's cold shoulder."

"A dinner-party?"

"Yes; and those two old buffers are to be there."

Dick was right, for a dinner was given in the private apartments, where the ladies did their best; but it certainly was not a success, and Marie could not help bitterly contrasting the difference between the repast and its surroundings and that given by Lady Littletown. For the Honourable Misses Dymcox had been unfortunate in the purveyor to whom they had applied to furnish the dinner and all the necessaries. All the linen, the plate, the glass, and, above all, the ornamentation, had a cheap, evening-party supper aspect. There was the plated épergne which showed so much copper that it seemed to be trying to out-brazen the battered Roman cup-shaped wine-coolers, in each of which stood icing a bottle of champagne, quite unknown to fame—a wine with which a respectable bottle of Burton ale would have considered it beneath its dignity to associate. There were flowers upon the table furnished by the pastrycook; and though a couple of shillings would have supplied a modest selection of the real, according to well-established custom these were artificial, many of them being fearfully and wonderfully made.

That artificiality pervaded the whole repast, which from beginning to end was suggestive of oil-made, puffed-up

pastry, which would crush into nothing at a touch; while soups, gravies, and the preparations of animal flesh, purveyed and presented under names in John Bull French, with a good deal of *à la* in the composition, one and all tasted strongly of essence of beef, that delicious combination of tin-pot, solder, resin, and molten glue, which flavours so many of our cheaper feasts.

To give the whole a *distingué* air, the London pastrycook had sent down, beside his red-nosed *chef* and dubiously bright stewpans, those two well-known, ghastly-white temples, composed of sugar and chalk, which do duty at scores of wedding-breakfasts, and then stand in the pastrycook's window afterwards covered with glass shades, to keep them from the unholy touch of flies, and their sides from desecration by rubbing shoulders with the penny buns.

It was a mistake, too, to engage Mortimer, the gentleman who waited table for the gentry of Hampton Court, and invariably took the lead in single-handed places and played the part of butler. Mr Mortimer had been in service—*the* service, he called it—saved money, applied to a rising brewer, and taken a public-house "doing" a great number of barrels per week, so he was informed; but the remarkable fact about that house was that as soon as Mr Mortimer had paid over his hard-earned savings and taken his position as landlord, the whole district became wonderfully temperate, and, to use his own words, "If I hadn't taken to paying for glasses of ale myself, and so kept the engine going, there would have been next to nothing to do." The result was that in six months Mr Mortimer had to leave the house, a poorer and a wiser man, picking up odd jobs in waiting afterwards in the Palace and neighbourhood, but retaining his habit of buying himself glasses of ale to a rather alarming extent.

This habit was manifest upon the entrance of the first course, and had greatly exercised Joseph in spirit lest it should be detected. In fact, it became so bad by the time that the remove in the second course was due, that the footman made a strategic movement, inveigling Mr Mortimer into the big cupboard where knives and boots and shoes were cleaned, and then and there locking him up in company with a glass and jug.

Perhaps a viler dinner, worse managed, was never set before guests; but to Lord Henry Moorpark it was a banquet in dreamland, to Mr Elbraham it was a feast, for from the moment he took down Clotilde to that when the ladies rose to return to the drawing-room, he literally gloated over and devoured the Honourable Misses Dymcox's niece.

Good dinners, served in the most refined style, had lost their charm for the visitors, who seemed perfectly satisfied, Elbraham's face shining like a sun when he smiled blandly at his *vis-à-vis*, whose deeply-lined, aristocratic countenance wore an aspect of pleasant satisfaction as he gazed back at the millionaire.

"I say, Moorpark, they look well, don't they?" said Elbraham.

"They do, indeed," assented Lord Henry, smiling.

"Make some of them stare on the happy day, I think."

"They are certainly very, very beautiful women," replied Lord Henry, smiling and thoughtful.

"Eh—what? Oh, ah—yes: coffee. Thanks; I'll take coffee."

This to Joseph, who brought in a black mixture with some thin hot milk and brown sugar to match. Lord Henry also took a cup, but it was observable that neither gentleman got much farther than a couple of spoonfuls.

"Well," said Elbraham suddenly, stretching out his hairy paws, and examining their fronts and backs, "it's of no use our sitting here drinking wine, is it?"

"Certainly not," said Lord Henry, who had merely sipped the very thin champagne at dinner and taken nothing since.

So the gentlemen adjourned to the drawing-room, where certain conversations took place before they left, the effect of which was to send Mr Elbraham back to town highly elate, and Lord Henry to his old bachelor home a sadder, if not a wiser, man.

He had found his opportunity, or, rather, it had been made for him, and he had plainly asked Marie to be his wife.

"I know I ask you to make a sacrifice," he said—"you so youthful and beautiful, while I am old, and not possessed of the attraction a young man might have in your eyes; but if you will be my wife, nothing that wealth and position can give shall be wanting to make yours a happy home."

He thought Marie had never looked so beautiful before, as with flushed cheeks she essayed to speak, and, smiling as he took her soft, white hand in his, he asked her to be calm and patient with him.

"I dread your refusal," he said; "and yet, old as I am, there is no selfishness in my love. I wish to see you happy, my child—I wish to make you happy."

"She has accepted him," thought Marie; and her heart began to beat with painful violence, for, Clotilde away, who could say that Marcus Glen would not come to her for sympathy, and at last ask her love. She felt that she could not accept Lord Henry's proposal, and she turned her face towards him in an appealing way.

"You look troubled, my child," he said tenderly. "I want you to turn to me as you would to one who has your happiness thoroughly at heart. I want to win your love."

"My—my aunts know that you ask me this, Lord Henry?" she faltered.

"Yes, they know it; and they wish it, for we have quietly discussed the matter, and," he added, with a sad smile, "I have not omitted to point out to them how unsuited to you I am as a match. I throw myself then upon your mercy,

Marie, but you must not let fear influence you; I must have your heart, my child, given over to my safe-keeping.”

She looked at him wildly.

“Is this hand to be mine?” he whispered. “Will you make the rest of my days blessed with your young love? Tell me, is it to be?”

“Oh, no, no, no, Lord Henry,” she said, in a low, excited tone; “I could not, I dare not say yes. Pray, pray do not ask me.”

“Shall I give you time?” he whispered; “shall I wait a week—a month, for your answer, and then come again and plead?”

“Oh, no, no, no,” she said; “I could—I never could say yes. I like you, Lord Henry, I respect and esteem you—indeed, indeed I do; but I could not become your wife.”

“You could not become my wife,” he said softly. “No, no, I suppose not. It was another foolish dream, and I should have been wiser. But you will not ridicule me when I am gone? I ask you to try and think of the old man’s love with respect, even if it is mingled with pity, for, believe me, my child, it is very true and honest.”

“Ridicule! oh, no, no,” cried Marie eagerly, “I could not do that. You ask me to be your wife, Lord Henry: I cannot, but I have always felt that I loved you as—like—”

“You might say a father or some dear old friend?” said Lord Henry sadly.

“Yes, indeed yes!” she cried.

“Be it so, then,” he said, holding her hand in his in a sad, resigned way. “You are right; it is impossible. Your young verdant spring and my frosted winter would be ill matched. But let me go on loving you—if not as one who would be your husband, as a very faithful friend.”

“Yes, yes, please, Lord Henry,” she said; “I have so few friends.”

“Then you shall not lose me for one,” he continued sadly. “There, there, the little dream is over, and I am awake again. See here, Marie,” he said, drawing a diamond and sapphire ring from his pocket, “this was to be your engaged ring: I am going to place it on your finger now as a present from the dear old friend.”

She shrank from him, but he retained her hand gently, and she felt the ring glide over her finger, a quick glance showing her that her aunts were seeing everything from behind the books they were reading, becoming deeply immersed, though, as they saw how far matters seemed to have progressed.

Mr Elbraham’s wooing was moulded far differently to Lord Henry’s.

It was an understood thing that he was to propose that evening, the dinner being given for the purpose.

“There’s no confounded tom-fool nonsense about me;” and each time Mr Elbraham said this he took out of the morocco white satin-lined case a brilliant half-hoop ring, set with magnificent stones, breathed on it, held it to the light, moistened it between his lips, held it up again, finished by rubbing it upon his sleeve, and returning it to the case.

“That’ll fetch her,” he said. “My! what you can do with a woman if you bring out a few diamonds. I shan’t shilly-shally: I shall come out with it plump;” but all the same, when by proper manoeuvring the Honourable Misses Dymcox had arranged themselves behind books and left the two couples at opposite ends of the room, while they themselves occupied *dos-à-dos* the ottoman in the centre, Mr Elbraham did not “out with it plump.”

He seated himself as close as decency would permit to Clotilde, and stared at her, and breathed hard, while she returned his look with one that was half mocking, half defiant.

“Been to many parties lately?” he said at last, nothing else occurring to his mind except sentences that he would have addressed to ballet-girls upon their good looks, their agility, and the like.

No; Clotilde had not been to many parties.

“But you like ’em; I’ll bet a wager you like ’em?” said Elbraham with a hoarse laugh.

Oh yes, Clotilde dearly liked parties when they were nice.

There was another interval of hard breathing, during which Mr Elbraham took out and consulted his watch.

The act of replacing that made him remember the ring in the morocco case, and he thrust his finger and thumb in his vest pocket, but it was not there, and he remembered that he had placed it in his trousers pocket.

This was awkward, for Mr Elbraham was stout and his garments tight. Still, he would want it directly, and he made a struggle and dragged it out, growing rather red in the face with the effort.

This gave him something else to talk about.

“Ha! it’s nice to be you,” he said, dropping the case in his vest.

“Why?” said Clotilde, looking amused.

“Because you gal—ladies dress so well; not like us, always in black. That’s a pretty dress.”

“Think so?” said Clotilde carelessly.

“Very pretty. I like it ever so, but it isn’t half good enough for you.—That’s getting on at last,” he muttered to himself.

“Oh yes, but it is. Aunt Philippa said it was a very expensive dress.”

“Tchh, my dear, rubbish! Why, I would not see anyone I cared for in such a dress as that. I like things rich and good, and the best money can buy.”

“Do you?” said Clotilde innocently; but her cheeks began to burn.

“Do I? Yes; I should just think I do. Look here! What do you think of that?”

He took out and opened the little case, breathed on the diamonds, and then held them in a good light.

“Oh, how lovely!” said Clotilde softly.

“Ain’t they?” said Elbraham. “They’re the best they’d got at Hancock’s, in Bond Street. Pretty stiff figure, too, I can tell you.”

“Are you fond of diamonds, Mr Elbraham?” she said, with a peculiar look at him from beneath her darkly fringed lids—a strange look for one so innocent and young.

“Yes, on some people,” he said. “Are you?”

“Oh yes; I love them,” she said eagerly.

“All right, then. Look here, Clotilde; say the word, and you can have diamonds till you are sick of them, and everything else. I—hang it all! I’m not used to this sort of thing,” he said, dabbing his moist face with his handkerchief; “but I said to myself, when I came to-night, ‘I won’t shilly-shally, but ask her out plain.’ So look here, my dear, may I put this diamond ring on the finger of the lady that’s to be Mrs Elbraham as soon as she likes?”

Clotilde darted one luminous look at him which took in his squat, vulgar figure and red face, and then her eyes half-closed, and she saw tall, manly, handsome Marcus Glen look appealingly in her eyes, and telling her he loved her with all his heart.

She loved him—she told herself she loved him very dearly; but he was poor, and on the one side was life in lodgings in provincial towns wherever the regiment was stationed; on the other side, horses and carriages and servants, a splendid town mansion, diamonds, dresses, the opera, every luxury and gaiety that money could command.

“Poor Marcus!” she sighed to herself. “He’s very nice!”

“Come,” said Mr Elbraham; “I don’t suppose you want me to go down on my knees and propose, do you? I want to do the thing right, but I’m a business man, you know; and, I say, Clotilde, you’re the most beautiful gal I ever saw in my life.”

She slowly raised her eyes to his, and there was a wicked, mocking laugh in her look as she said in a low tone:

“Am I?”

“Yes, that you are,” he whispered in a low, passionate tone.

“You are laughing at me,” she said softly.

“’Pon my soul I’m not,” he whispered again; “I swear I’m not; and I love you—there, I can’t tell you how much. I say, don’t play with me. I’ll do anything you like—give you anything you like. I’ll make the princesses bite their lips with jealousy to see your jewels. I will, honour! May I? Yes? Slip it on? I say, my beautiful darling, when may I put on the plain gold one?”

“Oh, hush!” she whispered softly, as she surrendered her hand, and fixed her eyes in what he told himself was a loving, rapturous gaze upon his; “be content now.”

“But no games,” he whispered; “you’ll be my wife?”

“Yes,” she said in the same low tone, and he raised the beringed hand to his lips, while the Honourable Isabella uttered a little faint sigh, and her book trembled visibly in her attenuated hands.

“Hah!” ejaculated Mr Elbraham; and then to himself: “What things diamonds are!”

Perhaps he would have felt less satisfied if he had known that, when Clotilde fixed her eyes upon his, she was looking down a long vista of pleasure stretched out in the future.

At the same moment the face of Marcus Glen seemed to rise up before her, but she put it aside as she lifted the hand that Elbraham had just kissed.

“He could not have brought me such a ring as that,” she said to herself; and then, “Heigho! poor fellow; but it isn’t my fault. I must tell him I am only doing what my dear aunts wish.”

She placed the ring against her deep-red lips and kissed it very softly, her beautiful eyes with their long fringed lids looking dark and dewy, and full of a delicious languor that made Mr Elbraham sit with his arms resting upon his knees, and gaze at her with half-open mouth, while he felt a strange feeling of triumph at his power as a man of the world, and thought of how he would show off his young wife to all he knew, and gloat over their envy.

Then a sense of satisfaction and love of self came over him, and he indulged in a little glorification of Mr Elbraham.

“Litton’s a humbug,” he said to himself; “I can get on better without his advice than with it. Women like a fellow to be downright with them, and say what he means.”

Volume Two—Chapter Ten.

Glen Declares War.

Dick Millet placed a note in his friend’s hand one day during parade, and Glen thrust it out of sight on the instant, glancing sidewise to see if Major Malpas had noticed the act, and then biting his lip with vexation at Dick being so foolish.

A good deal of the foolishness was on his own side, for had he taken the letter in a matter-of-fact manner, no one would have paid the slightest heed, or fancied that it came from a lady in a clandestine way.

But, as is generally the case in such matters, the person most anxious to keep his correspondence a secret is one of the first to betray himself, and, feeling this, Glen was in no very good humour.

The secret correspondence he had been carrying on with Clotilde was very sweet; but it annoyed him sadly, for his was not a nature to like the constant subterfuge. By nature frank and open, there was to him something exceedingly degrading in the fact that servants were bribed and the aunts deceived; and with a stern determination to put an end to it all, and frankly speak to the Honourable Misses Dymcox concerning his attachment to Clotilde, he went on with his duties till the men were dismissed.

“How could you be so stupid, Dick!” he exclaimed, as soon as they were clinking back, sabre and spur, to their quarters.

“Foolish!” said the little fellow, with a melodramatic laugh; “I thought you would like to get your letter. I don’t care about keeping all the fun to myself.”

“What’s the matter?” said Glen, smiling. “Has the fair Marie been snubbing you?”

“No. Look at your letter,” said the little fellow tragically.

Glen placed his hand in his breast, but, altering his mind, he walked on to his room before taking out the letter and glancing at it; then leaping up, he strode out into the passage and across to Dick’s quarters, to find that gentleman looking the very image of despair.

“Here, what does this mean?” exclaimed Glen. “Why did you not send my note with yours?”

“Did!”

“Then how is it you have brought it back?”

“That scoundrel Joseph!” exclaimed Dick. “I won’t believe but that it’s some trick on his part, for I don’t trust a word he says.”

“What does he say, then?”

“That they returned the notes unopened, and that—can you bear it?”

“Bear it! Bear what? Of course—yes; go on.”

“I’ve heard that Clotilde has accepted Mr Elbraham, and they are going to be married directly.”

Glen stood and glared at him for a moment, and then burst into a hearty laugh.

“Absurd! nonsense! Why, who told you this?”

“Joseph.”

“Rubbish! Joseph is an ass. The fellow forgot to deliver the letters.”

Dick spoke to him again, but Glen did not hear his words in the anger that had taken possession of him. He had, against his will, allowed himself to be swayed by Clotilde, and carried on the clandestine correspondence that was repugnant to his frank nature; and now he blamed himself for his conduct.

“Look here, Dick,” he cried at last, “we have been behaving like a couple of foolish boys ashamed of their feelings,

and the consequence is we have been unable to take the part of those two when they have been urged to accept proposals by their aunts."

"Don't say *they*; it is only Clotilde."

"I'll wager it is Marie as well, my boy; else why did you get your note back?"

Dick looked staggered, and gazed in his friend's face.

"I say, you know, what are you going to do?" he said it last.

"Going straight to the private apartments to see the aunts. Come with me?"

"What, to meet the old dragons, and talk about it?"

"Yes, of course. It is cowardly to hold back."

"That's—er—a matter of opinion," said Dick, who looked uneasy. "I—er—don't think it would be quite wise to go."

"As you like!" said Glen shortly; and before the boy could quite realise the position the door swung back heavily and his visitor was gone.

"Well," said Dick thoughtfully, "I could go through a good deal for Marie's sake, and would give a good deal to see her now, but face those two old Gorgons? No, not this time; I'd rather take a header into the Thames any day, and I don't believe Glen has gone, after all."

But he had gone straight to the private apartments, rung, and sent in his card to where the Honourable Misses Dymcox were discussing preparations for the marriage, with their nieces in the room.

"Captain Glen!" exclaimed the Honourable Philippa, starting as she read the card; "so early! What can he want?"

Marie glanced at her sister, and saw that she looked flushed and excited; but as soon as Clotilde found that she was observed, she returned a fierce, defiant glance at Marie's inquisitive eyes.

"Had—hadn't we better say 'Not at home'?" whispered the Honourable Isabella.

"No: it would be cowardly," replied her sister. "Joseph, you can show up Captain Glen."

Clotilde rose and left the room, and Marie was following, but her aunt arrested her.

"No, my dear, I would rather you would stay," she exclaimed; and full of sympathy, but at the same time unable to control a sense of gladness at her heart, Marie resumed her seat just as Ruth entered the room.

The next moment Glen was shown in, and after the customary salutations and commonplace remarks asked for a few minutes' conversation with the ladies alone.

The Honourable Philippa was a good deal fluttered, but she preserved her dignity, and signed to Marie and Ruth to withdraw, the former darting a look full of meaning as she passed Marcus, who hastened to open the door, the latter glancing up at him for a moment, and he smiled back in her face, which was full of sympathy for him in his pain.

Glen closed the door in the midst of a chilling silence, and returned to his seat facing the thin sisters, feeling that the task he had undertaken was anything but the most pleasant under the sun.

He was, however, too much stirred to hesitate, and he began in so downright a manner that he completely overset the balance—already tottering—of the Honourable Isabella, who felt so sympathetic that she was affected to tears.

"I wished to have a few minutes' conversation, ladies," he said, in rather a quick, peremptory tone, "respecting a question very near to my heart, and concerning my future happiness. Let me say, then, plainly, in what is meant to be a manly, straightforward fashion, that I love your niece Clotilde, and I have come to ask your consent to my being a constant visitor here."

The Honourable Isabella could not suppress it: a faint sigh struggled to her lips, and floated away upon the chilly air of that dismal room, like the precursor of the shower that trembled upon the lashes of her eyes.

"Captain Glen!" cried the Honourable Philippa, making an effort to overcome her own nervousness, and dreading a scene on the part of this downright young man, "you astound me!"

"I am very sorry I should take you so by surprise," he said quietly. "I hoped that you would have seen what my feelings were."

"Oh, indeed no!" cried the Honourable Philippa mendaciously, "nothing of the kind—did we, sister?"

The Honourable Isabella's hands shook a great deal, but she did not speak—only looked piteously at their visitor.

"Perhaps I ought to have made my feelings known sooner," said Glen. "However, I have spoken now, Miss Dymcox, and—"

"But, Captain Glen, pray spare us, and spare yourself what must be a very painful declaration, when I tell you that our niece is engaged to be married to Mr Elbraham."

“Then it is true?”

“Oh yes, perfectly true,” said the Honourable Philippa.

Glen drew a long breath, and sat for some moments silently gazing down at the carpet as if he could not trust himself to speak. When he opened his lips again his voice was changed.

“Am I to understand, madam, that Miss Clotilde Dymcox accepts this Mr—Mr Elbraham of her own free choice and will?”

It required a tremendous effort to get out that name “Elbraham,” but he forced it from his lips at last.

“Captain Glen,” said the Honourable Philippa, rising and darting a very severe glance at her sister because she did not rise as well, “this is presuming upon your position here as an acquaintance—a very casual acquaintance. I cannot discuss this matter with you.”

“As you will, madam,” replied Glen, who felt hot with indignant rage. “May I ask your permission to see Clotilde?”

“To see Miss Clotilde Dymcox?” said the Honourable Philippa, with dignity. “Under the circumstances, I think, sister, certainly not.”

She darted another fierce look at the Honourable Isabella, who was growing weaker and more agitated moment by moment, as she asked herself whether it was possible that, in spite of the disparity of their ages, she might yet try to soothe Marcus Glen’s wounded spirit, and offer him the sympathy of her virgin heart.

“I ask it in justice to myself, madam,” cried Glen, “for your niece—”

He was going to say more, but he checked himself, and bit his lips. “Of course, ladies, you would be present.”

“Impossible!” said the Honourable Philippa grimly.

“Don’t—don’t you think, sister,” faltered the Honourable Isabella, “that—that—Captain Glen might—might just see—just see Clotilde—for a few moments?”

“No!” said the Honourable Philippa, with quite a snap of her artificial teeth, and the Honourable Isabella seemed to shrink back into herself, quite dismayed by her sister’s almost ferocious way.

“I thank you, Miss Isabella,” said Glen, so warmly that the poor old lady’s heart began to palpitate at an unwonted rate, and she trembled and her hands were agitated, as if she would gladly have laid them in their visitor’s broad palms.—“You decline, then, to allow me to see Miss Clotilde?”

The Honourable Philippa bowed, and turned to her sister to see if she made as dignified a response to his appeal; but to her horror she saw her sister shaking her head violently as Glen now appealed to her in turn.

“Then, madam,” cried Glen angrily, “I give you fair warning that I shall spare no pains to gain an interview with your niece, for I do not, I will not believe that this is honest. It cannot be, and I am certain that the poor girl has been forced into this engagement. Ladies, I will say no more, for I fear that if I do I shall lose my temper. Miss Dymcox, good-morning. Miss Isabella, I thank you for your show of sympathy; good-bye.”

He felt that there could be no excuse for a longer stay, and strode angrily from the room; but he had hardly reached the foot of the stairs before he became aware of the fact that Marie was coming out of the schoolroom, where Ruth was now alone and a witness of what passed.

“Thank goodness!” exclaimed Glen joyously, as he sprang forward and caught both Marie’s hands in his, making her flush and tremble with the warmth of his greeting. “Tell me, dear Marie, the meaning of all this dreadful news.”

She did not speak, but, giving herself up to the joy of the situation, she let her hands rest in his and gazed wistfully in his face, while Ruth sat in her place in the schoolroom and trembled, she knew not why.

“You do not speak,” said Glen. “Tell me, for heaven’s sake tell me, that this is all in opposition to your sister’s wishes.”

Marie still gazed wistfully in his face, and her hands, in spite of herself, returned the warm pressure of his.

“Surely—oh no; I will not believe it!” cried Glen. “It cannot be so. Marie, dear Marie, pray have compassion on me and tell me the truth.”

“Do—you wish me to tell you?” she said in a low voice that trembled with suppressed emotion.

“Yes, everything. If you have any feeling for me, tell me honestly all.”

Marie’s hands trembled more and more, and her colour went and came as she spoke.

“I will tell you what you wish, Captain Glen,” she said, in her low rich tones; “but do not blame me if it gives you pain.”

“I will not; only pray put an end to this terrible anxiety.”

There was a few moments’ silence, and then Glen said huskily:

"You know how Clotilde loved me, Marie?"

Marie's dark eyes gazed fully, pityingly into his, but there was a slight curl of scorn upon her upper lip as she remained silent.

"No," she said slowly, as she shook her head; "no, I do not."

"You—do not!"

Marie hesitated to plant so sharp a sting in his heart, but, still, she panted to speak—to tell him that he had wasted his honest love upon one who did not value it, in the hope that he might turn to her; but at the same time she feared to overstep the mark, and her compunction to hurt the man she loved came and went.

"Why do you not tell me what you mean?" he said, pressing one of her hands so that he caused her intense pain.

"Because I shrink from telling you that Clotilde never cared for you in the least," she said bitterly.

"How dare you say that?" he cried.

"If she had loved you, Captain Glen, would she have accepted Mr Elbraham for the sake of his wealth?"

He would have dropped her hand, but she held fast, full of passionate grief for him as she saw how deadly pale he had turned, and had they been in a less public place she would have clung to him, and told him how her heart bled for his pain.

"You are her sister, and could not say that which was false," he said simply. "Tell me, then, is this all true?"

"Do you doubt me?" she asked, looking full in his eyes.

He held her hands, and looked down in the dark, handsome face that gazed so unflinchingly in his.

"No," he said softly, "no;" and raising one of her hands to his lips, he kissed it, and then turned and left the place.

Marie's reverie, as she stood there holding one soft hand pressed over the back of the other, where Marcus Glen's lips had been, was interrupted by the voice of Clotilde.

"Rie: has he gone?"

"Yes," said her sister, with a look of disgust, almost loathing, in her face.

"Poor boy! I hope he won't mind much. I say, Rie, you can have him now. I'll make you a present of his love. No, I won't," she said, flashing into life. "You shan't look at him. If you do, I'll tell him such things about you as shall drive him away."

The sisters stood there upon the stairs gazing angrily one at the other, and Ruth, whose heart felt very sore, watched them in turn, and thought how hard all this was for Captain Glen, and also, with a sigh, how weak he must be.

"But they are both so handsome," she said to herself half aloud; and then, with a kind of shiver, she began to think about Mr Montaigne.

Volume Two—Chapter Eleven.

Lady Littletown's Diplomacy.

Mr Elbraham had not been long making up his mind to eschew shilly-shallying, and to propose at once. He was a clever man of business, and no one knew better than he how to work a few shares upon the Stock Exchange, and float a company so as to pour thousands into the laps of its promoters; but he had a weak side, and his late action was taken a good deal on account of the opposition he met with from his private secretary.

"Going to dine with 'the maids of honour' at Hampton Court!" said this latter gentleman, looking up in astonishment as his principal announced his intention; "why, you grumbled at having to go to Lady Littletown's the other day, and she does give good dinners."

"Capital," said the financier, smacking his lips.

"But you won't get anything fit to eat at the Palace."

"My object is to get into better society," said the financier promptly; "and the Dymcoxes are people of position. Of course, you know I met them there."

"Ah, to be sure; so you did. Well, they certainly belong to a good family."

"Yes," said Mr Elbraham, strutting pompously up and down the room. "Lovely girl that Miss Clotilde!"

"Well, I don't know," said Arthur Litton; "she is handsome, certainly."

"Humph! I should think she is, sir."

"But I've seen many finer women," continued Litton. "Not my style of girl at all."

"Should think not, indeed," said Elbraham hotly. "Bah, sir! stuff, sir! rubbish, sir! What do you know about handsome women?"

"Well, certainly," said Litton humbly, and with a smile, as the financier walked away from him down the room—a smile which was replaced by a look as serious as that of the proverbial judge, when the great man turned; "I suppose my opinion is not worth much."

"I should think not, indeed. I tell you she is magnificent."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear sir," said Litton warmly; "handsome if you like, but magnificent—no! You know dozens of finer women."

"Maybe, maybe," said the financier.

Litton paused for a few moments, tapping his teeth as if undecided, till his chief paused and looked at him curiously.

"Well, what is it?" he said.

"Look here, Mr Elbraham," said Litton, "I suppose we are not very good friends?"

"H'm, I don't know. You are in my pay," said the financier coarsely, "so you ought to be one of my best friends."

"You've said too many sharp things to me, Mr Elbraham, to make me feel warmly towards you; but, all the same, I confess that you have done me some very good turns in money matters; and I hope, though I take your pay, that I am too much of a gentleman to stand by and see anyone take a mean advantage of a weakness on your part."

"Weakness? My part!" said the financier fiercely, as if the very idea of his being weak was absurd.

"Yes, sir, weakness. Look here, Mr Elbraham, I should not like to see you taken in."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Mean?" said Litton. "Well, Mr Elbraham, I'm not afraid of you; so whether you are offended or not, I shall speak out."

"Then speak out, sir, and don't shilly-shally."

"Well, sir, it seems to me that there's a good deal of fortune-hunting about. Those Dymcox people have good blood, certainly; but they're as poor as rats, and I'll be bound to say nothing would please the old aunts better than hooking you, with one of those girls for a bait."

"Will you have the goodness to reply to that batch of letters, Mr Litton?" said Elbraham haughtily. "I asked your opinion—or, rather, gave you my opinion—of Miss Clotilde Dymcox, and you favour me with a pack of impertinent insinuations regarding the family at Hampton Court." Mr Elbraham went angrily out into the hall to don his light and tight overcoat and grey hat, and walk down to the station.

As Litton heard the door close he sank back in his chair at the writing-table, and laughed silently and heartily.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he ejaculated; "and this is your clever financier—this is your man far above the ordinary race in shrewdness! Why am I not wealthy, too, when I can turn the scoundrel round my finger, clever as he believes he is? Clever, talented, great! Why, if I metaphorically pull his tail like one would that of a pig, saying, 'You shan't go that way!' he grunts savagely, and makes straight for the hole."

Arthur Litton took one of Mr Elbraham's choice cigars from his case, deliberately pitched aside the letters he had to answer, struck a light, placed his heels upon the table, and, balancing his chair upon two legs, began to smoke.

"Well, so far so good," he said at last, as he watched the aromatic rings of smoke ascend towards the ceiling. "I suppose it is so. Mr Elbraham is one of the cleverest men on 'Change, and he manages the money-making world. I can manage Mr Elbraham. *Ergo*, I am a cleverer man than the great financier; but he makes his thousands where I make shillings and pence. Why is this?"

The answer was all smoke; and satisfactory as that aromatic, sedative vapour was in the mouth, it was lighter than the air upon which it rose, and Arthur Litton continued his soliloquising.

"I'm afraid that I shall never make any money upon 'Change, or by bolstering up bad companies, and robbing the widow, the orphan, the retired officer, and the poor parson of their savings. It is not my way. I should have no compunction if they were fools enough to throw me their money. I should take it and spend it, as Elbraham and a score more such scoundrels spend theirs. What does it matter? What is the difference to him between having a few hundred pounds more or less in this world? They talk about starvation when their incomes are more than mine. They say they are beggared when they have hundreds left. Genteel poverty is one of the greatest shams under the sun."

"Not a bad cigar," he said, after a fresh pause. "He has that virtue in him, certainly, he does get good cigars; and money! money! money! how he does get money—a scoundrel!—while I get none, or next to none. Well, well, I think I am pulling the strings in a way that should satisfy the most exacting of Lady Littletowns, and it is ridiculous how the scoundrel of a puppet dances to the tune I play."

He laughed in a way that would have made his fortune had he played Mephistopheles upon the stage. Then, carefully removing a good inch and a half of ash:

"And now, my sweet old match-maker," he continued, "will you keep your promise? I am a poor unlucky devil, and the only way to save me is by settling me with a rich wife such as she promises.

"Hum, yes!" he said softly, "a wife with a good fortune. Elbraham takes one without a penny, for the sake of her looks; the aunts sell the girl for the sake of his money. A cheerful marriage, and," he added cynically, "as the French say, *après*?"

"Take my case, as I am in a humour for philosophising. I am to be introduced to a rich lady, and shall marry her for the sake of the fortune. She will marry me for my youth, I suppose, and good looks—I suppose I may say good looks," he continued, rising, crossing the room, and gazing in the glass. "Yes, Arthur, you may add good looks, for you are a gentlemanly fellow, and just of an age to attract a woman who is decidedly off colour."

He paused, rested his elbows upon the chimney-piece, and kept on puffing little clouds of smoke against the mirror, watching them curiously as they obliterated his reflection for the moment, and then rolled slowly up, singularly close to the glass.

He did this again and again, watching his dimly-seen reflection till it had grown plain, and then he laughed as if amused.

"Yes, I am decidedly good-looking, and I say it without vanity," he continued, "for I am looking at myself from a marketable point of view. And the lady? Suppose I always look at her through the clouds, for she will be elderly and plain—of that I may rest assured; but I can gild her; she will be gilded for me, and as the Scots say, 'a' cats are grey i' the dark!' so why should I mind? If I wed the fairest woman under the sun I should forget her looks in a week, while other men worried me by their admiration. So there it is, ladies and gentlemen; the fair Clotilde and the manly Arthur Litton about to be sold by Society's prize-auction to the highest bidders, and this is the land where slavery is unknown—the land of the free! This, ladies and gentlemen, is Christian England!"

He seemed to be highly amused at this idea, and laughed and gazed at himself in the glass as if perfectly satisfied that his face would make a change in his lot, after which he threw away the remains of the cigar he was smoking, and taking a bunch of keys from his pocket, he walked across to Elbraham's cabinet, which he unlocked, and helped himself to a couple of the best Rothschilds, one of which he lit.

Arthur Litton was very thoughtful now, and it took some time to get to work; but he finished the task entrusted to him, and then, after a little consideration, he rose to go, making his way to Lady Littletown's.

Her ladyship was at home, in the conservatory, the footman said; and treating the visitor as an old friend, he opened the drawing-room door, and Litton walked in unannounced.

Her ladyship was busy, in a pair of white kid gloves, snipping off faded leaves and flowers, and she left her occupation to greet her visitor.

"Well, Arturo, no bad news, I hope?"

"Only that the great Potiphar, the man of money, is completely hooked, and determined to embark upon the troubled sea of matrimony."

"Is that bad news?" said her ladyship. "I call it a triumph of diplomacy, Arturo. Spoils from the enemy!"

"Then you are satisfied?"

"More than satisfied, my clever diplomat, and you shall have your reward."

"When?"

Lady Littletown snipped here and snipped there, treating some of her choicest flowers in a way that would have maddened her head gardener had he seen, for unfaded flowers dropped here and there beneath the stands in a way that showed her ladyship to be highly excited.

"Now look here, Arturo," she exclaimed at last, as she turned upon him, and seemed to menace him with her sharp-pointed scissors, which poked and snipped at him till a bystander might have imagined that Lady Littletown took him for a flower whose head gave her offence—"Now look here, Arturo, do you want to make me angry?"

"No: indeed no," he cried deprecatingly.

"Then why do you ask me such a question as that?"

"Well," he said, smiling, "is it not reasonable that I should feel impatient?"

"Perhaps so. I'll grant it; but, my good boy, you must be a man of the world; and now that we are upon that subject, let us understand one another."

"By all means," assented Litton eagerly.

"First of all, though, I cannot worry myself with too much work at once. I have those two girls to marry, and I must get that out of hand before I undertake more."

"Exactly; and all is now in train."

"Many a slip, Arturo, 'twixt cup and lip; but we shall see—we shall see."

Her ladyship went on snipping vigorously.

"I want you to understand me. To speak plainly, Arturo, you are a gentleman of great polish."

"Thanks," he said, bowing.

"And a good presence."

He bowed again.

"You are not quite handsome, but there is an aristocratic, well-bred look about you that would recommend you to any lady—and I mean you to marry a lady."

"Yes, by all means. Pray don't find me a young person who might pass for a relative of the great Elbraham."

"My good boy, there is no such party in the field; and if there were, I should not allow you to try and turn up that haughty aristocratic nose at her. A hundred thousand pounds, dear Arturo, would gild over a great many blemishes."

"True, O queen!" he said, smiling.

"As I said before, let us understand one another. You must not be too particular. Suppose the lady chances to be old?"

Litton made a grimace.

"And rich—very rich?"

"That would make amends," he said with a smile.

"I could marry you myself, Arturo," she continued, looking very much attenuated and hawk-like as she smiled at him in a laughing way.

"Why not?" he cried eagerly, as the richly-furnished home and income opened out to his mind ease and comfort for life.

"Because I am too old," she said, smiling at the young man's impetuosity.

"Oh, no," he cried; "you would be priceless in my eyes."

"Hold your tongue, Arturo, and don't be a baby," said her ladyship. "I tell you I am too old to be foolish enough to marry. There are plenty of older women who inveigh against matrimony, and profess to have grown too sensible and too wise to embark in it, who would give their ears to win a husband."

"Why should not Lady Littletown be placed in this list?" said Litton meaningly.

"Because I tell you she is too old in a worldly way. No, my dear boy, when an elderly woman marries, it is generally because she is infatuated with the idea of possessing a young husband. She thinks for the moment that he woos her for her worldly store; but she is so flattered by his attentions that these outweigh all else, and she jumps at the opportunity of changing her state."

"Again, then," he whispered impressively, "why should not this apply to Lady Littletown?"

"Silence, foolish boy!" she cried, menacing him again with the scissors, and holding up her flower-basket as if to catch the snipped-off head. "I tell you I am too old in a worldly way, When a matter-of-fact woman reaches my years, and knows that she has gradually been lessening her capital in the bank of life, she tries to get as much as possible in the way of enjoyment out of what is left."

"Exactly," he cried eagerly.

"She takes matters coolly and weighs them fairly before her. 'If,' she says, 'I take the contents of this scale I shall get so much pleasure. If I choose the contents of this other scale, I shall again obtain so much.'"

"Well, what then?" said Litton, for her ladyship paused in the act of decapitating a magnificent Japan lily.

"What then? Foolish boy! Why, of course she chooses the scale that will give her most pleasure."

"Naturally," he said.

"Then that is what I do."

"But would not life with a man who would idolise you be far beyond any other worldly pleasure?"

"Yes," said her ladyship drily; "but give me credit, *mio caro* Arturo, for not being such an old idiot as to believe that you would idolise me, as you call it."

"Ah, you don't know," he cried.

"What you would be guilty of to obtain a good settlement in life, my dear boy?"

"You insult me," he cried angrily.

"Oh no, my impetuous young friend; but really, Arturo, that was well done. Capital! It would be winning with some ladies. Rest assured that you shall have a rich wife. As for me, I have had you in the scale twice over. I did once think of marrying you."

"You did?" he cried with real surprise.

"To be sure I did," she said quietly. "Why not? I said to myself, 'I am careless of the opinion of the world, and shall do as I please;' and I pictured out my home with you, a *distingué* man, at the head."

"You did?" he said excitedly.

"Of course I did. And then I pictured it as it is, with Lady Littletown, a power in her way, a well-known character in society, whose word has its influence, and one who can sway the destinies of many, in many ways, in the world."

"No; say in one," he exclaimed rather bitterly—"in the matrimonial world."

"As you will, *cher* Arthur," replied her ladyship. "You see, I am frank with you. I weighed it all carefully, as I said, and weighed it once again, to be sure that I was making no mistake, and the result was dead against change."

"Highly complimentary to me!"

"A very excellent thing for you, my dear boy; for you would have led a wretched life."

"Assuming that your ladyship's charms had conquered my youthful, ardent heart?" he said.

"Silly boy! you are trying to be sarcastic," said Lady Littletown. "Pish! I am too thick-skinned to mind it in the least. Be reasonable and listen, dear brother-in-arms."

"Why not lover-in-arms?" he cried quickly—"in those arms."

Lady Littletown placed her scissors in the hand that held the basket, raised her square gold eyeglass, and looked at her visitor.

"Well done, Arturo! excellent, *mon général*! Why, you would carry the stoutest fort I set you to attack in a few days. I have not heard anything so clever as that apt remark of yours for months. Really," she continued, dropping the glass and resuming her scissors, "I am growing quite proud of you—I am indeed."

"And so you mock at me," he said angrily.

"Not I, Arturo; you were only practising; and it was very smart. No, my dear, it would not do for you; and I tell you frankly, you have had a very narrow escape."

"Why?" he said; and his eyes glanced round at the rich place with its many indications of wealth, and as he noted these there came to his memory his last unpaid bill.

"Because I have a horrible temper, and I am a terrible tyrant. Of course you would have married me for my money and position."

"Don't say that," cried Litton.

"Don't be a donkey, Arthur, *mon cher*," said the lady. "Well, to proceed: I should have married you because you were young and handsome."

"Your ladyship seemed to indicate just now that I was not handsome," said Litton.

"Did I? Well, I retract. I do think you handsome, Arturo, and I should have been horribly jealous of you as soon as I found that you were paying your court elsewhere."

"Does your ladyship still imagine that I could be such a scoundrel?" cried Litton, in indignant tones.

The square golden eyeglass went up again.

"Excellent, Arturo, my dear boy! You would have made a fortune upon the stage in tragi-comedy. Nothing could have been finer than that declaration. Really, I am proud of you! But I should have led you a horrible life, and been ready to poison you if I found you out in deception."

"Lady Littletown, I hope I am a gentleman," said the visitor haughtily.

"I hope you are, I'm sure, my dear boy," said her ladyship, smiling at him serenely. "But, as you see, I could not have put up with my money being lavished upon others; and hence I thought it better to let someone else have you."

"But, my dear Lady Littletown—"

"Ah, tut, tut, tut! no rhapsodies, please, my sweet ingenuous Lubin. I am no Phyllis now, believe me, and all this is waste of words. There, be patient, my dear boy, and you shall have a rich wife, and she shall be as young as I can manage; but, mind, I do not promise beauty. Do you hear? Are the raptures at an end?"

"Oh yes, if you like," he said bitterly.

"I do like, my dear boy; so they are at an end. Really, Arturo, I feel quite motherly towards you, and, believe me, I shall not rest until I see you well mated."

"Thanks, my dear Lady Littletown," he said; "and with that, I suppose, I am to be contented."

"Yes, sir; and you ought to be very thankful, Do you hear?"

"Yes," he replied, taking and kissing one of her ladyship's gardening gloves. "And now I must be for saying *au revoir*."

"*Au revoir, cher garçon*!" replied her ladyship; and she followed her visitor out of the conservatory into the drawing-room, and rang the bell for the servant in attendance to show him out.

"It wouldn't have been a bad slice of luck to have married her and had this place. But, good heavens, what an old hag!"

"I should have been an idiot to marry him," said her ladyship, as soon as she was alone. "He is very handsome and gentlemanly and nice; but he would have ruined me, I am sure of that. Ah well, the sooner I find him someone else with a good income the better. Let him squander that. Why—"

She stopped short.

"How stupid of me! The very thing! Lady Anna Maria Morton has just come in for her brother's estate."

Lady Littletown stood thinking.

"She is fifty if she is a day, perhaps fifty-five, and as tremulous as Isabella Dymcox. But what of that? Dear Anna Maria! I have not called upon her for a fortnight. How wrong! I shall be obliged to have a little *partie carrée* to dinner. Let me see—Lady Anna Maria, Arthur, myself, and—dear, dear—dear, dear me! Who shall I have that is not stupid enough to spoil sport?"

She walked about in a fidgety manner, and then picked up her card-basket, raised the square gold eyeglass, and turned the cards over in an impatient manner.

"Not one—not one!" she cried reluctantly. "Never mind; she shall come to a *tête-à-tête* dinner, and Arthur shall drop in by accident, and stop. Dear boy, how I do toil and slave on his behalf! But stay," she added, after a pause; "shall I wait and get the Dymcox business over first? No; what matters? I am diplomat enough to carry on both at once; and, by-the-bye, I must not let that little military boy slip through my fingers, for he really is a prize. Taken with Marie; but that won't do," she continued. "Moorpark must have her, and I dare say somebody will turn up."

She took her seat at the table then, and began to write a tiny note upon delicately-scented paper. The first words after the date were: "My dearest Anna Maria," and she ended with: "Your very affectionate friend."

Volume Two—Chapter Twelve.

A Matter-of-Fact Match.

Dick Millet received a note in his uncle's crabbed hand one morning at Hampton Court, obtained leave, and hurried up to town, calling at Grosvenor Square to hear the last news about Gertrude, but finding none.

On arriving at Wimpole Street, Vidler opened the door to the visitor, and smiled as he did so in rather a peculiar way.

"Can I speak to my uncle?" said Dick importantly. And he was shown up into the drawing-room, which seemed more gloomy now, lit as it was by four wax-candles, which were lost, as it were, in a great mist of old-time air, that had been shut up in that room till it had grown into a faded and yellow atmosphere carefully preserved from the bleaching properties of the sun.

The little opening was to his right, with the white hand visible on the ledge; but Dick hardly saw it, for, as he entered, Gertrude ran to his arms, to fall sobbing on his neck, while John Huish came forward offering his hand.

"Then it was you, John Huish, after all?" Dick exclaimed angrily, as he placed his own hand behind his back.

"Yes, it was I. What else could I do, forbidden as I was to come to the house? Come, my dear Dick, don't be hard upon me now."

"But," exclaimed Dick in a puzzled way, "how was all this managed?"

"Shall we let that rest?" said Huish, smiling. "Neither Gertrude nor I are very proud of our subterfuges. But come, we are brothers now. We can count upon you, can we not, to make friends with her ladyship."

"I—don't know," said Dick quietly, for his mind was busy with the thoughts of the awkward reports he had heard concerning Huish and his position at various clubs, and he asked himself whether he should be the friend and advocate of a man who was declared to be little better than a blackleg.

"Surely I can count upon you," said Huish, after a pause.

“Suppose we step down into the dining-room,” said Dick stiffly; but he gave his sister an encouraging smile as she caught his hand.

“Dick,” she whispered, “what does this mean?”

“Only a little clearing up between John Huish and me, dear,” he said. “After that, I dare say I shall be able to tell you I’m glad you’re his wife.”

Gertrude smiled, and Huish followed down to the dining-room, which, lit by one candle, looked like a vault. Arrived here, though, Dick turned sharply upon his brother-in-law.

“Now, look here, John Huish,” he said, “I won’t quarrel about the past and this clandestine match, for perhaps, if I had been situated as you were, I should have done the same; but there is something I want cleared up.”

“Let us clear it up at once then,” said Huish, smiling. “What is it?”

“Well, there are some sinister reports about you—you see, I speak plainly.”

“Yes, of course. Go on.”

“Well, they say commonly that you have been playing out of the square at the clubs; that you’ve been expelled from two, and that your conduct has been little better than that of a blackleg. John Huish, as a gentleman and my brother-in-law, how much of this is true? Stop a moment,” he added hastily. “I know, old man, what it is myself to be pinched for money, and how a fellow might be tempted to do anything shady to get some together to keep up appearances. If there has been anything queer it must be forgiven; but you must give me your word as a man that for the future all shall be right.”

“My dear Dick,” cried Huish, “I give you my word that all in the future shall be square, as you term it; and I tell you this, that if any man had spoken such falsehoods about my wife’s brother, I should have knocked him down. There isn’t a word of truth in these reports, though I must confess they have worried me a great deal. Now, will you shake hands?”

“That I will,” cried Dick eagerly; “and I tell you now that I am glad that you have thrown dust in our eyes as you have. I always liked you, Huish, and you were about the only man from whom I never liked to borrow money.”

“Why?” said Huish, smiling.

“Because I was afraid of losing a friend. Come up now, for Gertrude will be in a fidget to know what we have been saying.—Gertrude, my dear,” he said as they re-entered the drawing-room, “it’s all right.”

An hour later Dick parted from the young couple at the little house they had taken in Westbourne Road, and cabbed back, to send her ladyship into a fainting fit by the announcement that his sister and her husband had been at his uncle’s.

“For,” said Lady Millet, “I can never forgive Gertrude; and as to that dreadful man Huish, in marrying him she has disgraced herself beyond the power to redeem her lot. Ah me! and these are the children I have nurtured in my bosom.”

It was rather hard work for Dick Millet, with his own love affairs in a state of “check,” with no probability of “mate,” but he felt that he must act; and in his newly assumed character of head of the family he determined to go and try to smooth matters over at Chesham Place, and took a hansom to see Frank Morrison, who was now back at his own house, but alone, and who surlily pointed to a chair as he sat back pale and nervous of aspect, wrapped in a dressing-gown.

“Look here, Frank,” said Dick, sitting down, and helping himself to a cigar, “we’re brothers-in-law, and I’m not going to quarrel. I’ve come for the other thing.”

“My cigars, seemingly,” said the other.

“Yes; they’re not bad. But look here, old fellow, light up; I want to talk to you.”

“If you want to borrow twenty pounds, say so, and I’ll draw you a cheque.”

“Hang your cheque! I didn’t come to borrow money. Light up.”

Morrison snatched up a cigar, bit off the end, and lit it, threw himself back in his chair, and began to smoke quickly.

“Go on,” he said. “What is it?”

“Wait a minute or two,” said Dick. “Smoke five minutes first.”

Morrison muttered something unpleasant, but went on smoking, and at last Dick, who was sitting with his little legs dangling over the side of the chair, began.

“Fact is,” he said, “I’m going to speak out. I shan’t quarrel, and I’m such a little chap that you can’t hit me.”

“No; but I could throw you downstairs,” said Morrison, who was half amused, half annoyed by his visitor’s coming, though in his heart of hearts he longed to hear news of Renée.

"I saw my uncle yesterday."

"Indeed! Poor old lunatic! What had he got to say?"

"Ah, there you are wrong!" said Dick sharply. "He said something which you will own proved that he was no lunatic."

"What was it?" said Morrison coldly.

"That you were a confounded scoundrel."

Frank Morrison jumped up in his chair, scowling angrily; but he threw himself back again with a contemptuous "Pish!"

"Proves it, don't it?"

"Look here," cried Morrison angrily, "I've had about enough of your family, so please finish your cigar and go."

"Shan't. There, it's no use to twist about. I've come on purpose to sit upon you."

"Look here," cried Morrison sternly, "has your sister sent you?"

"No. I've come of my own free will, as I tell you, to show you what a fool you are, and to try and bring you to your senses."

"You are very ready at calling people fools," said Morrison, biting his nails.

"Well, don't you deserve to be called one for acting as you have acted? What did you do? Went mad after a woman who didn't care a *sou* for you; neglected a dear, good girl who did care for you, and exposed her to the persecutions of a scoundrel who has no more principle than that."

He snapped his fingers, and, instead of firing up with rage, Morrison turned his face away and smoked furiously.

"Now, isn't that all true, Frank? Here, give me a light."

Morrison lit a spill, passed it to his brother-in-law, and sank back in his chair.

"I say," continued Dick, as he lit his cigar again, "isn't it (*puff*) quite (*puff*) true?"

"I suppose so," said the other listlessly. "She never cared for me, though, Dick. That scoundrel and she were old flames."

"First, a lie; second, true," said Dick quietly. "Renée is as good as gold; and when she found she was to be your wife, she accepted the inevitable and tried to do her duty, poor girl! She was already finding out what a bad one Malpas was."

"Curse him! don't mention his name here!" cried Morrison savagely.

"I say she was already finding out what a cursed scoundrel Malpas was when she married you."

"She encouraged his visits afterwards," cried Morrison fiercely. "The villain owned it to me."

"And you didn't thrust your fist down his throat?"

Morrison got up and paced the room.

"Look here, Frank, old fellow: you are beginning to find out what a donkey you have been. You are easy-going, and it's no hard job to lead you away. Now tell me this: didn't Malpas introduce you to a certain lady?"

"Yes," was the sulky reply.

"Of course," said Dick. "He takes you and moulds you like putty, introduces you to people so as to make your wife jealous, out of revenge for your supplanting him, and then tries to supplant you in turn."

"Dick Millet," cried Morrison, "you mean well, but I can't bear this. Either be silent or go. If I think of the scene on that dreadful night when I was sent home by a note written by that scoundrel of a brother-in-law of yours—"

"Meaning yourself?" said Dick coolly.

"I mean that double-faced, double-lived, double-dyed traitor, John Huish."

"What!"

"The man who has fleeced me more than Malpas—curse him!—ever did."

"Gently! I won't sit and hear John Huish maligned like that."

"Maligned!" cried Morrison, with a bitter laugh.

"As if anyone could say anything bad enough of the scoundrel!"

"Look here, Frank," said Dick rather warmly, "I came here to try and do you a good turn, not to hear John Huish

backbitten. He’s a good, true-hearted fellow, who has been slandered up and down, and he don’t deserve it.”

Morrison sat up, stared at him in wonder, and then burst into a scornful laugh.

“Dick Millet,” he exclaimed, “you called me a fool a little while ago. I won’t call you so, only ask you whether you don’t think you are one.”

“I dare say I am,” said Dick sharply. “But look here, are you prepared to prove all this about John Huish?”

“Every bit of it, and ten times as much,” said Morrison. “Why, this scoundrel won or cheated me of the money that paid for his wedding trip. He was with me till the last instant. Yes, and, as well as I can recollect, after he had got your sister away.”

Dick’s cigar went out, and his forehead began to pucker up.

“Look here,” he said: “you told me that he sent you the note that made you go home that night. Where were you?”

“At a supper with some actresses.”

“But John Huish was not there!”

“Not there. Why, he was present with the lady who was his companion up to the time that he honoured your sister with his name. I believe he visits her now.”

“I can’t stand this,” cried Dick, throwing away his cigar. “How a fellow who calls himself a man can play double in this way gets over me. Frank Morrison, if I did as much I should feel as if I had ‘liar’ written on my face, ready for my wife to see. It’s too much to believe about John Huish. I can’t—I won’t have it. Why, it would break poor little Gerty’s heart.”

“Break her heart!” said Morrison bitterly. “Perhaps she would take a leaf out of her sister’s book.”

“Confound you, Frank Morrison!” cried Dick, in a rage, as he jumped up and faced his brother-in-law. “I won’t stand it. My two sisters are as pure as angels. Do you dare to tell me to my face that you believe Renée guilty?”

There was a dead silence in the room, and at last Frank Morrison spoke.

“Dick,” he said, and his voice shook, “you are a good fellow. You are right: I am a fool and a scoundrel.”

“Yes,” cried Dick; “but do you dare to tell me you believe that of Renée?”

“I’d give half my life to know that she was innocent,” groaned Morrison.

“You are a fool, then,” cried Dick, “or you’d know it. There, I didn’t come to quarrel, but to try and make you both happy; and now matters are ten times worse. But I won’t believe this about John.”

“It’s true enough,” said Morrison sadly. “Poor little lass! I liked Gertrude. You should not have let that scoundrel have her.”

“We have a weakness for letting our family marry scoundrels.”

“Yes,” said Morrison, speaking without the slightest resentment; “she had better have had poor Lord Henry Moorpark.”

“Oh!” said Dick. “There, I’m going. ’Day.”

He moved towards the door, but Morrison stopped him.

“Dick,” he said; “did Renée know you were coming?”

“No,” was the curt reply.

“Is she—is she still at your uncle’s?”

“Yes, nearly always.”

“Is she—is she well?”

“No. She is ill. Heartsick and broken; and if what you say is true, she will soon have poor Gerty to keep her company.”

Dick Millet hurried away from his brother-in-law’s house, pondering upon his own love matters, and telling himself that he had more to think of than he could bear.

In happy ignorance of her ladyship’s prostrate state, John Huish, soon after his brother-in-law’s departure, hurried off to pay a hasty visit to his club, where he asked to see the secretary, and was informed that that gentleman was out. He threw himself into a cab, looking rather white and set of countenance as he had himself driven to Finsbury Square, where Daniel looked at him curiously as he ushered him into the doctor’s room.

“My dear, dear boy, I am glad!” cried the doctor, dashing down his glasses. “You did the old lady, after all, and carried the little darling off. Bless her heart! Why, the gipsy! Oh, won’t I talk to her about this. That’s the best thing

I've known for years. What does your father say?"

"He wrote me word that he was very glad, and said he should write to Gertrude's uncle."

"Ah, yes. H'm!" said the doctor. "Best thing, too. They were once very great friends, John."

"Yes, I have heard so," said Huish. "I think Captain Millet loved my mother."

"H'm, yes," said the doctor, nodding. "They quarrelled. Well, but this is a surprise! You dog, you! But the secrecy of the whole thing! How snug you kept it! But, I say, you ought to have written to us all."

"Well, certainly, I might have written to you, doctor, but I confess I forgot."

"I say, though, you should have written to the old man."

"We did, letter after letter."

"Then that old—there, I won't say what, must have suppressed them. She was mad because her favourite lost. It would have been murder to have tied her up to that wreck. I say, though, my boy," continued the doctor seriously, "I don't think you ought to have carried on so with Frank Morrison. He has had D.T. terribly."

"What had that to do with me?" said Huish. "If a man will drink, he must take the consequences."

"Exactly," said the doctor coldly; "but his friends need not egg him on so as to win his money."

"He should not choose scoundrels for his companions," said Huish coldly.

"H'm, no, of course not," said the doctor, coughing, and hurrying to change the conversation. "By the way, why didn't you tell me all this when you came last?"

"How could I?" said Huish, smiling. "I was not a prophet."

"Prophet, no! but why keep it secret then?"

"Secret? Well," said Huish; "but really—I was not justified in telling it then."

"What I not when you had been married?"

"I don't understand you," said Huish, with his countenance changing.

"I mean," said the doctor, "why didn't you tell me when you were here a fortnight ago; and—let me see," he continued, referring to his note-book, "you were due here last Wednesday, and again yesterday."

John Huish drew a long breath, and the pupils of his eyes contracted as he said quietly:

"Why, doctor, I told you that I had been on the Continent, and only returned two days ago."

"Yes; of course. We know—fashionable fibs: Out of town; not at home, etcetera, etcetera."

"My dear doctor," said Huish, fidgeting slightly in his seat, "I have always made it a practice to try and be honest in my statements. I tell you I only came back two days ago."

"That be hanged, John Huish!" cried the doctor. "Why, you were here a fortnight ago yesterday."

"Nonsense," cried Huish excitedly. "How absurd!"

"Absurd? Hang it, boy! do you think I'm mad? Here is the entry," he continued, reading. "Seventh, John Huish, Nervous fit—over-excitement—old bite of dog—bad dreams—dread of hydrophobia. Prescribed, um—um—um—etcetera, etcetera. Now then, what do you say to that?"

"You were dreaming," said Huish.

"Dreaming?" said the doctor, laughing. "What! that you—here, stop a moment." He rang the bell. "Ask Daniel yourself when you were here last."

"What nonsense!" said Huish, growing agitated. Then as the door opened, "Daniel," he said quietly, "when was I here last?"

"Yesterday fortnight, sir," said the man promptly.

"That will do, Daniel!" and the attendant retired as Huish sank back in his chair, gazing straight before him in a strange, vacant manner. "What a fool I am!" muttered the doctor. "I've led him on to it again. Hang it! shall I never understand my profession?"

"I'll go now," said Huish drearily, as he rose; but Dr Stonor pressed him back in his seat.

"No, no; sit still a few minutes," he said quietly.

"I—I thought it was gone," said Huish; "and life seemed so bright and happy on ahead. Doctor, I've never confessed, even to you, what I have suffered from all this. I have felt horrible at times. The devil has tempted me to do the most

dreadful things."

"Poor devil!" said the doctor. "What a broad back he must have to bear all that the silly world lays upon it!"

"You laugh. Tell me, what does it mean? How is it? Do I do things in my sleep, or when I am waking, and then do they pass completely away from my memory? Tell me truly, and let me know the worst. Am I going to lose my reason?"

"No, no, no!" cried the doctor. "Absurd! It is a want of tone in the nerves—a little absence of mind. The liver is sluggish, and from its stoppage the brain gets affected."

"Yes; that is what I feared," cried Huish excitedly.

"Not as you mean, my dear boy," cried the doctor. "When we say the brain is affected, we don't always mean madness. What nonsense! The brain is affected when there are bad headaches—a little congestion, you know. These fits of absence are nothing more."

"Nothing more, doctor?" said Huish dejectedly. "If I could only think so! Oh, my darling! my darling," he whispered to himself, as his head came down upon his hands for a moment when he started up, for Dr Stonor's hand was upon his arm. "Oh, doctor!" he cried in anguished tones, "I am haunted by these acts which I do and forget. I am constantly confronted with something or another that I cannot comprehend, and the dread is always growing on me that I shall some day be a wreck. Oh, I have been mad to link that poor girl's life to such a life as mine! Doctor—doctor—tell me—what shall I do?"

"Be a man," said the doctor quietly, "and don't worry yourself by imagining more than is real. You are a deal better than when I saw you last. You have not worried yourself more about the bite?"

"No, I have hardly thought of it. Dog-bite? But tell me, doctor, would the virus from a dog-bite have any effect upon a man's mental organisation?"

"Oh no, my dear boy; but you are better in health."

"I felt so well and happy to-day," he cried, "that all seemed sunshine. Now all is cloud."

"Of course; yes!" said the doctor. "That shows you how much the imagination has to do with the mental state. The greater part of my patients are ill from anxiety. Now, look here, my dear John, the first thing you have to bear in mind is that every man is a screw. There may be much or little wrong, and it may vary from a tiny discoloration from rust, up to a completely worn-out worm or a broken head. Your little ailment is distressing; but so is every disorder. Keep yourself in good health, take matters coolly, and in place of getting worse you may get better, perhaps lose the absence of mind altogether. If you do not—bear it like a man. Why trouble about the inevitable? I am getting on in years now, and, my dear fellow, I know that some time or other I shall be lying upon my deathbed gasping for the last breath I shall have to draw. Now, my dear boy, do I sit down and make my life miserable because some day I have got to die? Does anybody do so except a fool, and those weakly-strung idiots who make death horrible when it is nothing but the calm rest and sleep that comes to the worn-out body? No; we accept the inevitable, enjoy life as it is given us, make the best of our troubles and pains, and thank God for everything. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, doctor, yes," said the young man sadly. "But this is very dreadful!"

"So is a bad leg," said the doctor sharply. "There, I'll speak frankly to you if you'll sit up and look me full in the face. Come, for your young wife's sake, shake off this weak nervousness, and be ready to fight. Don't lie down and ask disease to conquer you. Why, my dear boy, speaking as an old fisherman, you're as sound as a roach, and as bright as a bleak. Be a man, for your wife's sake, be a man!"

Huish drew a long breath. The doctor had touched the right chord, and he sat up, looking pale but more himself.

"Now then," said the doctor, "I speak to you fairly as one who has had some experience of such matters, but who honestly owns that he finds life too short to master a thousandth part of what he ought to know. I say, then, look here," he continued, thrusting his hands through his crisp hair, "your state puzzles me: pulse, countenance, eye, all say to me that you are quite well; but you every now and then contradict it. What I tell you, then, is this, and of it I feel sure. It lies in your power to follow either of two roads you please: You can be a healthy, vigorous man, clear of intellect, save a cloud or two now and then which you must treat as rainy days, or you can force yourself by your despondency into so low a mental state that you may become one of my patients. Now, then, which is it to be, my sturdy young married man? Answer for Gertrude's sake."

"There is only one answer," cried Huish, springing up. "For Gertrude's sake."

"That's right," cried the doctor, shaking his hand warmly. "Spoken like a man."

"But will you prescribe? Shall I take anything?"

"Bah! Stuff! Doctor's stuff," he added, laughing. "My dear boy, that dearly beloved, credulous creature, the human being, is never happy unless he is taking bottles and bottles of physic, and boxes and boxes of pills. Look at the fortunes made by it. Human nature will not believe that it can be cured without medicine, when in most cases it can. Why, my dear boy, your daily food is your medicine, your mental and bodily food. There, be off, go and enjoy the society of your dear little wife. Go and row her up the river, or drive her in the park; go in the country and pick buttercups, and run after butterflies, and eat bread-and-butter; sleep well, live well and innocently, and believe in the truest words ever written: 'Care killed the cat!' Don't let it kill you."

"No, I can't afford to let it kill me," said Huish, smiling.

"Never mind your sore finger, my boy; everybody has got a sore place, only they are divided into two classes: those who show them, and those who do not so much as wear a stall. Good-bye; God bless you, my boy! I wish I had your youth and strength, and pretty wife, and then—"

"Then what, doctor?" said Huish, smiling, and looking quite himself.

"Why, like you, you dog, I should not be satisfied. Be off; I shall come and see you soon. Where's your address? Love to my little Gertrude; and John, tell her if—eh?—by-and-by—"

"Nonsense!" cried Huish, flushing with pleasure. "I shall tell her no such thing."

"You will," said the doctor, grinning. "Oh, that's the address, eh? Westbourne Road. Good-bye."

"I don't understand him," said the doctor thoughtfully, as soon as he was alone. "He is himself to-day; last time he was almost brutal. Heaven help him, poor fellow! if—No, no; I will not think that. But he is terribly unhinged at times."

Volume Two—Chapter Thirteen.

Clotilde is Triumphant.

Palace Gardens, Kensington, was selected by Elbraham for the scene of his married life, and here he was to take the fair Clotilde upon their return from their Continental trip.

"It's all bosh, Litton, that going across to Paris; and on one's wedding day," said the great financier. "Can't we get off it?"

"Impossible, I should say," replied Litton. "You see, you are bound to make yours the most stylish of the fashionable marriages of the season."

"Oh yes, of course—that I don't mind; and I'll come out as handsome as you like for the things to do it with well; but I do kick against the run over to Paris the same day."

"And why?" said Litton wonderingly.

"Well, the fact is, my boy, I never could go across the Channel without being terribly ill. Ill! that's nothing to my feelings. I'm a regular martyr, and I feel disposed to strike against all that. Why not say the Lakes?"

"Too shabby and cockneyfied."

"Wales?"

"Worse still."

"Why not Scotland?"

"My dear sir, what man with a position to keep up would think of going there? I'll consult Lady Littletown, if you like."

"Lord, no; don't do that," said Elbraham. "She's certain to say I must go to Paris; and so sure as ever I do have to cross, the Channel is at its worst."

"But it is a very short passage, sir. You'll soon be over; and in society a man of your position is forced to study appearances."

"How the deuce can a fellow study appearances at a time like that?" growled Elbraham. "I always feel as if it would be a mercy to throw me overboard. 'Pon my soul I do."

"I'll see if I cannot fee the clerk of the weather for you, and get you a smooth passage this time," said Litton, laughing; and the matter dropped.

There were endless other little matters to settle, in all of which Litton was the bridegroom's ambassador, carrying presents, bringing back messages and notes, and in one way and another thoroughly ingratiating himself in Clotilde's favour, that young lady condescending to smile upon him when he visited Hampton Court.

The Palace Gardens house was rapidly prepared, and, thanks to Arthur Litton, who had been consulted on both sides, and finally entrusted with the arrangements, everything was in so refined a style that there was but little room for envy to carp and condemn.

Certainly, Lady Littletown had had what Mr Elbraham called a finger in the pie, and had added no little by her advice and counsel in making the interior the model it was.

"For," said Elbraham, in a little quiet dinner with her ladyship at Hampton, "I'm not particular to a few thousands. All I say is, let me have something to look at for my money; and I say, Litton, draw it mild, you know."

"I don't understand you," said that gentleman. "Do you mean don't have the decorations too showy?"

"Not I. Have 'em as showy as you like. Get out with you; how innocent we are!"

“Really, Mr Elbraham, I do not know what you mean,” said Litton stiffly.

“Go along with you,” chuckled Elbraham. “I say, draw it mild. Of course you’ll make your bit of commission with the furniture people; but draw it mild.”

Litton flushed with annoyance and indignation, probably on account of his having received a promise of a cheque for two hundred pounds from a firm if he placed the decorating and furnishing of Mr Elbraham’s new mansion in their hands.

A look from Lady Littletown quieted him, and that lady laughed most heartily.

“Oh, you funny man, Elbraham! really you are, you know, a very funny man.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” chuckled the financier; “I like my joke. But look here, Litton, I don’t get married every day, and want to do it well. I’m not going to put on the screw, I can tell you. You furnish the place spiff, and bring me the bills afterwards, and I’ll give you cheques for the amounts. If there is a bit of discount, have it and welcome; I shan’t complain so long as the thing is done well.”

So Arthur Litton contented himself with calling the financier “a coarse beast,” declined to be more fully offended, and aided by Lady Littletown, who worked hard for nothing but the *kudos*, furnished the house in admirable style, received the cheques from Elbraham, who really did pay without grumbling, and soothed his injured feelings with the very substantial commission which he received.

Upon one part of the decorations Lady Littletown prided herself immensely, and that was upon the addition to the drawing-room of a very spacious conservatory built upon the model of her own; and this she laboured hard to fill with choice foliage plants and gaily petalled exotics of her own selection.

Her carriage was seen daily at the principal florists’, and Elbraham had to write a very handsome cheque for what he called the “greenstuff”; but it was without a murmur, and he smiled with satisfaction as Lady Littletown triumphantly led him in to see the result of her toil.

“Yes,” he said, “tip-top—beats the C.P. hollow! Puts one a little in mind of what the Pantheon used to be when I was a boy.”

“But, my dear Elbraham, is that *all* you have to say?” exclaimed her ladyship.

“Well, since you put it like that, Lady Littletown, I won’t shilly-shally.”

“No, don’t—pray don’t. I like to hear you speak out, Elbraham—you are so original.”

“Oh, I am, am I?” he said. “Well, you know—well, I was going to say, don’t you think some of those statues are a little too prononsay, as you people call it, you know?”

“Naughty man!” exclaimed her ladyship. “I will not have fault found with a thing, especially as I brought our sweet Clotilde here, and she was perfectly charmed with all she saw. The flowers are really, really—”

“Well, they are not amiss,” said the financier; and he went up to a wreath of stephanotis with such evident intention of picking a “buttonhole” that Lady Littletown hooked him with the handle of her sunshade, uttering a scream of horror the while.

“Mustn’t touch—naughty boy!” she cried. “How could you?”

“Oh, all right,” said Elbraham, grinning hugely at the idea of not being allowed to touch his own property; and then he suffered himself to be led through the various rooms, one and all replete with the most refined luxuries of life.

“Now, you do think it is nice, my dear Elbraham?” said her ladyship.

“Nice? It’s clipping! Might have had a little more voluptuousness; but Litton says no, so I don’t complain. I say: Clotilde—you know, eh?”

“Yes, dear Elbraham. What of her?”

“She ought to be satisfied, eh?”

“She is charmed; she really loves the place. Come, I’ll tell you a secret. The darling—ah, but you’ll betray me?”

“No—honour bright!” cried Elbraham, laying his hand upon the side of his waistcoat.

“Well, I’ll tell you, then; but, mind, it is sacred.”

“Of course—of course.”

“The darling begged me to bring her up to see the delicious nest being prepared for her; but it was to be a stolen visit, for she said she could never look you in the face again if she thought you knew.”

“Dear girl!” ejaculated Elbraham. “Yes, she is so sweet and unworldly and innocent! Do you know, my dear Elbraham,” said Lady Littletown, “a man like you, for whom so many mothers were bidding—”

“Ah, yes, I used to get a few invitations,” said Elbraham complacently.

"I used to hear how terribly you flirted at Lady Millet's with those two daughters," said Lady Littletown playfully.

"By George! no. However, the old woman was always asking me to her at-homes and dinners, and to that wedding; but I never went."

"I knew it," said Lady Littletown to herself. "How mad she must be! Ah me!" she continued mournfully, "there are times when I feel as if I have done wrong in furthering this match."

"The deuce you do! Why?" ejaculated Elbraham. "Because my sweet Clotilde is so unused to the ways of the world, and it is such a terrible stride from her present home to the head of such an establishment as this."

"Oh, that be hanged!" cried Elbraham. "'Tis a change, of course—a precious great change from those skimpily-furnished apartments at Hampton Court."

"But show is not everything, my dear Elbraham," said Lady Littletown, laying a finger impressively upon the financier's arm.

"No, it is not; but people like it. I'll be bound to say Clotilde likes this place."

"She was in raptures—she could hardly contain her delight. Her sweet innocent ways of showing her pleasure made my heart bound. Ah, Elbraham, you have won a prize!"

"So has she," he said gruffly. "I don't know but what she has got the best of the bargain."

"Oh, you conceited man! how dare you say so? But it is only your quaintness."

"I say, though," cried Elbraham, "she did like the place?"

"I cannot tell you how much she was delighted."

"Did she say anything about me?"

"Oh yes; she was prattling artlessly about you for long enough—about your kindness, your generosity, the richness of the jewels you had given her. You sadly extravagant man! I can't tell you half what she said; but I really must take you to task for spoiling her so."

Elbraham coughed and cleared his throat.

"Didn't—er—er—she didn't say anything about—about my dress—my personal appearance, did she?"

"Now, wasn't I right when I called you a conceited man? Really, Elbraham, it is shocking! I declare you are one of the most anxious lovers I ever met, and I won't tell you a word she said."

"Oh yes; come now, do."

"It would be a breach of confidence, and I really cannot give way—no, not on any consideration."

"You are hard upon me," said Elbraham. "Oh, by the way, I haven't forgotten you, Lady Littletown. Would you wear this to oblige me?"

"Oh no, I could not think of taking it, Mr Elbraham really. It looks so like a bribe, too."

"No, no, that it don't," said the financier. "I wouldn't give it to you at first, for fear your ladyship should think I meant it in that way; but now it is all settled, and you have been so kind to me, I thought perhaps you would not mind accepting that little marquise ring just as a remembrance of, etcetera, etcetera—you know."

"Well, if you put it like that," said Lady Littletown, "I suppose I must take it, and wear it as you say. But it is too good, Elbraham—it is, really. What a lovely opal!"

"Yes, 'tis a good one, isn't it?"

"Charming! And what regular diamonds!"

"I thought you'd like it," chuckled Elbraham; and then, to himself, "They're all alike."

"Do you know, Elbraham," said her ladyship, holding the ring up to the light for him to see, as she fitted it upon her finger over her glove—"lovely, isn't it?—do you know, Elbraham, that I was going to ask you to do me a kindness?"

"Were you, though? What is it?"

"Well, you see, Elbraham, living, as I do, a woman's life, I am so ignorant of business matters."

"Of course you are," he responded. "Want to make your will?"

"No, no, no, no! horrid man! How can you?" she cried, whipping him playfully with her sunshade. "I want you to tell me what it means when a gentleman is short of money and he goes to somebody to get a bill discounted."

"Simplest thing in the world. If the paper's good," said Elbraham, "discount accordingly. I never touch bills now."

"No?" she said sweetly; "but then you are so rich. But that is it, Elbraham—if the paper's good, discount accordingly?

What do you call it—the bill? Well, it is easy to have it on the very best note-paper.”

“Haw, haw, haw! bless your ladyship’s innocence!” cried Elbraham, with a hoarse laugh. “By paper being good I mean that the man who signs his name is substantial—can pay up when it comes to maturity.”

“Oh!” said Lady Littletown, drawing out the interjection in a singularly long way, “I see now. And that is how a gentleman raises money, is it?”

“Yes, that’s it,” said Elbraham, eyeing her ladyship curiously.

“Would not a lady do?” asked Lady Littletown.

“To be sure she would!” said the financier. “Lookye here—does your ladyship want a hundred or two?”

“Not to-morrow, dear Mr Elbraham; but my rents do not come in for another month, and I must confess to having been rather extravagant lately—I have had a great deal of company, and I thought I might—might—might—what do you call it?”

“Do a bill.”

“Yes, that’s it—do a bill,” said her ladyship, “if some kind friend would show me how.”

“It’s done,” said Elbraham. “What would you like—two-fifty?”

“Well, yes,” said her ladyship.

“Better make it three hundred—looks better,” said the financier.

“But you are not to advance the money, dear Mr Elbraham. I could not take it of you.”

“All right; I shan’t have anything to do with it. Someone in the City will send your ladyship a slip of paper to sign, and the cheque will come by the next post. I say, though, what did Clotilde say?”

“Oh, I daren’t tell you. Really, you know—pray don’t press me—I couldn’t confess. Dear Clotilde would be so angry if I betrayed her—dear girl! I could not do that, you know.”

“Honour bright, I wouldn’t say a word for the world.”

“Well, it’s very shocking, you know, Elbraham, and I was quite astonished to hear her say it; but she is so innocent and girlish, and it came out so naturally that I forgave her.”

“But what did she say?”

“Oh, dear child,” she clapped her hands together with delight, and then covered her blushing face and cried, “Oh, Lady Littletown, I wish it was to-morrow!”

“By Jingo!” exclaimed the financier to himself, “so do I!”

Everybody being in the same mind, the wedding was hurried on. The trousseau was of the most splendid character, and Marie entered into the spirit of the affair with such eagerness that the sisters forbore to quarrel.

Mr Montaigne came and went far more frequently, and seemed to bless his pupils in an almost apostolic fashion.

“I would give much,” he said, with a gentle, pious look of longing, “to be able to perform the ceremony which joins two loving hearts.”

But three eminent divines were to tie that knot, and even if Mr Paul Montaigne had been in holy orders according to the rites and ceremonies of the English Church, his services would not have been demanded, and he contented himself with smiling benignly and offering a few kindly words of advice.

Miss Dymcox and the Honourable Isabella were rather at odds on the question of intimacy, and Captain Glen would have been religiously excluded from the precincts of Hampton Court Palace private apartments if the Honourable Philippa had had her way; but Lady Littletown took it as a matter of course that several of the officers of the barracks should be invited, to add *éclat* to the proceedings, and as the Honourable Isabella sided with her, invitation-cards were sent, and, for reasons that Glen could not have explained to himself, were accepted.

“Yes, I’ll go, if it’s only to show her that I am not cast down. I’ll go and see her married. I’ll see her sell herself into slavery, and I hope she may never repent her step.”

The next hour, though, he said he would not go, and he was about to keep to his determination, when Dick came in, and announced that he had received an invitation.

“You’ll go, of course?”

“Go? No; why should I?”

“Just to show that you are a man of the world; no woman should fool me and make me seem like the chap in the song—‘wasting in despair—die, because a woman’s fair’—you know. Oh, I’d go.”

Glen sat thinking for awhile.

“I wouldn’t be cut up, you know.”

“If I thought that she threw me over of her own free will, Dick, I would not care a sou; but I believe that wicked old hag, her aunt Philippa, has forced her into it.”

“Then you need not care a sou.”

“How do you know?”

“Marie told me she accepted Elbraham for his coin.”

“Yes; she intimated as much to me.”

“She did! When?”

“Oh, the other day—the last time I saw her—when I had been to the private apartments, you know.”

“Oh yes. Ah, to be sure,” said Dick, who seemed much relieved. “Oh, I’d go, dear boy; I would indeed.”

“I will go,” said Glen with energy; and on the appointed day he went.

Hampton Court had not seen a more brilliant wedding for years, and the preparations at the Honourable Misses Dymcox’s apartments so completely put Joseph off his head that he, the reputable young man who preached temperance to Buddy the flyman, and was carefully saving up all his money to add to the savings of Markes for the purpose of taking a lodging-house, was compelled to fly to stimulants to sustain him.

The very way in which the dining-room was “done up,” as he called it, “with flowers and things” staggered him, and it seemed no wonder that the greeny stone basin in the middle court should sound quite noisy as the big squirt in the centre made more ambitious efforts than usual to mount the sky, and the old gold and silver fish stared more wonderingly as they sailed round and round.

But Joseph was not alone in being off his head and flying to stimulants; even cook was as bad, and was found by Markes standing at the door and talking to a soldier—the greatest treason in Markes’ eyes that a woman could commit—and reprimanded thereon, with the consequence that cook rebounded like a spring, and struck the austere, temperate, unloving Markes.

It was no wonder, for the sacred department of cook had been invaded by strange men in white apparel to such an extent that from being angry she grew hysterical, and went to Markes, apologetic and meek, for comfort, vowing that she couldn’t “abear” soldiers; but she was so humbled by the austere damsel that she turned to Joseph, who administered to her from the same cup as that wherefrom he obtained his relief.

The wearers of the white caps and jackets brought a *batterie de cuisine*, bombarded and captured the room set apart for cooking, and then and there proceeded to build up strange edifices of sugar, concoct soups, sweets, and all and sundry of those meats which are used to furnish forth a wedding feast.

The cases of wines that came in took away Joseph’s breath, but he revived a little at the sight of the flowers, and shortly afterwards relapsed, staying in a peculiarly misty state of mind and a new suit of livery to the end of the proceedings, during which time he had a faint recollection of seeing the Honourable Philippa greatly excited and the Honourable Isabella very tremulous, as they went about in new dresses, made in the style worn by the late Queen Adelaide, making them both bear some resemblance to a couple of human sprigs of lavender, taken out, carefully preserved, from some old box, where they had been lying for the past half-century.

It was a very troublous time, and Joseph wished his head had been a little clearer than it was. Those wide-spreading Queen Adelaide bonnets and feathers seemed to dance before his eyes and to confuse him. So did the constantly arriving company; but, still, he recalled a great deal. For instance, he had a lively recollection of the smell of his “bokay,” as he called it; of the young ladies going to the service at the church and coming back in a carriage, behind which he stood with an enormous white favour and the bouquet in his breast, while some boys shouted “Hurray!” He remembered that, but it did not make him happy, for he could never settle it thoroughly in his own mind whether that “hurray” was meant for him or for the bride.

That affair of the bride, too, troubled Joseph a good deal, and, but for the respect in which he held the family, or the awe in which he stood of the Honourable Philippa, he would have resented it strongly.

Certainly there were only two horses to the carriage behind which Joseph stood, but it was a particularly good carriage, hired from a London livery stables, with capital horses and a superior driver, who looked quite respectable in the hat and coat kept on purpose for Buddy the fly-driver, although he grumbled at having to put them on, as Buddy had been intoxicated upon the last occasion of his wearing them, and had somewhat taken off their bloom through going back to his stables and wearing them while he lay down in the straw for a nap.

Upon that occasion Joseph had seriously lectured Buddy upon the evils of intemperance.

“Look at me,” he said; “I can drink a glass of ale without its hurting me.”

“Well, the things ain’t improved, suttenly,” said Buddy in a repentant tone. Then scornfully: “But as to you and your slooshun of biled brewer’s aperns that you calls ale, why, you might wet-nuss babies on it, and it wouldn’t hurt ’em so long as you didn’t do it when it’s sour.”

"But it's a very, very bad habit, Buddy," exclaimed Markes; "just look at that hat."

"Ah, you'll have worse jobs than that some of these days when you marries a sojer."

Mrs Markes bounced out in disgust.

"How she do hate to hear the soldiers mentioned, surely," chuckled Buddy. "Why, she can't abear 'em. But she needn't be so hard about a fellow getting a drop; it's a great comfort. She don't know what it is, and never got to that stage, Joe, when everything about you as you taste and touch and smell feels as if it was soft and nice, and as if you'd tumbled into a place as was nothing else but welwet."

The result was that Buddy's hat and coat were thoroughly taken in hand by Markes and furbished up, the overcoat having to be rubbed and turpentined and brushed till it was more in keeping with the style of a wedding garment, while the hat was 'gone over' with a sponge and flat-iron, to the production of a most unearthly gloss, anent which Buddy chaffed the new driver. But of course that was on account of jealousy, that he, the regular ladies' coachman, and his musty-smelling, jangling fly and meagrimed horse should be set aside upon an occasion when there would have been "a bite to get and a sup o' suthin' just to wash out a fellow's mouth," For Buddy had a laudable desire to keep his mouth clean by washing it out; and he resented the insult to his dignity upon this occasion by going to the Mitre Tap, and washing out his mouth till he was unable to take this clean mouth home.

As the Dymcoxes sported so dashing a turn-out, and Joseph handed in the bride and took her to church, what he wanted to know was why Elbraham should take her back in his four-horse chariot. Of course he would take her away in it afterwards; but according to Joseph's idea it would have been far more respectful to the Honourable Dymcoxes if Elbraham had come with his young wife in the hired carriage along with him.

This was a trouble to Joseph, which he objected to largely, wearing a soured and ill-used look on the way back from Hampton Church; and he was not a great deal better when, meeting Elbraham on the staircase, that gentleman slipped a five-pound note in his hand.

The bride looked very beautiful, and Joseph heard that she wore real lace, and it covered her nearly from top to toe. The white satin dress, too, was wonderfully stiff and good, while her bouquet, sent, with those for the bridesmaids, in so many neat wooden boxes from the central avenue of Covent Garden, was "quite a picter," so Joseph said.

But somehow it was all a muddle, and Joseph could make neither head nor tail of it. He felt as if he must seize and ring the dinner-bell, or carry in the form for prayers. For instance, there was that Lord Henry Moorpark there, and Captain Glen and Mr Richard Millet, who had tipped him over and over again, and ought to have married the ladies. They were there, and so was that tall, dark Major Malpas, who always "looked at him as if he had been a dorg; and lots more people crowding into the rooms, and a-eating and drinking and talking till the place was a regular bubble."

Joseph either meant Babel or a state of effervescence, both similes being applicable to the condition of the private apartments on the auspicious day, as it was called by Lord Henry, who played the part of "heavy father" in the genteel comedy in course of enactment.

Then Joseph—who told himself he had never seen such a set-out since he came, a hungry page from the orphan school—wanted to know why Captain Glen, who had been so huffed about Miss Clotilde's marriage, should be there, and look so jolly, and propose the health of the bride. "It seemed rum," Joseph said, "though certainly him and Miss Marie looked pretty thick now, while little Mr Millet sat next to Miss Ruth," who, to the man's notions, was "the prettiest of the lot."

Joseph saw and heard a good deal. He saw Major Malpas place his glass in his dark eye, and, bringing the thick brow over it, stare very hard at the bride, who did not seem to mind it in the least—a fact which made the philosopher declare that "Miss Clo had got face enough for anything."

He also heard Major Malpas, who was perfect in his dress and handsome bearing, say to one of the guests who had made some remark respecting Glen's appearance, that the Captain was a fine animal, that was all. "Too big for a soldier, sah. Looks like a big mastiff, sah, taking care of that little toy-terrier Millet."

Joseph's notions of the wedding feast were very much after the fashion of the celebrated coat of his ancient namesake, of many colours, and those colours were terribly muddled up in his brain. They were bad enough before the matter of that five-pound note occurred; after that the unfortunate young man's ideas were as if shaken up in a bottle to a state of neutral tint in which nothing was plain.

He put that five-pound note, crumpled as it was, either in his breeches or his behind coat-pocket, but what became of it afterwards he could not tell. He might have taken it out to hold a hot plate, to use as a d'oyley, or to wipe his nose, or to dab up the wine that Mr Elbraham spilt when he upset his champagne-glass. He might or he mightn't. He couldn't say then. All he knew was that it muddled him, and that the dinner-bell hadn't been rung, nor the form carried in for prayers.

There was another idea came into his head, too, acting like so much leaven, or as an acid powder poured into the neutral alkaline solution already shaken up in his brain. There were those two waiters from Bunter's standing by when Mr Elbraham gave him the five-pound note, and one of them winked at the other. Joseph could not say that one of those young men took that five-pound note. He was not going so far as to say it. What he was going to say was that they weren't above taking two bottles of champagne back into the pantry and drinking them out of tumblers, and that a man who would take a bottle of wine that didn't belong to him might go so far as a five-pound note.

Joseph grew worse as the morning wore on. He felt as if he must go and quarrel with Markes, and a great deal of what he recalled after may have been nothing but the merest patchwork of nebulous theories of his own gathered

together in a troublous time. For it was not likely that Captain Glen would have been standing holding Miss Ruth's hand, and making her blush, as he called her his dear child, and said she was the best and sweetest little thing he had ever met, and that he should never forget her kindness and sympathy.

Joseph certainly thought he heard Captain Glen say that, and he was near enough to have heard him say it; but he remembered afterwards that when he turned he caught sight of Mr Montaigne smiling in a peculiar way, but whether at him (Joseph), or at Captain Glen and Miss Ruth, he was not sure. It was a curious sort of smile, Joseph thought, exactly like that which Buddy's old horse gave, drawing back its teeth before it tried to bite, and it made Joseph shiver.

He might have been in everybody's way or he might not, but the Honourable Philippa said that he was to stop about and make himself useful, and of course he did; for if cook chose to give up her kitchen to a set of foreign chiefs—he meant *chefs*—he was not going to be ousted by Bunter's waiters, even if some of them were six feet high, and one of them looked like a nobleman's butler. Miss Philippa said he was to make himself useful, and see that the visitors had plenty, and he did, though it was very funny to see how little some people took, though that wasn't the case with others.

It was while busying himself directly after the company had left the table that he came upon Captain Glen talking to Miss Ruth.

No, it wasn't Miss Ruth that time; it was Miss Marie. Yes, of course it was; and Captain Glen was saying:

"No, Marie; I hope I am too much of a man to break my heart about a weak, vain woman. You saw how I behaved this morning? Well, I behaved as I felt—a little hurt, but heart-whole. Poor foolish girl! I trust that she will be happy."

"I hope so, too," Marie had answered. "I am sorry, Captain Glen, and I am very glad."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I am sure that Clotilde would never have made you happy."

She gazed up at him in a curious way as she spoke, and it seemed to Joseph that Captain Glen looked puzzled and wondering. Then his face lit up, and he was going to speak to Miss Marie, when little Richard Millet came rushing up, saying:

"I say, Glen, hang it all! play fair. Don't monopolise the company of all the ladies. Miss Marie, may I have the pleasure?"

He offered his arm as if he were going to take her through some dance instead of from the big landing amongst the flowers into the drawing-room; but instead of taking the offered arm, Joseph seemed to see that Miss Marie bowed gravely, and, looking handsome and queen-like, laid her hand upon the arm of Lord Henry Moorpark, who, very quiet and grave, had been hovering about ever since they rose from the table. Then the old gentleman had walked off with her, leaving little Mr Millet very cross, and it seemed to Joseph that he said something that sounded like a bar across a river, but whether it was weir or dam, Joseph's brains were too much confused to recall.

In fact, all this came out by degrees in the calm and solitude of his pantry, when he had recovered next day from a splitting headache; and then it was that he recalled how foolishly everybody behaved when Miss Clotilde—Mrs Elbraham, he meant—went off with her rich husband: how Miss Philippa wept upon her neck, and Miss Isabella trembled, and her hands shook, when she kissed the young wife; how Mr Montaigne seemed to bless her, and afterwards go and stand by Miss Ruth, taking her hand and drawing it through his arm, patting the hand at the same time in quite a fatherly way.

Lady Anna Maria Morton, too, was there, standing with that stuck-up Mr "Rawthur" Litton, and Miss Marie with Lord Henry, and Lady Littletown, who seemed to have the management of the whole business, with Captain Glen; and at last, after the Honourable Philippa had kissed Mrs Elbraham once again, and then nearly fainted in little Dick Millet's arms, the bride and bridegroom passed on towards the carriage, while people began to throw white slippers at them, and shower handfuls of rice, some of which fell on the bride's bonnet and some upon the bridegroom, a good deal going down inside his coat-collar and some in his neck. But he went on smiling and bowing, and looking, Joseph thought, very much like a publican who had been dressed up in tight clothes, and then in consequence had burst into a profuse perspiration.

Glen was standing close by the carriage with a half-laugh upon his face as the bridegroom passed, and Joseph thought he looked very tall and strong and handsome, and as if he would like to pitch Mr Elbraham into the middle of the fountain.

And then, just as they were getting into the carriage, it seemed to Joseph that Miss Clotilde—he meant Mrs Elbraham, the rich financier's wife—turned her head and looked at Captain Glen in a strange wild way, which made him turn aside and look at Miss Marie, when the bride went for the first time into a hysterical fit of sobbing as she was helped into the carriage, where Mr Elbraham followed her smiling red smiles. The steps were rattled up, the door banged, the footman waited a moment as the chariot moved away; and then sprang up into the rumble beside Mrs Elbraham's maid, and away went the chariot as fast as four good post horses could take it towards London, bound for Charing Cross Station.

What took place at the private apartments afterwards Joseph did not know, for long before the chariot had reached Richmond, the honest serving-man's head was wedged in a corner between the press bedstead in the pantry and the wall, and his confused ideas had gone off into dreamland, apparently on the back of a snorting horse, bent on recovering a certain five-pound note which was required for tying up a white satin slipperful of rice, which had been

emptied out of Mr Elbraham's glass into a Lincoln and Bennett hat.

End of Volume Two.

Volume Three—Chapter One. The Story. - Years Ago - (Continued).

Gertrude's Husband.

Meanwhile the days glided on so peacefully for John Huish and his wife, that it seemed to him as if at last the ghost which had haunted his life had been laid.

Sir Humphrey was spending the evening with them, and Dick was expected, as Gertrude was seated in her little drawing-room at the piano, singing one of the sad old melodies that pleased her uncle so well. Her husband was leaning on the instrument gazing down into her gentle eyes, as she looked up at him with her countenance full of the calm joy she felt in the presence of the man of her choice. He was strange at times, but that did not trouble her, for he was gentle and loving always, ready to humour her slightest whim, and kindness itself to the feeble old gentleman who loved to come and prattle and prose in their quiet little home.

"John," she whispered, as her fingers strayed over the keys, and her voice was rather sad.

"My darling," he said softly.

"Do you know what it is to feel so happy that it seems as if it could not last?"

"Yes," he said, bending lower over her; "I have felt so ever since the day when you consented to be my little wife, and still it lasts."

The piano was again going softly, and for the third time Gertrude sang, in a voice that lulled the old gentleman off to sleep, "Love's young dream."

"Let it be always 'Love's young dream,'" whispered Huish, as he sank down on one knee beside the music-stool. "Gertrude, darling, I am so happy that it is like being in a dream, one from which we will never let the world wake us with its troubles."

She let her head rest upon his shoulder, and her arm was thrown tightly round his neck.

"Yes," she whispered; "let us dream."

"Yes," he replied, "we two always. I can feel that here within these arms I hold all the world—that heaven has been so bounteous to me that I can never be sufficiently grateful, and—"

He rose quickly, for there was a step outside, and a servant entered.

"If you please, sir, there are two gentlemen want to see you downstairs."

Huish turned pale, for a strange sense of coming trouble flashed upon him.

"Did they send up their names?" he said, recovering himself.

"No, sir, only said would you be kind enough to step down, sir, without disturbing my mistress. It was something particular."

"Is anything wrong, John?" said Gertrude earnestly.

"Wrong? No, my dear, I hope not. Some bit of business: people for a subscription or something. I shall be back directly. Go on playing, or we shall wake your father."

She nodded and smiled as she resumed her seat at the piano; and as Huish went quietly out of the room, the sad strain of olden days his wife was playing seemed to grow more and more mournful when the notes were muffled by the closed door.

"Where are the gentlemen, Jane?" he said quietly.

"In the dining-room, sir," said the girl, with a strange look; and as he entered she stood waiting on the mat.

One of the gas-burners was alight, and Huish started as, on entering the room, he found himself face to face with a dark, stern-looking man, and a policeman, who immediately placed his back against the door.

"Is anything the matter?" said Huish quickly.

"Well, yes, a little," said the stern, dark man. "Mr Huish—John Huish?"

"Yes; I am John Huish."

"Then you are my prisoner, Mr John Huish; here is the warrant. Smith—cuffs!"

"Stop! One minute!" exclaimed Huish excitedly. "What does this mean?"

“Only the end of the little game, sir,” said the dark, stern man. “Long lane that has no turning. Turning’s come at last!”

“I do not understand you. Some mistake.”

“Yes, sir, these matters always are little mistakes. Are you ready?”

“No! Stop!” cried Huish. “Send that man away. You need not secure me. I will go with you.”

The stern man relaxed a little, and smiled.

“Won’t do,” he said. “We’ve had too much trouble to run you down, sir. You well-educated ones are too precious clever. We’ve got a cab waiting.”

“But my wife—my—we have company here.”

“There, come along, sir, and get away quietly without letting them know. It’s no use trying any dodges on, because we’ve got you, and don’t mean to let you slip.”

“Tell me at least what it means!” cried Huish.

“The big burglary last night, if you want to know for which little game it is; but don’t be uneasy.”

“My hat and overcoat,” said Huish quickly. “Get me away quietly, so that they do not see upstairs. I tell you, man, that I will not try to escape you. I have only to go to the station to explain that this is a mistake.”

“Get the gentleman’s hat and coat,” said the plain-clothes officer; and the policeman opened the door so suddenly that the maid was caught listening.

“Jane, here, quick!” cried Huish. “Tell your mistress after we are gone that I am suddenly called away on business.”

“And won’t be back to-night, my dear,” said the officer. “Now, sir, are you ready?”

Huish nodded, feeling confused and prostrated by the suddenness of the seizure. For a moment he half felt disposed to resist, but he refrained, and, stepping into the hall, the girl opened the door just as Dick came up the steps.

“Why, Huish!” he cried in astonishment.

“Hush!” cried the other. “Not a word to Gertrude. There is some mistake. Go up to your father, and bring him round to the station. It will be a question of bail, eh, constable?”

“Yes, sir, I should think it would,” said the officer drily; and, taking his prisoner’s wrist, he hurried him into the cab.

“Then it must be all true about him, and he’s caught at last,” muttered Dick, whose throat felt dry and lips parched. “Poor little Gertrude! What will her ladyship say?”

He stood thinking of what he should do as the cab rolled away, and then entered slowly, feeling that he must leave matters a good deal to chance. But the deepest-laid scheme of breaking the news would have been blown to the winds, for the maid had hurried up open-mouthed to blurt out to Gertrude that master had been took, and that they were going to handcuff him and put him to prison for burglary.

“Is this girl mad, Dick?” said Gertrude, who was trembling violently, while Sir Humphrey stood up hardly yet awake.

“Some cock-and-bull nonsense—a blunder, I suppose,” replied Dick hastily.

“But she says the police—have taken my husband.”

“They—they—they are always making these confounded blunders, my dear,” exclaimed the old man. “There, there, be quiet, my dear. Dick and I will go and see.”

“Yes, father, I was going to propose it. John wishes us to go. There, Gertrude, don’t be stupid. I’ve no doubt it’s all right.”

“Dick,” she cried, catching his arm and gazing in his face; “you don’t think so. There is some great trouble. What is it?”

“I don’t know—I can’t tell; only that you are hindering us when we might be of service to John. Be a woman, Gertrude, and take all that comes as a wife should. There, there, don’t cry. I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“I must go with you,” she cried. “If my husband is in prison my place is by his side.”

“Yes, yes, my dear,” said the old man querulously; “that’s what they say in books, but the law won’t stand it. Come along, Dick. I say, my boy,” he whispered, as they reached the hall, “it’s precious hard on me that my sons-in-law should get into such scrapes. What has John been doing?”

“Heaven knows, father, but I fear the worst,” whispered Dick; but his words were heard upstairs by Gertrude, who was leaning over the balustrade, and the poor girl staggered back into the little drawing-room to sob as if her heart would break.

“But I must be a woman and act,” she said, drying her eyes hastily; and ringing, she despatched the girl with a short note to her sister, begging her to come back in the cab directly with the messenger. Then she sat down patiently to wait, after declining the cook’s offer of help.

Ten minutes afterwards there was a quick ring at the bell, and the remaining servant answered the door.

Gertrude ran to the landing, and glanced down, to utter a cry of joy, for at that moment a well-known voice exclaimed roughly:

“Where is your mistress?” and she ran down to meet her husband in the hall.

John Huish seemed to Gertrude greatly excited and hurried. There was something strange, too, in his way which she could not understand, but set it down to that which he had gone through.

“Oh, John,” she began, clinging to him; but he checked her, keeping his face half averted, and speaking in a harsh whisper.

“Hush!” he exclaimed. “Not a word. Go down.”

This to the servant, who tossed her head at the imperative order and left the hall.

“Now,” he said, “quick—your hat and jacket! I have a cab waiting.”

“Are we going out, dear?” she said inquiringly. “I have just sent for Renée.”

“How foolish!” he cried. “But waste no time.”

“Where are we going?” she asked, wondering at his strange, impetuous manner.

“Don’t waste time, dear,” he cried, “but get ready. You shall know all as we go.”

Gertrude’s tears began to flow and half blinded her, but she hurried away to prepare herself, while Huish walked quickly from room to room, muttering impatiently. Not that there was much need, for Gertrude reappeared at the end of a minute or two, rapidly tying on her hat, to find the gas turned down.

“I am ready, dear,” she said, laying her hand upon his arm.

“That’s right,” he cried. “Come along!”

“Shall I tell cook how long we shall be?” said Gertrude.

“No, no. Come along,” he cried impatiently, and, hurrying her out of the house, he helped her into a cab. “Cannon Street Station,” he cried to the driver, and jumping in beside her, the cab rattled off.

“Are we going to leave town, dear?”

“You’ll soon see,” he cried. “I can’t talk to you now; the cab-wheels make so much noise. Can’t you trust me?”

“Oh yes,” she cried, laying her hand upon his arm, “but you forget how anxious I am to know more.”

“Well, well, be patient,” he cried. “There, if you must know, I have been short of money.”

“Yes, dear, of course. I knew. You forget,” she said piteously.

“Yes, of course,” he replied. “Well, I was arrested for debt, and I have got away. We must stay in private—there, I’ll speak plainly—in hiding for a time.”

“Oh, John dear, this is very terrible!” she cried. “Why not go to Uncle Robert? He would help us, I am sure.”

“Yes, perhaps so. We will settle that afterwards. The first thing is to get to a place of safety.”

“Safety, John dear?”

“Well, you don’t want me to remain in prison?” he said.

“Oh no, dear,” she cried, clinging to him. “But, Dick—my father!”

“What about them?” he said sharply.

“What did they say to you?”

“When? How?” he asked.

“They came after you, dear,” she said simply.

“Oh yes; they are busy with the police, of course.”

She sat listening to the noise of the cab-wheels as it rattled along in the direction of the City.

Nothing more was said till the vehicle drew up, when Huish leaped out and helped her to alight. He then handed the

cabman a liberal fare and exclaimed: “Come along, or we shall miss the train.”

He hurried her into the station, along the platform, and into the waiting-room.

“Sit down a minute,” he exclaimed, and he went to the door to look out, but returned directly, looking so strange that Gertrude shrank from him involuntarily, and had to make an effort to master a curious feeling of repugnance which came over her.

He drew her arm quickly through his, and, bidding her lower her veil, led her hastily out of the station, across the road and into a narrow lane.

“Are we not going by train?” she asked.

“No; it is too late. Just gone. Come along, and don’t talk.”

She hurried along by his side, for he was walking very fast, and only noticed that they went through a perfect maze of narrow turnings, now up, now down, Huish stopping from time to time to look back to see if they were followed.

He kept this up for nearly an hour, and Gertrude was getting hot and exhausted, when he turned sharply into a darker and narrower lane, glancing rapidly up and down the deserted place with its two or three lamps and dimly-lighted public-house. The next moment he had thrust her into a heavy doorway, there was a rattle of a latch-key, and Gertrude felt herself drawn into a dark passage, and the door was closed.

“John!” she whispered, as the tremor which had before attacked her returned.

“Safe at last!” he muttered, drawing his breath with a low hiss, and not heeding her. “Tired?”

“Rather, dear,” she panted. “But, John, what place is this?”

“My sanctuary,” he said, in a peculiar voice. “Give me your hand. Come along. I’ll tell you when the stairs begin.”

He led her along the dark passage, and a strange chill of dread struck upon Gertrude. As they reached the first landing, a light suddenly shone out, and a few steps higher she gazed wonderingly at the weird figure of an old woman, with long, grey, unkempt hair, holding an ill-smelling paraffin lamp high above her head.

There was an intent, curious, inquiring look in the old woman’s eyes, as they seemed to fasten upon the new-comer, gradually growing vindictive, as they passed her without a word.

“Who is that?” whispered Gertrude.

“Servant,” said Huish laconically. “Won’t make you jealous, eh?”

“John,” she whispered back in a pained voice; “why do you speak to me like that?”

“Oh, it’s only my way,” he said flippantly. “Come along.”

They went up farther, and, reaching the second floor, Huish threw open the door of a comfortable, well-lit room, and drew her in, hastily opened the door of communication with the next room, satisfied himself that it was empty, went on and locked the farther door leading out to the landing, and returned.

“There,” he said; “you will be safe here.”

“Oh yes, John dear,” she said, gazing at him wonderingly, “his manner seemed so strange; but I am so anxious to know.”

“Yes, yes; all in good time, dear,” he cried. “There, off with that hat and jacket. Why, my dear,” he cried, “you look lovely!”

There was a hot red spot in his cheeks as he spoke in a curiously excited way, and Gertrude felt a strange sense of shrinking as he hastily snatched away her jacket, threw it on a chair, and clasped her in his arms.

“John,” she cried, struggling to free herself, “look! look!”

He loosed his grasp and turned suddenly upon a figure which stood right in the doorway, that of a tall handsome woman, looking ghastly pale, and her great eyes dilated with rage and surprise. She had evidently risen from a sick couch, and wore a long loose white dressing-gown, which, with her long dark hair flowing over her shoulders, gave her an almost supernatural look, heightened by the silence in which she gazed from one to another.

“What are you doing here?” cried Huish sharply. “I thought you were in bed—ill.”

“I was,” replied the woman slowly, “till I heard you return.”

“Go back to it then,” he said brutally; “why do you come here?”

Gertrude shrank back towards the couch, as the woman slowly entered, with her eyes fixed fiercely upon her, and the door swung to.

“Who is this?” she cried, in a low angry voice.

“Take no notice of her. I will get her away,” whispered Huish, crossing to Gertrude’s side. “She is mad!”

“No, girl, I am not mad,” said the woman sternly; for her hearing seemed to have been sharpened by her illness, and she had heard every word. “John Huish,” she said sternly, “answer me—who is this?”

Gertrude’s eyes dilated with horror. She was confused and startled. She could not comprehend her position or why they were there; and as the recollection of the happy evening she had spent came to mingle with the chaos of fancies and surmises that bewildered her brain, it seemed to her like some strange nightmare, from which she felt that she would soon awake into peace and repose.

To make the scene more impressive, the heavy, deep booming of a clock striking midnight floated into the room with a strange jangle of other bells, some slow, some hurried, all bent on proclaiming the same fact—that another day was dead, another being born.

As the woman repeated her question, Huish’s eyes grew dark with rage, and he pointed to the door.

“Go down,” he said, “at once, or—”

She shrank from him for a moment as she saw his look; but her jealous rage mastered her fear, and she stepped farther into the room.

Huish seemed undecided what to do; he glanced at Gertrude, then at the woman, and then back to see that the former was looking at him imploringly, as if asking him to end the scene.

“Go back to bed,” he said firmly; “you are ill!” and he laid his hand upon the woman’s arm.

“Worse in mind than in body!” she cried, starting away. “Girl,” she continued passionately, “you look truthful and unspoiled; tell me who you are.”

“Oh yes!” said Gertrude quickly, as she advanced with extended hand, and a look of pity in her face. “I am Mrs Huish.”

The woman’s lower jaw dropped, and a blank, stony look came into her eyes.

“Married!” she said hoarsely. “Are you his wife—to-day?”

“Oh no!” said Gertrude wonderingly; “for some time now. You are ill and delicate. Can I do anything for you?”

“No, no—no, no! Don’t touch me; I could not bear it. Tell me once more.”

“Here, enough of this!” cried Huish angrily. “Go down!”

“Don’t touch her,” said Gertrude excitedly; and she interposed. “She is ill—very ill. I am Mrs John Huish,” she repeated.

“The woman he has wronged?”

“No, no!” said Gertrude, beginning to tremble, as she thought of the scene upon the stairs; “but you are—”

“That man’s lawful wife, whom he now casts aside for some pretty baby face that takes his fancy.”

“It is not true!” cried Gertrude with spirit; “my husband is a gentleman and the soul of honour.”

“It is true! and that man is a liar—a cheat—a scoun—O God, I cannot bear it! Let me die!”

The woman threw up her hands and reeled. In another instant she would have fallen, but Huish stepped forward, caught her in his arms, and bore her out of the room, carrying her down to the next floor, while Gertrude, as she heard his receding steps, sank into a chair, and gazed blankly before her.

She started up though, as Huish returned with a smile upon his face, and closed and locked the door.

“Poor thing!” he said lightly; “I am sorry she came up. Ill, you know. Her baby. Reason temporarily gone. She accuses everybody like that.”

“John,” cried Gertrude, trembling, “cannot understand you to-night: you are so strange and unlike yourself. Is what that poor creature says true? Oh, I cannot bear to hear such words!”

“True? is it likely?” he said, approaching her. “Why, are you not my little wife?”

“Yes, yes!” cried Gertrude, shrinking from him; “but tell—”

She stopped short, gazing at him wonderingly. Her hands went to her dilating eyes, and as the light of the lamp fell for the first time full upon him now, she uttered a cry of horror, her face became convulsed, and she ran to the door.

“It is not—” she paused wildly.

“Are you mad, too?” he cried, pursuing her and catching her wrists.

“Yes—no—I don’t know,” she cried excitedly. “Don’t touch me. I cannot bear it.”

“Silence!” he cried. “Do you want to alarm the house?”

“Oh no, no!” she panted; “but you frighten—you horrify me!”

“Hush! Be silent!”

“No, no!” cried Gertrude, struggling, as he again seized her in his arms. “Oh, help—help—help!”

Volume Three—Chapter Two.

Police Business.

Dick Millet became quite the military officer as he reached the police-station with his father, and proved that, if he possessed a very small body, it contained plenty of soul. He was staggered at the charge brought against his brother-in-law, that of being a party to a serious attempt at burglary on the previous night, and soon found that there was nothing to be done till the next day. He listened to Huish’s asseverations of innocence very quietly, but said nothing till he exclaimed:

“Why, Dick, you cannot believe me guilty of this monstrous charge!”

“I can only believe one thing just now, John Huish,” he replied; “and that is that you are my dear sister’s husband, and that for her sake everything possible must be done to help you out of this dreadful scrape.”

“Yes,” cried Sir Humphrey feebly, “of course—of course. And, John, my boy, I always liked you; it’s a cursed impertinent lie, isn’t it?”

“It is indeed,” cried Huish earnestly; “unless—unless—”

He stopped, gazing from one to the other in a curiously bewildered fashion.

“Unless—unless what, my boy? Why don’t you speak out?”

“Let it rest to-night, sir,” said Huish, in an altered voice. “I am confused—shocked. Get me some good advice to-morrow, Dick, and when the examination comes off, you will, of course, find bail.”

Dick nodded, but did not shake hands.

“I’ll do everything I can,” he said sternly.

“Won’t you shake hands?”

“No,” replied Dick, “not till you are cleared. Huish,” he said in a whisper. “I shall work day and night to clear you, for Gerty’s sake; but I’ve heard some blackguardly things about you lately. This, though, is worse than all.”

Huish turned from him, looking dazed and strange, to shake hands with Sir Humphrey, who began protesting to and scolding the inspector on duty.

“I—I—don’t believe a word of it,” he cried angrily. “You—you—you police fellows are always—yes, damme, always making mistakes of this kind, and—and, confound me, if I don’t have the matter brought before the House of Lords. Good-night, my dear boy; make them give you everything you want, and we’ll be here first thing in the morning.—It’s—it’s—it’s about the most disgraceful thing I ever knew, my dear Dick,” he said as soon as they were in the street; “but if you don’t take me on to the club and give me some supper I shall faint.”

“You must be sharp, then, father. Gertrude will be horribly anxious.”

“Yes, yes, poor girl, she will; but it will be all right to-morrow. I’m not so strong as I was, and this has upset me terribly.”

There was no doubt about it, for the old gentleman looked very haggard. A hearty supper, however, restored him, and he left the club in pretty good spirits to accompany Dick to Westbourne Road, where they were met by the announcement that “master came back a bit ago, and went away with missus.”

“What does this mean?” said Dick sternly.

“Mean, my boy? Why, that he has got bail.”

“I’m afraid not,” said Dick to himself, and, with the full belief that his brother-in-law had contrived to escape, he accompanied his father home, keeping, however, his thoughts to himself.

In the morning, however, there was the news that a message had come for her ladyship to go to Wimpole Street, where Mrs Huish had arrived on the previous night.

“Was John Huish there, too?” asked Dick sharply.

“I did not hear,” said her ladyship haughtily. “I know nothing of such a person, and I will not have my name sullied by mention in connection with his.”

"But you'll go and see Gertrude?"

"No," exclaimed her ladyship. "It was Gertrude's duty to come to me if she were in trouble. If she prefers her uncle's help, let her enjoy it. I have no more to say, except that I shall not go; and, Humphrey, I forbid you to go there—for the present."

"And me, too," said Dick quietly.

"You have long ceased to obey me," said her ladyship austerely, "and must take your own course. *I* will not, however, be dragged into this dreadful scandal."

"Humph!" said Dick. "Then you let it all out, father, after you'd gone to bed?"

"Yes, my son, yes. Your mamma was very anxious, and I told her all."

"As you like. I'm off now to secure counsel. We'll have him out before night."

Lady Millet sighed and wiped her eyes, but no one paid any heed to her, so she consoled her injured feelings with a good breakfast.

Meantime, John Huish sat through the night, thinking, and calling up from the past all the strange things that had been laid to his charge.

"What does it mean?" he said aloud. "Am I a madman or a somnambulist, or do I lead a double life?"

It was terrible, that being shut up in such a place; for when the other prisoners were silent, there was a dreadful clock close by, which seemed in its cold, harsh, brazen way to goad him to distraction. It was a hurried clock, that always seemed manifesting itself and warning people of the flight of time, so that every quarter of an hour it fired off a vicious "ting-tang" in the two discordant notes that made a bad descending third, repeating itself at the half-hours, tripling at the third quarter, and at the hour snapping as it were at the world four times before allowing the hammer on another bell to rapidly go off *slam—slam—slam*! till its duty was done. "Clocks are bad enough," he thought, "from the warnings they give of how short our lives are growing; but when a man is in trouble and bells are added, the effect is maddening indeed."

He sat trying to think till he was bewildered, and at last, in a complete maze, he sat listening to the noisy singing of a woman in the next cell, and the drunken howlings of a man on the other side.

"My poor darling!" he cried at last; "it will almost break her heart. A burglary! and if they should prove that I was guilty—oh, it is monstrous!"

He tried to pace his cell, but it was too narrow, and he sat down again with his hands pressed to his forehead, with the mental darkness coming down upon him thicker than that of his cell.

"It's like some nightmare," he said at last, "and as if in some way my brain were unhinged. Absence—absence of mind! My God! will a judge believe me if I say for defence that I committed a robbery in a fit of absence of mind? One has read of strange things in people's lives," he thought after a time—"how they have been totally unconscious of what took place in one half of their existence. Is it possible that my life is divided into two parts, in each of which I am ignorant of what passes in the other? But who would believe it! I'll have Stonor here first thing to-morrow."

He sat with his mind growing darker and darker, and vainly struggling against the black oppression; and at last, with a weary wail; he exclaimed unconsciously:

"My poor darling, what a night for you! Last night happy and admired—to-night—oh, thank God—thank God!"

For the light had come.

The police declared that the burglary had taken place the previous night about nine o'clock at a City house, and that he was seen and nearly captured. Why, a dozen people could prove that he was at Dr Stonor's the whole evening.

He rose and tapped sharply at his cell door.

"Now then," said a rough voice. "What is it?"

"Kindly ask the inspector to come here for a moment," said Huish.

The officer on night duty came from his desk where he had been entering the last charge. "Well, sir?" he said, with official brevity.

"Sorry to trouble you," said Huish, "but that burglary—when was it?"

"Nine o'clock last night—that is, the night before last, for it is now four o'clock."

"Thank God," said Huish, and he lay down upon that peculiarly soft bed provided by a humane Government at police-stations for arrested people, and slept soundly for hours.

"Precious eager to know when, the crack was done," said the officer, as he looked in at the cell. "Clever dodge—going to try an *alibi*?"

What was intended for a preliminary examination took place in the course of the afternoon, and the officer in charge of the case brought forward two or three witnesses to give a sufficiency of evidence to justify a remand, informing the magistrate that he believed that he should be able to produce a long catalogue of crime against the prisoner, who had succeeded in eluding the vigilance of the police for some time past.

On the other side, however, the services of the rising young counsel, Mr Douglas, had been secured. He made a brief and indignant address to the magistrate on the way in which the sanctity of Mr Huish's home had been invaded, and a gentleman dragged off to answer this disgraceful trumped-up charge. In conclusion, Mr Douglas said he should bring forward witnesses whose social position was such that their testimony must be taken as unimpeachable, and they would prove on oath that at the time when this gentleman—the defendant; he would not insult him by calling him the prisoner—was stated to have been seen by the police in company with some notorious scoundrels engaged in a burglary—his worship would excuse him for smiling, the charge was so absurd—Mr Huish was partaking of the hospitality of a well-known physician at his house at Highgate.

"Call Dr Stonor."

Dr Stonor stepped into the witness-box, was sworn, and stated that Mr John Huish often dined with him at Highgate, and was there on the night in question, that he arrived there about seven, and did not leave till twelve, and was never out of his sight the whole time.

Daniel Repson, Dr Stonor's confidential servant, testified to the same effect.

Then Sir Humphrey Millet was sworn, and stated that he called at his son-in-law's at six o'clock, and went up with him in the carriage to Highgate, and was set down at Grosvenor Square on the return. He certainly did have a nap after dinner, for about half an hour, but not for more.

Mr Richard Millet gave similar testimony, and lastly Miss Stonor was sworn, and stated that, saving the interval between leaving the table and tea-time, she saw Mr Huish the whole evening.

Mr Douglas was of opinion that after the evidence of these witnesses his worship would dismiss the contemptible charge, and tell his client that he left the court without a stain upon his character. At the same time, he hoped the police would be more careful, for he was informed that Mrs Huish had been most terribly alarmed, and that the consequences might be serious.

The police-sergeant was checkmated, and the prisoner was discharged at once, leaving the police court in the company of his friends.

"Yes," said the sergeant grimly, "he has done us this time; but if we don't put salt on his tail yet, I'll leave the force."

John Huish shook hands heartily with the doctor, who eyed him rather curiously, and then turned to Dick, who was, however, very distant.

"You'll come home with me," he said; but Dick shook his head.

"Not now," he said coldly; "another time. Come, father."

The old man shook hands heartily with his son-in-law, and whispered:

"Dick's a bit put out, my dear John; but it's all right. I'll put it all straight. I'll bring him on to-night."

Huish nodded, and shook hands then with the doctor and Miss Stonor.

"Good-bye, doctor; a thousand thanks! Miss Stonor, you'll excuse me. I am most anxious to get home."

Miss Stonor nodded and smiled, and Huish was turning away, when the doctor said:

"Run up and see me again soon."

Huish nodded assent and turned away, hailed the first hansom, and jumped in, the man smiling at him in a friendly way.

"Home, sir?" he said.

"Yes, quick. West—"

"All right, sir—I know," cried the man, and away went the cab.

"Driven me before," thought Huish, as he sank back in the cab. "Poor little darling! how she has been upset!"

He lit a cigar and smoked it, to settle his nerves as he termed it, and then his thoughts turned to the affairs of the past night.

"And suppose I had not been able to bring all those witnesses to prove my innocence," he thought. "How horrible!"

He moved about uneasily in his seat, for he was not satisfied. This was, after all, but another link in the strange chain of circumstances that had troubled him, and he shuddered and threw away his cigar, for his nerves refused to be settled. Somehow, a strange uneasy feeling kept increasing upon him, and at last he raised the little trap and shouted to the man to go faster.

“Suppose she is ill!” he muttered. “Poor darling! what she must have suffered!”

At last the cab was pulled up at the door, and Huish leaped out and ran up the steps without paying the man, who waited, while, not finding his latch-key, he rang sharply, and the cook answered the door.

“Where is your mistress?” he said sharply.

“Missus, sir? I haven’t seen her since last night.”

“What, has she gone home?”

“Home, sir? I don’t know, sir—I mean, since you fetched her, sir.”

“Since I fetched her, woman! Are you mad?”

“Not as I knows on, sir,” said the woman, with the asperity of one in her profession. “You ast me where missus was, and I says as I ain’t seen her since you fetched her last night.”

“Since I fetched her last night! You mean the night before, to go out to dinner—Dr Stonor’s.”

“No, sir, I don’t; I mean the very last night as is, ’bout half an hour after you was took.”

“Yes, yes; go on,” said Huish, turning ghastly pale.

“You come back and told missus quite sharp like to put on her things, and took her away in a cab.”

“Are you—dreaming?” faltered Huish, staggering back against the wall.

“Dreaming! no, sir, of course not. And the poor dear got ready in a minute, and you both went off in a cab.”

“This is horrible!” groaned Huish. “I never returned till now; I did not come and fetch her.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, which you’ve forgot,” said a voice behind him; and Huish turned round to find himself face to face with the cabman.

“Like me to wait, sir? Didn’t pay me my fare. It was me as drove you and the lady last night.”

“You!—what?—me?—the lady?”

“Of course, sir,” said the man, smiling. “You hailed me in Praed Street, outside the station, and come on here, and you told me to wait. Five minutes arter you comes out with the lady, and I took you down to Cannon Street.”

“This is horrible!” groaned Huish again; and he clutched at the umbrella-stand to save himself from falling.

“The gent’s ill,” said the cabman hoarsely.

“Yes, ill—ill,” cried Huish; “no—better now. Tell me, both of you, did I come last night and fetch my wife?”

“Course you did, sir,” said the cook in an injured tone, as if insulted at her veracity being impeached.

“If I might make so bold, sir,” said the cabman. “I’d have a drop o’ short; it’s nerves—that’s what it is. I get a bit touched so sometimes, after being on. Shall I drive you to—”

“A doctor’s?—yes,” groaned Huish. “Quick!—to Dr Stonor’s, Highgate.”

“Highgate, sir? Hadn’t you better go to one close by?”

“Quick, man!—to Highgate,” cried Huish. “Here.”

He thrust a sovereign into the man’s hand, and ran down the steps to the cab.

“Right, sir,” cried the cabman, running after him and climbing to his perch. “Lor’!” he muttered as he started the horse, “how willing a suv. do make a man, toe be sure!”

It seemed an age before the cab had climbed the long hill, and all the time John Huish sat back hat-less, and holding his head with both his hands, for it throbbed as though it would burst. Two or three times over he thrust up the trap to urge the man to hasten; but during the latter part of the journey he sat back, fighting hard to restrain himself, for he felt that if he moved or spoke more he would begin to shriek and utter wild drivel. He was going mad—he was sure of it—and his mind would no longer bear the horrible strain of the bewildering thought. There was something wrong, and he could not master it. One sole thought now filled his mind, but in a hazy, strange way, and that was that he, in some other state, had fetched away his wife and destroyed her.

At last, just as they neared the top of the hill, he became aware for the first time that the cabman was watching him, and he started angrily as the trap was shut down.

“Poor gent! he have got it hot,” muttered the cabman; and he gave his horse a touch with the whip, which made the weary beast exert itself a little more, and a few minutes later they were at the doctor’s iron gates.

“Shall I wait, sir?” said the man.

Huish shook his head and jumped out, to ring furiously at the bell.

Daniel came down the path to meet him.

"I thought so," he muttered, as he saw the excited looks of the visitor; and he offered Huish his arm, for the young man staggered as the gate swung to.

"The doctor—quick!" said Huish, with his eyes looking staring and wild.

"In his study, sir—only just back from town," said Daniel; and he helped the tottering visitor quickly into the house, across the hall, and at once into the doctor's room.

"Why, John—Huish, my dear boy, what is this?"

"Possessed—of a devil—doctor," cried Huish thickly. "For Heaven's sake—help me—I'm going mad!"

He sank back into an easy-chair gasping, and his face turned blue with the congestion of his veins; then he babbled hoarsely a few unintelligible words, and became insensible.

"Basin—quick!" said the doctor; and as his ready *aide* ran to a little mahogany stand, the doctor's pocket-book was opened, a tiny steel blade glittered for a moment, and directly after the dark stream of John Huish's life-blood was trickling from a vein.

Volume Three—Chapter Three.

Potiphar's Wife.

Clotilde seemed to find little difficulty after her return from the Continental trip in settling down into her new position in life. She made plenty of mistakes, no doubt, but Elbraham's notions of management were so far from perfect that he proved to be no fair judge. His ideas were that his young wife should keep plenty of company, dress well, and do the honours of his house in excellent style.

As far as display was concerned, this she did; and, Elbraham being nowise opposed to the plan, she frequently had Marie to stay with her. In fact, her sister would have quite taken up her abode at Palace Gardens had Clotilde carried the day; but though she pressed her constantly, talked of her own dulness in town, and made various excuses for keeping Marie at her side, the latter refused to remain there long.

Still, Marie was frequently at Palace Gardens, and whenever she was staying in town Lord Henry Moorpark made frequent calls, and was always pressed by Clotilde to return to dinner.

The old gentleman smiled his thanks, and accepted the invitations with no little sign of pleasure; but he made no farther advance in his suit, and seemed to resign himself calmly to his fate, and to be content to bask, so it appeared, in Marie's presence; she, for her part, always being kindly affected towards her elderly friend. The officers from Hampton Court, too, were frequent guests at Palace Gardens, dining there in state, but never when Marie was staying with her sister.

"I wonder," said Clotilde, rather archly to Glen, "that you do not try and exchange troops, so as to be stationed at Kensington instead of Hampton Court. I see some of your regiment is here."

"Yes," said Glen carelessly; "but really, Mrs Elbraham, I think I like Hampton Court better than Kensington."

Clotilde bit her lip, but she showed no further sign of annoyance, and the conversation changed.

Had Glen been a vain man, he would have been delighted at the evident desire Clotilde now displayed for his company; but there was little vanity in his composition. He told himself that he would treat her as if she had never made the slightest impression upon him; and as, he could hardly tell why, he felt a kind of awakening interest in Marie, who he knew had refused Lord Henry Moorpark, he gladly accepted all invitations, in the hope of seeing more of Marie at her sister's house, but only to be disappointed.

Still, he encountered her occasionally at Hampton, sometimes at Lady Littletown's—now and then in the gardens, for their intercourse to be of the most distant kind if the Honourable Philippa was present; but friendly—almost affectionate—if it were in the presence of the Honourable Isabella alone.

For the poor lady, failing to make any impression upon Glen, felt a kind of gentle satisfaction in administering to his pleasure. She saw how eager the young officer and her niece were to meet, and this, like a pale beam of reflected light, tended to brighten her own sad life, so that she smiled and sighed and palpitated gently, telling herself, as her trembling hand wandered about the plaits of her old-fashioned dress, that it was very sweet to see others happy.

So great was her enjoyment that often and often, as Glen and Marie, with Ruth for companion, strolled up and down, poor Isabella Dymcox would take her place upon one of the seats, saying that she was rather tired, and shed a few sad tears, which trickled down her withered cheeks, almost unknown to the dreaming author of their being.

It came upon Glen like a surprise on the night of Mrs Elbraham's grandest "at home" to find that Marie was there; and after being welcomed by his host and hostess, the first very warmly, and the second with a searching look in her eyes, a strange sense of pleasure came over him on seeing Marie standing near, looking, it seemed to him, more handsome than he had ever seen her look before.

There was a dreamy, anxious look in her eyes as they encountered his, and her gloved hand certainly conveyed a trembling, tender pressure when he first shook hands, so that when at last he left her side, he began asking himself whether it was possible that he had been making a mistake, and casting away a living substance for a false deluding shadow.

“Nonsense,” he said impatiently, as the hot blood seemed to rush through his veins. “I can’t be so frivolous.” Then, with a half-laugh, “Broken hearts are not so easily mended, and Marie can only feel a sort of pity and contempt for a fellow who preferred her sister.”

But somehow in the course of the evening his eyes encountered Marie’s from time to time, and, as far as he could judge, there was neither pity nor contempt in them, but a genuine look of tender regard which took him again and again to her side.

Yes; he felt before he came that he liked Marie, and that it was quite possible for a nearer tie than liking to grow up between them in the course of time, but this evening a veil of denseness seemed to have fallen from his eyes, and he read a score of looks and ways in quite a new light.

He hesitated for a while when once or twice he found himself near Clotilde, who seemed to affect his society a good deal that evening, and almost imperiously summoned him with a look to her side.

He went almost gladly, for there was a new sense of joy in his breast. He felt that he was triumphing over the young wife, and yet it was the pitying triumph of a great conqueror who could afford to be merciful; and this feeling grew as he glanced at the splendidly-attired, handsome woman ablaze with diamonds, and then at her coarse, common-looking elderly husband, who, with his round head down between his shoulders, kept bustling about among his guests, like a society showman displaying the beauty of the bejewelled woman he had placed in a gilded cage.

“I can afford to be merciful now,” thought Glen. “Good heavens! what a blind fool I have been! Why, she is worth a thousand Clotildes, and I was a fool not to see her superiority before!”

He paused just then to ask himself whether he were not still blind and foolish with conceit, for why should Marie care for him? But just then his eyes caught hers, and an electric glance made his pulse throb and hopes run high, as he told himself that it was no conceit upon his part, but the truth, and that after all he had not really loved Clotilde.

“No, my dear madame,” he said to himself; “it was a fancy such as a weak man like your humble servant is prone to indulge in. Yes,” he continued, and there was a faint smile on his lip as he caught sight of Clotilde just then watching him; “I thank my stars that I escaped your wiles. You are as handsome a woman as I ever met, and I certainly thought I loved you, but, by Jove, what an escape I have had!”

Glen’s thoughts were in his eyes, upon which Clotilde’s were fixed, but she did not interpret them aright; not even when he gazed at her almost mockingly, as if asking her if she were satisfied with her choice, to which he bade her welcome.

“By Jove, what will Dick say?” thought Glen, as he saw the little fellow cross to Marie. “Poor boy! Well, he will have to get over it, just as he has got over a score of other tender passions. And I thought he said he was in too much trouble about his sisters to think of matrimony for himself.”

The rooms grew more crowded, and Glen longed to cross to Marie’s side, but somehow he was always prevented, save for one five minutes, when Clotilde was by the entrance receiving some new arrivals. Those five minutes, though, were five intervals of joy during which very little was said, but that little was enough to endorse most fully without a positive declaration the ideas that had so lately begun to unfold.

The evening wore rapidly on. Marie was standing by the piano talking to little Dick Millet, and her eyes met those of Glen gazing at her across the room.

He was about to answer the summons they seemed to convey, when Lord Henry Moorpark, looking exceedingly old and yellow by the light of the chandeliers, but gentlemanly and courtly as ever, rose from his seat and crossed to where Marie stood, entering into conversation, as in his sad and deferential way he seemed to have set himself to hover about in the presence of the woman he loved.

“A very, very bright and pleasant party, my child,” he said tenderly. “I hope you are enjoying it.”

“Oh, so much!” cried Marie, darting a grateful look in his eyes. For it was so noble and good of him, she told herself, and she felt that she quite loved the tender-hearted old nobleman for the generous way in which he had seemed to sink his lover’s love in that of a guardian for a child.

“Yes, it is bright and pleasant,” continued Lord Henry; “but I feel very much out of place here, and as if I ought to be quietly sipping my glass of port at my club. How noble your sister looks, and how happy!”

“Noble, indeed!” said Marie eagerly. “She is very handsome, and I hope she is happy.”

“Indeed, I hope so too, my child; but here comes some one else to take my place.”

For as he was speaking, Glen, who felt that if he did not make an effort he would have no further speech with Marie that night, was coming to her side, but only to be captured and carried off in another direction.

“Then I need not go yet,” said Lord Henry, who was watching the little comedy through his half-closed eyes, “unless I go and relieve guard, and set Captain Glen at liberty.”

“Oh, no, no!” whispered Marie, whose face betrayed her mortification. “It would look so particular.—Clotilde saw him coming to me,” she added to herself, “and it was done in spite.”

“Perhaps it would,” said Lord Henry quietly. “I like Captain Glen. He is very manly and handsome. The *beau ideal*, to me, of a soldier. I must know more of him, and of his amusing little friend yonder, who is pointing his moustaches and looking daggers in my direction. He is another admirer of yours, is he not, Marie?”

“Oh, poor boy: it is ridiculous!” exclaimed Marie, half scornfully. “There is something very likeable about him, too, except when he is in his foolish fit.”

“His foolish fit?” said Lord Henry inquiringly.

“Yes, and tries to talk nonsense. I was compelled to dismiss him, and forbid his coming near me unless he could talk sensibly.”

Fresh announcements were made from time to time, and then a servant approached Clotilde, who immediately began to pair off her guests for the supper.

“Take in Marie, dear Lord Henry,” she said as she came to where they were standing; and soon after, in passing, she said softly to Glen. “I shall reserve myself for you.”

Glen bowed, and waited patiently as the guests went down to the banquet spread in a large marquee set up in the garden, where beneath the red and white striped awnings the brilliant swinging gasaliers turned the glass and lustrous plate upon the long tables into a blaze of scintillations, which illumined with fresh tints the abundant flowers.

Elbraham had given Edgington and Gunter orders to “do the thing handsome,” and they had unmistakably carried out his wishes, even to his own satisfaction; while, to give an additional charm to the supper, the strains of an excellent band, concealed behind a great bank of flowers and plants of the gayest foliage, suddenly began to float through the great marquee.

“It is like a scene in fairyland,” said Clotilde, as Glen took his seat beside her, and after she had glanced down the table to see that the little squat figure of Elbraham was hidden from her gaze by a line of épergnes and jardinières.

“Yes, it is magnificent,” replied Glen gravely and with his eyes fixed upon Marie, seated some little distance below them in company with Lord Henry Moorpark, the former gazing at him in a half-reproachful way.

“I made Elbraham invite you,” whispered Clotilde, sipping the champagne that had just been poured into her glass.

“Indeed!”

“Yes; of course, I shall have all my old friends here as much as I please.”

“I suppose so,” said Glen rather dreamily. “Of course, you are very happy?”

She darted a quick look at him, one that he did not meet, for he bent over his plate and appeared to be busy with his supper.

“How dare you say that to me!” she said in a low voice. “Oh, it is too cruel—and from you!”

Glen shuddered, for he half expected that his hostess’s words would be heard.

“I beg pardon,” he said hastily. “I will take more care.”

“No, no,” she said, in the same deep, earnest tones: “scold me, say cutting, contemptuous things to me. I am a wretched creature, and deserve all.”

Glen seized and emptied his champagne-glass at a draught, and as he set it down he glanced towards the opening in the marquee, as if seeking a way to escape.

An awkward pause followed, and, judging that his companion was self-angry at her slip of words, Glen was magnanimous enough to try and pass them over, changing the conversation, or rather trying, by a dexterous movement, to draw it into another channel.

“Where did you go?” he asked.

“When? During my wedding trip?” she asked, with a curious tone of bitterness in her voice.

It was a badly-planned question, Glen felt, but he must go on with it now.

“Yes. Paris, of course?”

“Oh yes, we went to Paris and Berlin, and then through Switzerland, I believe; but it was all one miserable dream.”

She had spoken almost loudly, and the blood mounted to the young officer’s cheeks as he again wondered whether her words had been heard. But he need not have been uneasy, for those nearest were intent upon their plates or upon each other.

“You are very angry with me,” said Clotilde suddenly; and for a moment he caught her eye, and asked himself directly after whether Marie had seen that glance, which she had, and suffered a raging pang.

"Angry? No," said Glen lightly, "why should I be angry, Mrs Elbraham? Surely a lady has a right to make her own choice. I was a competitor; and an unfortunate one."

"Do you think you were unfortunate?" asked Clotilde eagerly.

"As unfortunate as you were favoured; why, my dear Mrs Elbraham, you are here the mistress of a palace. Had I had my way, you would have been condemned to share some shabby barrack-lodging. Hence I congratulate you."

"Ah!"

Glen's face flushed more and more. It might have been from the long-drawn, half-despairing sigh on his left; or the champagne, of which he pretty freely partook in his excitement, might have been answerable for his heightened colour, but certainly he did not go the way to diminish it, for he drained the glass at his side again and again, dashing off into a hurried conversation and talking brightly and well, till he heard a fresh sigh upon his left, and encountered another glance from his hostess's large dark eyes—a look full of reproach and appeal.

This time Glen smiled. The wine was working, and he saw matters from another point of view.

Throwing off, then, the consciousness that had troubled him, he laughed and chatted with her till his words or the wine brought a warm flush into her creamy skin, and again and again he received a languishing look from the large dark eyes—a look that would have made some men turn giddy, but which only made Glen smile.

The party at last arose and began to file back into the brilliantly-lit saloons, the band having now been stationed in the flower-filled hall, and an improvised dance commenced, a couple beginning to turn to the strains of one of Gungl's waltzes, and a dozen more following suit, agitating the perfumed air, and filling it with the scintillations of jewels.

They passed from the great marquee into the hall, the strains of the waltz making Glen long to go to Marie and ask her to be his partner for that dance.

He was thinking this when he was brought back to himself by the low, sweet voice of Clotilde.

"You are *distrait*," she said half reproachfully.

"Yes. I was thinking of the music," he said. "I want a waltz."

"No, no," she said hurriedly; and she pressed his arm. "I must not dance to-night. Take me in this way."

She pointed to a door and they passed through into the great conservatory, softly lit up by tinted globes placed amidst the flowers and foliage of the rich exotics that filled the place. There was a delicious calm there, and the air was fragrant with the cloying scents of flowers; musical with the tinkle of falling water as a jet flashed in many-tinted drops and sparkled back into a fern-hung basin; while as if from a distance came the softened strains of the voluptuous waltz.

It was a place and a time to stir the pulses of an anchorite, and yet Glen hardly seemed to heed the beautiful woman who hung heavily and more heavily upon his arm, till he said suddenly—

"Is not this the way?"

"No, along here; let us go through this door."

"This door" was one at quite the end, leading into a kind of boudoir; but ere they reached it, and as they were nearly hidden by the rich leaves and flowers, Clotilde turned to her companion with a low, piteous sigh—gazing wildly in his eyes. "Oh, Marcus, why did I marry that man?"

Volume Three—Chapter Four.

Glen's Defender.

Marcus Glen could hardly recall exactly what happened upon that unlucky night; but Clotilde's words rang still in his ears, and even as they seemed to throb in his brain, there was a burst of light that seemed to cut the semi-darkness where they stood—the boudoir doors being thrown open—and with the light came a burst of conversation and music from the inner rooms.

Those sounds seemed to be mingled with the furious oath uttered by Elbraham, who was upon the step with Lord Henry Moorpark, and Marie close behind.

It was like some situation in a comedy drama, and before he could recover from his surprise he felt a sharp blow across his face, and a tiny jet of blood spurting from the puncture made by the point of a brilliant where it had entered his temple.

"How dare you! Elbraham! Husband! Protect me from this man."

"Protect you? By Gad I will," roared the financier, throwing his arm round his wife's waist, whilst, flushed and angry, she began to sob.

"That man—that wicked man! Oh, it is shameful!"

“Look here, Moorpark,” cried Elbraham savagely, as Clotilde, after gazing furiously at Glen, hid her face upon her husband’s shoulder, “you are a witness. By Gad I’ll have an action against him—I’ll have him in the Divorce Court. I’ll—”

“Hush, hush, my good sir!” whispered Lord Henry, who looked for the moment horror-stricken, but recovered directly sufficiently to close the door leading into the great conservatory.

“But I’ll—but I’ll—” cried Elbraham, foaming at the mouth with rage and jealousy.

“Hush, sir, pray: for your wife and her sister’s sake,” said Lord Henry, with dignity.

“But,” panted Elbraham, struggling to speak, and shaking his fist at Glen, who stood there biting his lip, and frowning.

“Silence, sir!” cried Lord Henry with authority; “recollect you are a gentleman. Captain Glen, I beg and desire that you leave this house at once.”

“Gentlemen!” exclaimed Glen, flushing with excitement; and the words of explanation were upon his lips, but he stopped short and took a step as if to go, but turned back. “Look here, Lord Henry,” he said.

Then he stopped short, choking, sickened with disgust. He could not—he would not speak.

“You had better leave at once, Captain Glen,” said Lord Henry haughtily. “There must be no scandal here. You have insulted—”

“Insulted!” panted Elbraham; “by Gad, sir—”

“Mr Elbraham, for your own and your lady’s sake be silent and calm yourself, or the guests will learn what has occurred. If you demand satisfaction afterwards, sir, you can do so, though duels are out of fashion.”

“Satisfaction!” cried Elbraham. “By Gad I’ll have heavy damages—heavy damages!” he reiterated, with the foggy notion still in his brain that this was a case in which he could proceed against Glen in the Divorce Court.

“We will discuss that afterwards, sir,” said Lord Henry coldly. “Mrs Elbraham, there are some of your guests approaching. Marie, my child, lead your sister into the next room; she has been a little faint. Elbraham, recollect yourself.”

“All right, my lord; I’m calm enough. But let this blackguard go at once.”

Glen started, and he was turning furiously upon the financier, when he saw Marie slowly approaching her sister with a look almost of loathing in her countenance, and he took a couple of steps towards her.

“Marie, for heaven’s sake hear me!” he whispered; but even as he spoke he saw Clotilde turn and glare at him with so fierce a look that he was again silenced.

Then Lord Henry threw open the door, the strains of music and the brilliant light flashed into the conservatory, and Clotilde seemed to recover herself, and laid her hand upon her husband’s arm.

“Take me away,” she said hoarsely; but, seeing that Marie did not move, she restrained her lord, whose face was just turning back from purple to red, and seemed to be waiting for her sister to leave.

“Will you take me back into the drawing-room, Lord Henry?” said a voice then that sounded quite strange to all present, and mastering her emotion, but looking deadly pale, Marie suffered Lord Henry to lead her away without one glance at Glen, who stood there feeling as if a hand were constricting his throat.

The next moment Elbraham favoured him with a melodramatic scowl, and marched out with Clotilde’s white arm resting, laden with glittering bracelets, upon his black coat-sleeve, and her face fixed, as if of marble, as she gazed straight before her.

“He will not betray me,” she thought to herself, “and he will forgive me the next time we meet.”

She might have altered her opinion if she had heard his words, though perhaps they would have made her feel more satisfied as regarded her own position.

“Curse the woman for a Jezebel!” cried Glen between his teeth, as he clutched a handful of the rich leafage of a palm and crushed it in his fingers.

“Was ever poor wretch meshed before in such a net? If ever I forgive her this—Well, what is it?”

“Alone!” cried Dick. “I thought I saw Marie come in here while I was dancing.”

“Yes,” said Glen, trying to crush down his emotion; “she did come here, and she is gone.”

“For a *tête-à-tête*. Curse it all, Glen! you are too bad. Have some honesty in you!”

“Hold your tongue!” said Glen, bringing his hand down fiercely upon the boy’s shoulder, which he clutched with so tremendous a grip that the lad winced and uttered a cry of pain. “Don’t speak to me. Take me back.”

“Are you ill? What is the matter? There’s blood on your face. Hang it all! you hurt me. What has been wrong? Has Marie refused you?”

"Will you be silent?"

"No," said the boy with spirit; "I will know. I saw Marie come in here. What has happened? Have you been playing some—"

"Rehearsing only!" cried Glen, with a forced laugh.

"Rehearsing! Are they going to have amateur theatricals?"

"No, no: real—a social comedy," cried Glen.

"A social comedy! I say, old man, haven't you had too much champagne? But are they going to act something? I should like to be in it. What is the piece?"

"The scapegoat!" cried Glen, with a laugh; "and I play the goat."

"Look here, old man, I'll see you into a cab. Let's get out this way. I've a couple more dances I must have before I go. I wouldn't go back into the drawing-room if I were you. Come along."

With his senses seeming to reel, Glen took the arm offered to him, and allowed himself to be led out into the hall, Dick helping him on with his coat and seeing him in a hansom before returning to the drawing-room, where the band was playing another waltz.

He intended to find Marie and secure her for a partner; but the dance was nearly ended before he found her, looking, as he thought, more beautiful than ever, but very strange, standing in a doorway with Lord Henry, who was holding her hand.

Something seemed to check the boy, as a pang of jealousy shot through his fervent young heart. He could not hear what was said, but stood still in mute rage as Lord Henry said:

"Indeed, yes, my dear child; everything. There shall be no hostility. Fighting is a thing of the past. Take my word for it, and be at rest."

"Thank you, Lord Henry, thank you," she said, almost passionately. "Good-night. I will go to my room now; I can bear no more."

"God bless you, my child. It must be hard to bear, but you are noble and good and true enough to master this bitterness. I would I could bear it for your sake. Good-night."

"Good-night," she said warmly.

"And you will try to forget it all?"

"I have forgotten it," she said, flushing and drawing herself up proudly. "It was one of my mistakes."

She looked full in his eyes as she spoke, and then drew her hand from his, and he stood watching her cross the hall and ascend the staircase till she reached the first landing, where she turned and looked down at him for a moment before passing out of his sight.

Lord Henry Moorpark stood with his eyes half closed, thinking of the bright vision that had just glided from his sight; and his thoughts must have been pleasant, for he smiled once, and stood opening and shutting his crush hat till, becoming aware that someone was near, he raised his eyes, and saw Dick pointing his tiny moustache.

"Ah," he said, smiling; "there is music yonder, and pretty feet and bright eyes are asking for partners. Why tarryeth the little son of Mars?"

"Look here!" cried the boy fiercely; "if you were a man of my years—oh, this is unbearable?" he cried, and he hurried away.

"Poor boy!" said Lord Henry softly; "and I am spoiling his happy dream. Ah, well, it was one from which he was bound to be rudely awakened, and Marie—" He paused, and his eyes half-closed. Then he said the name softly to himself: "Marie, Marie! Poor child! she looked heartbroken. Am I a doting old fool to ask myself this question—shall I win her yet?"

It would be hard to say who suffered most in the sleepless night which followed, during which Glen paced his bedroom till day, the same daybreak that found Marie, wakeful and feverish, turning upon her weary couch.

That morning a note came for her. Elbraham received it and took it to Clotilde.

"It is from that wretch," she cried hotly; "burn it."

Elbraham did so without a moment's hesitation, and the ashes were still sparkling on the hearth when Marie entered the drawing-room dressed as if for a journey.

"Why, Rie!" exclaimed her sister, as Elbraham recalled the past night's scene and felt uncomfortable.

"I am going back to Hampton," said Marie quietly and without heeding her sister's extended hands; and on reaching home the honourable sisters were loud in their questions, and full of surprise to see her back, but Marie was reticent. She was not quite well; she was tired with the effects of the party; and she did not think Clotilde wished her to stay

longer.

"But Clotilde must give way in such cases. It is her duty to study her sister now that she is well married."

For the first time in her life Marie saw herself as she was, and at night, when the cousins were alone, and Ruth had been helping her to undress, the latter was startled into a belief that Marie was ill and delirious, for soon after she had dropped into her usual calm and peaceful sleep she was awakened by her cousin, looking strange and pale in her long white robe and with her black dishevelled hair about her shoulders.

"Are you ill, dear?" cried Ruth, starting up.

"Yes, so ill—so ill!" moaned Marie; and Ruth clasped her affectionately in her arms, to find her eyes wet with tears, and her hands like ice.

"What is it?" whispered Ruth; "let me call aunts."

"No, no, let me stay here; lie down again, Ruthy: I want to talk to you."

"But you are ill, dear!" cried Ruth.

"Only in mind, Ruthy. There, lie still, hold my hands and let me lay my head by yours; I want to talk."

To Ruth's surprise, Marie sank upon her knees by the bedside, clasped her in her arms, and laid her cheek upon the pillow.

"There," continued Marie, "I can talk to you now," and to the wondering girl's astonishment she sobbed hysterically, asking for her sympathy and love. "For I have grown to hate myself, Ruth—to be ashamed of what I am. I'd give the world to be like you."

"Oh, Marie, Marie," sobbed Ruth, "pray, pray don't speak of yourself like that! I have tried so hard to love Clotilde, but she has been cruel to me, I never could; but you—you have always been kind, and I do love you. You always took my part."

"So that I might be a tyrant to you myself, you foolish child," said Marie bitterly. "Oh, Ruth, Ruth, Ruth! if we had had a mother by our side I should have been a different woman."

"There is something wrong, Marie; I can see it in your face." And she hurriedly began to dress.

Then, and then only, did Marie give way to her feelings, sobbing with hysterical rage till Ruth was alarmed, and clung to her, begging her to be calm.

By degrees the whole bitter story came out, Marie keeping nothing back, but pouring forth the tale of her wrong with all an injured woman's passionate jealousy and despair.

She did not notice how by degrees, as she went on, Ruth had grown white as ashes, and had gradually loosened her arms from round her, edging slowly away till she stood there with her arms hanging listlessly at her side, and in this attitude she listened to the bitter, passionate declarations of her cousin.

"I wish I was dead!" cried Marie. "I thought him so true, and manly, and honest, and yet he could be guilty of so cruel, so foul a wrong; and oh, Ruth, Ruth! I loved with all my heart—loved him as I hate and despise him now."

She started and looked wonderingly at her cousin, and asked herself whether this was the gentle, yielding girl who had been her and her sister's butt and victim these many years, for as she finished Ruth's ashy face became suffused with anger.

"It is false! It is a cruel lie!"

"It is true, you foolish child!" retorted Marie angrily.

"I tell you it is false!" cried Ruth. "Captain Glen is too true and noble to be so wicked as you say. I will not believe it. I do not care; I would not believe it unless he stood here and owned to it himself. I know it is cruel and wicked to say so, but it is Clotilde who is to blame. Marcus Glen loves you, and he would not do you such a wrong."

"You are too young and innocent, Ruth," said Marie coldly. "Good-night. It is only the wakening from another dream."

Volume Three—Chapter Five.

The Reward of Perseverance.

Paul Montaigne made Ruth shudder with a look, and told her aunts that they had only to wait, for Lord Henry would again propose.

He was right.

"If your aunts did not object, Marie, it is a delicious evening for a stroll round the Gardens," said Lord Henry Moorpark, as they stood in the drawing-room looking at the black shadow cast by the full moon across the little court where the jets of water gurgled and plashed, and the few gold-fish sailed round and round, gaping and staring with

their protuberant eyes like so many Elbrahams running their mill-horse round in the search for wealth.

“I don’t think I should object, sister, if Marie would like to go,” said the Honourable Philippa.

“I do not think I should mind, sister,” said the Honourable Isabella. “And besides, Joseph might walk behind them, as he does when we go for a walk.”

“Joseph will be busy,” said the Honourable Philippa tartly. “Ruth dear, would you like to accompany your cousin?”

“If you would excuse me, aunt, I should prefer to stay,” said Ruth humbly, and with a lively recollection of the snubbing she had once received for eagerly embracing a similar offer.

“Would dear Lord Henry mind taking Marie unaccompanied by anyone else?” said the Honourable Philippa; and Lord Henry said he should only be too charmed to take her alone.

Marie had been sitting with a half-contemptuous smile upon her lip, but as Lord Henry turned to her she rose and left the room, to return shortly with a large scarf thrown over her head and round her neck.

The old man gazed wistfully at the beautiful figure, and uttered a low sigh. Then, rising, the couple left the room, Lord Henry saying that they would not be long; and, descending, they crossed the court and made their way into the gardens, confining themselves first to the broader walks, talking of the beauty of the night, the lovely effects of light and shadow in the formal old place, whose closely-clipped angularity was softened by the night.

Marie said but little, listening in a quiet, contented frame of mind while Lord Henry made comparisons between the gardens and park and those of Versailles, Fontainebleau, and other places he had visited abroad.

“You would like to travel, would you not?” he said, looking at her inquiringly.

“I used to think it would be one of the greatest joys of existence,” she replied; “but somehow of late I have felt content to stay as I am.”

“Always?” he said sadly.

“Yes. I don’t know.—Lord Henry,” she whispered, in a quick, agitated manner, “take me away from here. Let us go back.”

He was startled by her energy, and for the first time saw that they were not alone, for there in the bright moonlight were a couple of officers sauntering along, evidently in ignorance of the proximity of Lord Henry and his companion.

“Do you wish Captain Glen to see you, Marie?” said Lord Henry, with a shade of bitterness in his voice.

“Why do you ask me that?” she retorted.

“You see,” he replied coldly, “we are in the shadow, and if we remain here they will pass on without noticing us.”

“Let us stay,” she said; and they remained upon the velvet turf beneath a row of limes whose shadow was perfectly black; and as they rested silent and watchful there, they saw the two young men pass slowly in the silvery moonlight, talking carelessly till they were out of sight.

“Youth against age,” mused Lord Henry, as he stood gazing after the young officers. “Why am I so weak as to cling to this silly sentiment? At my time of life I should be a wiser man. I visit, I talk, I bring her presents, I pour before her all that is rich in an old man’s love, and she is kind and gentle, but unmoved. Then comes youth, and his presence even at a distance works a change in her such as I have never seen when I have tried my best to win her regard. Ah well! I should respect her the more for her honesty. Our hearts are not our own, and, poor child! she loves him still.”

He started from his reverie to see that Marie was standing beside him, gazing along the broad path at whose end the officers had disappeared.

“Marie,” he said softly; and he took her hand, but she did not move, and the hand was very cold.

“Marie,” he said again; and she started back into the present.

“Lord Henry!” she faltered.

“We are alone here, my child, and I can speak to you plainly. You know how long and well I have loved you. Let me tell you now that the old man’s love is stronger and truer than ever, but it is blended with something better, and is richer than it was before. Marie, my child, I would give all I possess—yes, even the last few years of my life—to see you happy. Shall I try to make your life a happy one?”

She looked at him calmly, and laid her other hand upon his as he clasped her right.

“Yes, Lord Henry,” she said, “if you will.”

“I will, my child,” he said earnestly. “God giving me strength, I will do all I can to make you happy.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“The scene on that dreadful night, my child, has lever been cleared up. You have never fairly heard ill. You love Captain Glen still, and he may have a very good defence for what we unfortunately saw. Shall I fetch him back to you

now? I will be as our father, as his judge; and if I say he can give a satisfactory explanation, you shall forgive him."

Marie had misunderstood him at first, but now his words were clear, and she started from him in passionate anger.

"See him—speak to him—listen to his perjuries gain—never!" she cried. "Take me home. No words of his could ever undo the past."

"Be calm, my child," he whispered, "and listen, his young heart beats for him still. Let me fetch him. There may be grounds for forgiveness even now."

"Lord Henry!"

"Appearances are deceitful," he said, interrupting her. "Let me try to make you happy. Believe me, I have your welfare so at heart that I would sacrifice myself for your sake."

She grew calmer as she listened to his words, and when he had ended, laid her hand again in his.

"You do not know me yet," she said softly. "I will speak out now without fear and shame. I did love him, Lord Henry. Heaven knows how dearly I loved him when he passed me over for my sister; and when she treated him so heartlessly, my love for him seemed to grow the stronger. When he turned to me at last, I thought that life would be one long day of joy."

She paused, and Lord Henry watched her with a growing reverence in his face.

"Then came that dreadful night," she continued, "and all was at an end. The old love is dead, Lord Henry, and what you have seen to-night was but the agitation such a meeting would produce. Take me home now—take me home."

"No," he said tenderly; "you are agitated, my child. Let us walk a little longer. Marie," he continued, as he held her hand in his, and made no attempt to move, "I once asked you to be an old man's wife. I told you to-night how your happiness is mine. Forgive me if I ask you again—ask you to give me the right to protect you against the world, and while I remain here to devote my life to making yours glide happily, restfully on. Am I mad in asking this of you once more?"

She did not answer for some moments, but when she did she laid her other hand in his, and suffered him to draw her nearer to him till her head rested upon his shoulder.

Marie went straight back to her room and sat down to think, with her face buried in her hands, till she felt them touched, when she started up, and found her cousin gazing at her questioningly. She told Ruth all, the communication almost resulting in a quarrel, for the girl had fired up and accused her of cruelty.

"You are condemning him and yourself to misery," she cried, "and I will speak. Oh, Marie, Marie! undo all this; I am sure that some day you will be sorry for it."

"You foolish child," said Marie, kissing her affectionately. "Oh, Ruthy, I wish we had known more of each other's hearts. You are so good in your disposition that you judge the world according to your own standard."

"Oh no, no, I do not!" cried Ruth. "I only speak because I am sure Captain Glen is too good and honest a gentleman to behave as you have said."

"Perhaps so," said Marie coldly, as she caressed and smoothed Ruth's beautiful hair. "But you must not let this advocacy of yours win you too much to Captain Glen's side."

"What do you mean?" cried Ruth, flushing.

"I mean that he is not to be trusted, and that it would be a severe blow to me if I found that you had been listening to him, as might be the case, when I am not near to take care of and protect you."

"Oh, pray. Marie!" cried Ruth, with her face like crimson, "don't talk like that. Oh no, no! I could never think of anyone like that if he had been your lover, Marie, which he is."

"Clotilde's lover—my lover—your lover—any handsome woman's lover. Oh! Ruthie!" said Marie scornfully, "let us be too womanly to give him even a second thought. There, it is all over. Dear Lord Henry was so tender and kind to me," she continued lightly. "He was as bad as you, though, at first."

"How as bad as I?" said Ruth.

"He wanted to fetch that man to give place to him. To make me happy, he said."

"There!" cried Ruth excitedly; "and he is right. Lord Henry is so wise and good, and he must know."

"He is one of the best and noblest of gentlemen," said Marie, throwing back her head and speaking proudly, "and I'll try to make him the truest and best of wives."

"But, oh, Marie! don't be angry with me, dear," cried Ruth, clinging to her; "think a moment. Suppose—suppose you should find out afterwards that you had misjudged Captain Glen."

"Hush!" cried Marie; and her face looked so fierce and stern that Ruth shrank from her. "Never speak to me again like that. I tell you, it is dead now—my love for him is dead. You insult me by mentioning his name to Lord Henry's affianced wife."

Ruth crept back to her to place her arms tenderly round her neck, and nestle in the proud woman's breast.

"I do love you, Marie," she said tenderly; "and I pray for your future. May you, dear, be very, very happy!"

"I shall be," said Marie proudly; "for I am to marry one whom I can esteem, and whom I shall try to love."

Ruth wept softly upon her cousin's breast for a few minutes, and then started from her and wiped away her tears, for there were footsteps on the stairs.

The reign of coldness was at an end, and the honourable sisters had their hearts set at rest by the announcement Lord Henry had been making to them below.

He had sat for some time in silence, and the subject was too delicate for the ladies to approach. They had been about to summon Marie to return, but he had smiled, and suggested that she should be left to herself.

Then the Honourable Philippa's heart had sunk, so had the heart of the Honourable Isabella, whose mind was in a paradoxical state, for she longed to see and hear that Captain Glen was happy; and to have added to his happiness she would have given him Marie's hand at any moment, but at the same time it made her tremble, and the tears rose to her dim eyes whenever she dwelt upon the possibility of another becoming his wife.

A pause had followed, during which Lord Henry had rested his elbow upon the table and his head upon his hand, and there, with the tears hanging on the lashes of his half-closed eyes, and as if in ignorance of the presence of the sisters, he sat thinking dreamily, and smiling softly at the vacancy before him in the gloomy room.

The Honourable Philippa felt that her hopes had been once more dashed, and that Lord Henry had that night proposed and been refused.

"May I send you some tea, Lord Henry?" she said faintly.

"I beg your pardon, dear Miss Philippa, dear Miss Isabella," he cried, starting up with a sweet smile upon his face and the weak tears in his eyes. "I was so overpowered by the enjoyment of my own selfish happiness that I could think of nothing else."

"Happiness?" faltered the Honourable Philippa; and her sister's hand trembled about her waist as if she were busily trying to unpick the gathers of her antique poplin gown.

"Yes, my dear ladies," he said, "happiness!" and he took and kissed in turn their trembling hands. "Our dear Marie has accepted me, and with your consent, as I am growing an old man fast, and time is short, we will be married quietly almost at once."

The Honourable Philippa sank back agitated *à la mode*. The Honourable Isabella sank back feeling really faint and with a strange fluttering at her heart, for, like some mad dream, the idea would come that, now his suit with Marie was perfectly hopeless, Captain Glen might yet say sweet words to her.

It was a mad dream, but it lasted for some hours. It lasted till after Lord Henry had bade them affectionately farewell, and they had gone up to the young girls' room, and Marie had been kissed and blessed with prayers for her happiness.

It lasted, too, until the honourable sisters had retired for the night; and somehow the joyous feeling of hope that had been deferred so long would keep rising brighter and brighter in the Honourable Isabella's breast. By the light of that hope she saw the manly, handsome face of Marcus Glen smiling upon her, as he came and told her that it was not too late even now, and that Ninon de l'Enclos was quite venerable when she loved.

It was very pleasant, and an unwonted flush burned in her face—just such a flush as appeared there when she tried some of that peculiar white paste belonging to Lady Anna Maria Morton, which, applied to the cheeks, turned them of a peachy red.

"It is very foolish of me," she murmured, in quite a cooing voice; "but I don't know: Lady Anna Maria is going to be married to a young and handsome husband, so why should not I?"

Poor little lady! She was finishing her night toilet as she thought all this, and then it was time to put out the lights.

There were two—an unwonted extravagance—burning, one on either side of the little old-fashioned toilet-glass, and with a smile of satisfaction she paused to look at herself before extinguishing the candles.

There was but little vanity in her composition, and it left room for a great deal of latent affection. As she gazed into the old glass the extinguisher dropped from her hand; she uttered a pitiful cry, and sank into a chair sobbing and bewailing her lost youth.

"No, no, no!" she sobbed; "he could never love such a dreadful thing as that!" And as she sat there the candles burned down, one to drop out at once, the other to flicker and dance in a ghostly way, but the Honourable Isabella heeded it not, for she was assisting at the interment of her love.

"He could never love such a one as I," she said to herself; and as she sat there in the cold and darkness, her thin hands pressed one upon the other, her heart seemed to ask her who there was for Captain Glen to love; and as she asked herself the question the soft, innocent face of Ruth rose before her, and seemed to be looking gently and kindly in her eyes as she dropped asleep.

Volume Three—Chapter Six.

The Double Knot.

As Gertrude Huish, wild with horror and half mad as she realised that there was something which she could not comprehend about the man who had clasped her in his arms, raised her voice in a loud appeal for help, steps were heard upon the stairs, and there was loud knocking.

“Go in there!” was whispered hoarsely, and trembling with the great dread which had come upon her she escaped from the hands which held her, rushed through an open door and shut it to and locked it before she stood alone in the darkness, ready to swoon away.

It was horrible! Those rumours about John Huish which she had proudly refused to believe—were they, then, all true? That woman had claimed him for her husband, and what, then, was she? And then his manner—the coming of the police—his conduct to her!

“God help me!” she half cried. “It is not he—it cannot be! What is to become of me? What shall I do?”

Yes; that was it. That explained the feeling of loathing she had felt when he clasped her in his arms. At other times her arms had stolen round his neck, her lips had clung to his; while now this man seemed half mad, his breath reeked of spirits, and he horrified her. Was it really, then, all true—that her husband had a double life, or was this some horror in his place?

Her position was maddening, and she felt at times that her reason must give way as, with hands extended, she felt her way in the intense darkness about the little bedroom till her hands rested upon the second door, which, like the first, was fast.

She remembered now that he had entered the room, locked the door, and removed the key, so that she was a prisoner in the utter darkness, where at last she threw herself upon her knees and prayed for help and guidance in her sore strait.

She rose up at last strengthened and calmer, feeling that she must escape and get back home at any cost. No, to Uncle Robert, who would help her; for she dared not, after leaving home as she did, face Lady Millet now.

Then, as she pressed her head with her hands, she felt confused and strange. Her brain swam, and she told herself that she must not go.

One o’clock—two o’clock had struck, and still she sat there in the darkness, with her brain growing more and more bewildered; and then she started to her feet and a cry rose to her lips, for there were footsteps without, and they passed the door and entered the next room.

Then as she stood listening to the heavy beating of her heart there was the harsh scratching noise made by a match, and a gleam of light shone beneath the door.

What should she do? He was coming again, and an insane desire came upon her to seek for the window and cast herself out—anything to avoid meeting him now.

At last, when the mental agony of suspense was more than she could bear longer, the door was suddenly opened, the light shone in, and a low hoarse cry of horror subsided into a wail of relief, for there stood the same woman, pale, even ghastly, holding a candle above her head, and with a dull, angry look upon her countenance as she entered the room.

“Well,” she said harshly, “are you satisfied?”

“I don’t understand you,” said Gertrude eagerly, as she crept towards her; “but you are a woman. Pray, pray help me to get away from this dreadful place. For indeed it is dreadful to me,” continued Gertrude, catching at the woman’s hand, but only for her to snatch it angrily away.

“You don’t know it as I do,” she said, “or you would call it a dreadful place. Don’t touch me: I hate you!”

“No, no, I never injured you!” cried Gertrude piteously. “Oh, as you are a woman, help me! Here, look, I will reward you. Take this.”

She hastily detached her watch and chain, and held them out.

“Pah!” exclaimed the woman, “what are they to me? I’ve seen him and them bring scores of them, and rich jewels, diamonds and pearls—I’m sick of them; and do you think I would take that from you?”

“Why not?” cried Gertrude. “Oh, have you no pity for me?”

“Pity? Pity for you! Why, are you not his wife?”

“Yes, yes, yes, but you cannot understand. I cannot explain. Help me to get away from here. I must go—to my friends.”

“Go? To your friends?” said the woman, looking perplexed. “What, have you quarrelled already?”

“Oh, do not ask me—I cannot tell you,” cried Gertrude piteously; “only help me to escape from here, and I will pray

for you to my dying day."

"What good's that?" said the woman mockingly. "I'm so bad that no one could pray me good. I'm a curse and a misery, and everything that's bad. Pray, indeed! I've prayed hundreds of times that I might die, but it's no good."

"Have you no heart—no feeling?" cried Gertrude, going down upon her knees.

"Not a bit," said the woman bitterly. "They crushed one and hardened the other till it all died."

"Let me pass you then!" cried Gertrude angrily. "I will not stay."

"If I let you pass, you could not get away. The doors are locked below, and you could not find the keys. You don't want to go."

"What can I say—how am I to tell you that I would give the world to get away from here?" cried Gertrude. "Oh, for Heaven's sake save me before he comes again!"

"He will not come again. He is downstairs drunk. He is always either drunk or mad. And so you are the new Mrs John Huish?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Gertrude; and then wildly, "Tell me, it is not true? You—you—cannot be his wife!"

"The parson said I was when we were married—Mrs Frank Riversley."

"Ah!" cried Gertrude joyously. "Sometimes," continued the woman, as if she enjoyed torturing her rival; "lately he has called himself John Huish—since he has neglected me so much to go to clubs and chambers."

"Oh!" sighed Gertrude.

"But I never complained."

"I cannot bear this," moaned Gertrude to herself; and then, fighting down the emotion, she crept upon her knees to the woman and clasped her hand.

"Let me go," she moaned. "Let me get away from here, and I will bless you. Ask anything of me you like, and it shall be yours, only get me away."

"You don't want to go," said the woman mockingly. "It's all a sham."

"How can I prove to you that I mean it?" cried Gertrude.

"I don't know; I only know that if I did he would kill me."

"Oh no, no; he dare not touch you. Come with me, then, and I'll see that you are not hurt."

"Are you in earnest? Better not. I ought to be in bed now—sick almost to death. Better stay," she said mockingly. "This may kill me. I hope it will, and then you can be happy—with him!"

"No! no! no!" cried Gertrude wildly. "Never again. I did not know. It is too dreadful! Woman, if you hope for mercy at the last, help me to get away before I see that man again."

"That man? that man?"

"No, no," cried Gertrude wildly. "I cannot explain. It is too dreadful! He is not my husband. He is like him, but he is not him. I don't know what I am saying. I cannot explain it. Only for God's sake get me away from here, or I shall go mad!"

The woman stood gazing at her piercingly as Gertrude cast herself at her feet.

"You do mean it, then?" she said at last.

"Mean it? Yes. I have been deceived—cheated. This man is—Oh! I don't know—I don't know," she cried wildly; "but pray help me, and let me go!"

The woman gazed down at her for a few moments longer, and then said huskily, "Come!"

Gertrude caught at the hand held forth to her, and suffered herself to be led out on to the landing, and then slowly down the dark stairs of the old City mansion in which they were, till they stood in the narrow hall, where, reaching up, the woman thrust her hand into a niche and drew out a key, and then set down and blew out the light.

Gertrude stood trembling, and she clung to the hand which touched her.

"Afraid of the dark?"

"No, no! But pray make haste; he may hear."

"No. He hears nothing after he has taken so much brandy. He was wild with the other lodgers for interfering; and when he is wild he drinks till he goes to sleep, and when he wakes—"

She did not finish her sentence, but led her companion to the door, unlocked it, and the next moment the cool dank

air of the night was blowing upon Gertrude's cheek, as she dashed out into the narrow street, flying like some hunted beast, in the full belief that the steps she heard were those of the man who could not be the husband whom she loved.

Volume Three—Chapter Seven.

Between Sisters.

"I wished to do everything for the best, my child," said Lord Henry Moorpark. "I did not like the idea, but Elbraham pressed me to come, and for your sake, as Mrs Elbraham is your sister, I gave way. I wish you had spoken sooner. We have not dined with them since we have been married."

It was too late then, for they were in the carriage on the way to Palace Gardens. But the dinner-party was not to pass off without trouble, for after the ladies had left, and while Lord Henry was fighting hard with a bad cigar, sipping his coffee and listening to his brother-in-law's boastings about the way in which the money market was rigged, the butler entered softly, and whispered something to Lord Henry, who rose on the instant.

"Anything wrong, Moorpark?" said Elbraham, in his coarse, rough way.

"Only a call for me," cried Lord Henry hastily. "Pray sit still, and do not let my absence interfere with your enjoyment."

"All right; come back as soon as you can," cried Elbraham; but by that time Lord Henry was in the hall, for the butler had whispered to him that her ladyship had been suddenly taken ill.

To Lord Henry's astonishment, he found Marie in the hall, hastily drawing a long scarf round her neck and over her head.

"Take me home," she whispered hoarsely, as he hurried to her side.

"My darling! are you ill?" he cried.

"Yes. Very ill, take me home."

"Had I not better send for medical help at once?"

"No, no. Home! home!" she whispered, as she clung to his arm.

"But the carriage, my darling? It will not be here till after ten."

"Let me walk. Take a cab. Anything; only get me away from this house," she whispered imploringly; and there was that in her face which made Lord Henry send at once for a cab; and it was not until they were in it, and on their way to their house in Saint James's, that Marie seemed as if she could breathe.

She had thrown herself into his arms as soon as they were in the cab, excitedly bidding him tell her that he trusted her, that she was his own wife, and ended by such a hysterical burst that he grew alarmed, and was about to bid the driver stop at the first doctors, when she seemed to divine that which he intended to do, and gradually grew calmer.

Hereupon he was about to question her, but at his first words the symptoms from which she suffered seemed ready to recur, so he contented himself with holding her hands in his, while she lay back with her head upon his shoulder, every now and then uttering a piteous moan.

The ladies had ascended to the drawing-room that evening, and as soon as they were seated alone there, Marie felt that she had made a mistake in coming.

The memory of the evening of the "at home" came back very vividly, try how she would to drive it away, and whenever she glanced furtively at Clotilde, she seemed to be gazing not at her sister, but at the woman who had done her a deadly injury.

She fought against this feeling, but it seemed to strengthen, especially as Clotilde kept smiling in a triumphant way—so it seemed to her; and Marie shivered as she felt that she was beginning to hate this sister of hers.

It only wanted Clotilde's confession to seal the growing feud, and make Marie's dislike grow into hate indeed.

"How little we see of each other now, love!" began Clotilde. "I thought, dear, that when we were married we should be inseparable. Is it my fault?"

"My husband is very fond of quiet," said Marie. "We go out but seldom."

"Poor old gentleman!" said Clotilde mockingly. "I hope you nurse him well."

Marie started, but she said nothing, and Clotilde went on:

"Isn't it nice, dear, to be one's own mistress, with plenty of money at one's command, and as much jewellery as one likes? Do you remember how we used to long for it all?"

“Yes, I remember,” replied Marie, sighing in spite of herself.

“You remember? Yes, and you sigh about it. Why, Rie, you ought to be as merry as the day is long. Lord Henry is a dear old fellow. How much older, though, he seems than Elbraham! I say, Rie, wouldn’t you like to change?”

“The conversation?” said Marie. “Yes; certainly.”

“No, my dear, not the conversation, but husbands. Poor old Rie! I rather pity you, for Lord Henry is decidedly slow.”

“Clotilde,” said Marie, with dignity. “Lord Henry Moorpark is my dear husband and your guest. The way in which you are speaking of him gives me pain.”

“Pain? Why, Rie, what stuff you are talking—and to me! Heigho! it seems very hard upon us that we should have had to marry these wretched old men, instead of such fellows as—say Captain Glen.”

“How can you speak like that, Clo!” cried her sister, flushing. “I beg you will be silent.”

“Beg, then,” retorted Clotilde, with a resumption of her old schoolroom ways. “Who cares? I shall talk as I like.”

“Do you think it is respectful to your husband or your duty as a woman to speak of—of—that man as you do.”

“Oh yes,” replied Clotilde carelessly. “Why not? I liked Marcus Glen ever so.”

“Clotilde! for heaven’s sake be silent. Think of your position—of what you are. Your words are terrible.”

“Terrible? What, because I said I liked Marcus Glen? Why, so I do. He’s a splendid fellow.”

Marie’s eyes sought the door, but they were quite alone, and she glanced back at her sister with a look of disgust and annoyance painted upon her face in vivid colours.

“Oh, there’s no one to hear us, and I don’t mind what I say before you, Rie. You won’t go and tell tales. You dare not. I say dare,” she continued, with a malignantly spiteful look in her countenance. “You were fond of Marcus Glen, weren’t you?”

Marie did not reply, but sat there with an outraged look upon her face, and Clotilde smiled to herself, and her eyes glittered with malicious delight as she went on:

“Do you know, Rie, I have a good mind to quarrel with you to-night, as I have got you here.”

“Quarrel with me? Why should you do that?” said Marie quietly.

“Oh, for a hundred reasons, my sweet sister. For one, because it is so long since you and I had a good scold. For another, because it was so underhanded of you to hold back when dear aunties wanted us to marry well.”

“Don’t be foolish, Clo!” said Marie. “Let us talk of something else.”

“Yes, we will by-and-by, my sweet sissy; but it was shabby of you to let me marry my old man, and then take advantage of my being fast to make up to my former beau.”

“Can such talk as this benefit either of us?” said Marie, flushing. “Surely it is beneath your dignity as a wife to speak as you do.”

“Dignity? Pooh! Women who marry as we have done, for money, have no dignity—they have sold it.”

“Clotilde!”

“Well, it’s quite true, and you know it. Trash! As if we either of us ever had any. It was nipped in the bud by our dear aunts. No, my dear Rie, we have no dignity, either of us. Slaves have no such commodity. We are only white slaves, the property of the dreadful old men who took a fancy to us and bought us!”

“For heaven’s sake, Clo, be silent,” cried Marie, who had to fight hard to keep down her agitation. “This is cruel?”

“Well, what if it is? Why should you not feel it as well as I? You hate and despise your husband as much as I do mine, and though you are so quiet and so shy, Rie, you mean to take your revenge; and why not?”

“I do not understand you,” exclaimed Marie.

“Bah! That you do, and I know it. I am not so mad as to believe in your smooth ways and sham fondness for that old man.”

“Clotilde, I will not sit and listen to you,” cried Marie. “Your words are disgraceful.”

“Better speak plain than be smug and smooth and secretive, you handsome hypocrite! There, it won’t do, Rie. You may as well drop the veil before me. All this wonderful show of modesty and mock devotion is thrown away.”

“Are you going out of your senses?” said Marie hoarsely.

“Half-way,” was the reply. “It is enough to madden any woman, to be sold as I was.”

“You accepted Mr Elbraham of your own free will,” said Marie indignantly, “and it is your duty to remember that you

are his wife.”

“Is it?” cried Clotilde angrily, and speaking as if she were fanning her temper to raging point. “I know what my duty is to my slave-owner better than you can tell me, madam; but, clever as you are, you did not keep out of the marriage mess.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?” cried Clotilde, who was excited with the wine she had drunk, and her desire to sting her sister to the quick. “Why, you did not suppose I was going to sell myself for a position and let you hang back and marry the man I loved.”

“The man you loved?” said Marie, turning very pale.

“Yes, the man I loved—Marcus Glen. He loved me, and you knew it, and hung back always, with your soft, cat-like ways, trying to win him from me.”

“It is not true,” cried Marie.

“Yes, it is, and you know it is true. That’s why you refused Lord Henry at first, so that you might win Marcus, as you thought. Do you think I was blind?”

“Clotilde,” said Marie, “this is terrible to me! Did you ask me here to-night to insult me?”

“Not I, my dear, only to congratulate you on being such a good, dutiful girl, and obeying our sweetly-affectionate, care-taking, washed-out old aunts. It is so pleasant to see you like I am, and well out in society. I meant that you should be, and so you are. Why, you are ever so much better off than I am—Lady Henry Moorpark. I ought to rise and make obeisance to you, but I am too lazy. But to set aside joking, you ought to be highly grateful, and kiss me for what I have done.”

“I do not understand you,” said Marie, unconsciously playing with her wedding-ring.

“Why, I brought you to your senses, silly child!”

“Brought me to my senses!” exclaimed Marie, fighting down an intense desire to rise and leave the room.

“To be sure, my dear; I have quite taken to dear aunts’ worldly ideas of what is right for girls to do. You know I did my duty, as they laid it out for me; and then, when I saw my silly sister hang back and spend her time in making eyes at the penniless officer I could not afford to marry, I said. ‘This will not do. I love dear Marie too well to let her make a fool of herself. She shall marry Lord Henry Moorpark, or I’ll know the reason why.’”

“You are talking folly,” said Marie huskily.

“Perhaps so, Rie; but you did not marry my Marcus, and you did marry Lord Henry. Yes, that’s the golden link of your slavery, sweet sister,” she said as she saw Marie touch her wedding-ring; “but how dutiful you must feel! Haven’t seen Marcus lately, have you?”

Marie made no reply.

“You don’t believe me,” continued Clotilde maliciously. “It was very funny how it all turned out. Do you remember the night of our party?”

Did she remember it! The recollection was burned into her brain.

“Poor Marcus!” continued Clotilde, “he is a great goose of a fellow. How astonished he looked!”

Marie was white and red by turns, and the place seemed to swim round before her; but she fought hard to hide her feelings from her sister’s malicious eyes.

“I must do him the justice to say that he behaved very well on the whole.”

“Clotilde, you must be mad,” said Marie hoarsely. “If you were in your right senses, you would not speak like this.”

“Oh yes, I would, my dear,” laughed Clotilde. “I am no more mad than you are; but I was determined that you should never marry Marcus Glen, and I kept you apart.”

“It is false,” cried Marie excitedly. “I threw him over for his reckless conduct with you.”

“You threw him over because I made you, my dear,” said Clotilde contemptuously. “Do you think, Rie, I was going to sit still here as Elbraham’s wife, and see you marry Marcus! No, my dear, that I would not do.”

Marie was like stone now, and she remained motionless, while Clotilde lay back in her lounge and continued her shameless avowals.

“I wanted to spite you a little, darling, in a kindly sort of way, and I could not have behaved better to you than to help you do your duty to our dear aunts and win a rich husband and a title.”

“Is this talk for some purpose?” said Marie at last, angrily.

"Yes, my dear, of course it is; but you must be very smooth-faced and quiet now, and not let the gentlemen see that we have been talking about our old beaux. But seriously, Rie, you never thought I should sit down quietly and let you carry off Marcus Glen?"

Marie began to tremble, for a horrible suspicion had assailed her, one which moment by moment grew more strong; while, seeing the effect of her words, Clotilde went on with malicious glee:

"It would not do at any cost, my dear, so I carried off poor stupid Marcus that night."

"This was your doing, Clotilde," said Marie at last, panting as if for breath.

"To be sure it was. Poor old fellow! He behaved very nicely by holding his tongue and taking all the blame, when he was as innocent as a lamb."

"Innocent!" exclaimed Marie involuntarily.

"To be sure he was, my dear. Why, he was as fond of you as could be, only I led him into that scrape so that he would not be able—"

Clotilde got no farther, for even she was startled at the effect of her words upon her sister, who sprang from her seat and caught her by the hands.

"Clotilde!" she exclaimed hoarsely, "this is all a lie! Tell me it is all a lie, and I will forgive you."

"Do as you like, only don't squeeze diamond rings into my fingers. All true enough: Marcus held his tongue, as I tell you, like a lamb, to save my credit. What fools men are!"

"Then—then," wailed Marie, "he was true?"

"Why, my sentimental sister! You ought to bless me instead of looking like that."

For a moment, though, in spite of her forced mirth, Clotilde shrank from her sister's wild gaze, but only to put on an air of bravado as she exclaimed:

"There, Rie, I made up my mind to serve you out, and I did."

Marie drew away from her, gazing in her false, handsome face the while, and sank back in the nearest chair, holding her hands pressed against her side as if she were in terrible pain, while her face worked as a convulsive sob escaped from her breast.

"What does it matter now? You are looking as if—as if—Rie! Here, take my salts."

"Keep back, woman—don't touch me!" cried Marie, in a low voice. "Sister? No, you must be a demon, and—oh! God help me! God help me!" she wailed; "what have I done?"

Clotilde rushed at her with an imperious "Hush!" but her sister avoided her grasp, and fled to the bell, rang it furiously, and startled Clotilde into silence, as a servant hurried up.

"Quick! I am ill. Fetch Lord Henry," gasped Marie; and as the butler hurried out, she followed him downstairs, leaving her sister too much startled by the effects of her revelation to do more than listen at the half-opened door.

"What do I care!" she said at last. "She is ill, and she is gone. She will not dare to say a word, and I can live down any nonsense on the part of Rie."

The front door closed as she uttered these words, after which she turned back into the room, and threw herself upon a couch.

"I wish someone would come, if it was only stupid little Dick," she said pettishly. "Poor old Rie! But she did not marry Marcus Glen."

Clotilde's white teeth closed with a snap, and she lay perfectly still, gazing at her handsome face in the nearest glass.

Volume Three—Chapter Eight.

Gertrude Takes Sanctuary.

Valentine Vidler and Salome his wife chirped about the gloomy house in Wimpole Street like a pair of exceedingly happy crickets. Vidler used to kiss Mrs V. and say she was a "dear little woman," and Mrs V. would always, when they were downstairs amongst the shining coppers and tins, call Vidler "love." They were quaint to look at, but their blood circulated just as did that of other specimens of humanity; their nerves grew tense or slack in the same way; and in their fashion they thoroughly enjoyed life.

Certainly no children were born unto them, a fact due, perhaps, to the absence of light; but somehow the little couple were very happy without, and so their life glided on as they placidly thought of other people's troubles, talked of how the Captain took this or that, wondered when Sir Humphrey would come and see him again; if Lady Millet would ever get over the snubbing she had had, for wanting to interfere during a visit, and let in light, which she declared she could not exist without, and Captain Millet had told her she could get plenty out of doors.

Dull as the house seemed, it was never dull to Salome, with her dusting, cleaning, cooking, and cutting-up little squares and diamonds of cotton print for her master's needle, and afterwards lining and quilting the counterpanes, which were in great request for charitable affairs and fancy bazaars.

The kitchen at Wimpole Street was very cosy in its way—a good fire always burned in the glistening grate, a cricket or two chirped in warm corners; there was a very white hearthstone, a very bright steel fender, and a very thick warm hearthrug, composed of cloth shreds, in front of the little round table drawn up pretty close; for absence of light meant apparently absence of heat.

The tea-things were out, it being eight o'clock; the Captain's dinner over, Renée seated by the panel reading to him in a low voice, and the Vidlers' duties done for the day. Hence, then, they had their tea punctually at eight o'clock, making it their supper as well.

Vidler was busy, with a white napkin spread over his knees, making toast, which Mrs V. buttered liberally, and then placed round after round upon the plate, which just fitted the steel disc in the fender.

The kettle was sending out its column of steam, the hot toast looked buttery and brown, and a fragrant scent arose from the teapot, the infusion being strong and good, consequent upon the Captain's having one cup directly after his dinner, and the pot being kept afterwards to draw.

The meal over and the tea-things washed up—Salome doing the washing, finishing off with that special rinse round of the tray with hot water and the pouring out of the rinsings at one corner, just as a photographer used to cover his plate with collodion—the table was cleared, aprons folded and put away by Vidler in the dresser drawer, while his wife brushed up the hearth, and then came the event of the day—that is to say, the work being done, came the play.

It was the Vidlers' sole amusement, and it was entered into with a kind of solemn unction in accordance with the gloom of the place. Some learned people would have been of opinion that a light gymnastic kind of sport would have been that most suited for such a life as the Vidlers led, and would have liked to see hooks in the ceiling, and Valentine and his little wife swinging by ropes and turning head over heels on bars for the bringing into play of unused muscles. They might have introduced, too, that pleasing occupation of turning one's self into a human quintain, with a couple of clubs swung round and round over the head to the great endangerment of the rows of plates and tureens upon the dresser, but they would have been wrong: the stairs gave both an abundance of gymnastic exercise, and their ordinary work brought their other muscles into play. Hence, then, they disported themselves over a pleasant pastime which combined skill, the elements of chance, and mental and arithmetical calculation—the Vidlers' pastime was cribbage.

The cards taken from the box which opened out into a board were tolerably clean, though faded, it being Salome's custom to rub them once a week with bread-crumbs, and upon the couple taking their places, with a vast amount of solemnity, spectacles were mounted, and the game began.

Old-fashioned six-card cribbage was their favourite, because, as Vidler said, he didn't care twopence for a game where there wasn't plenty of pegging; so the cards were cut. Salome won the deal; they were cut again, and she began.

It was a sight to see Salome deal the cards. Had they been hundred-pound notes she could not have been more particular; wetting her thumb, and taking the greatest care she could to deliver only one at a time, while Vidler looked calmly on, then took up his, smiled at them, selected two for the crib, frowned over them, counted how many he should hold, tried another way, seemed satisfied, and then as he threw out, having thoroughly instructed his partner—now his opponent—in all the technicalities and time-honoured sayings of the game, he informed Salome that he had contrived a "regular bilk."

"Have you?" said Salome, nodding and throwing out her own couple. "Cut up."

Vidler "cut up," and Salome took the card upon the top, exclaimed "Two for his heels," scored them, and Vidler frowned, for his "bilk" accorded wonderfully well with the turned-up card. "Master didn't seem to relish that cutlet," said Vidler, playing first—"six."

"No," said Salome, "he has been too much bothered lately—fifteen," and she scored a second "two."

"More trouble coming," said Vidler—"twenty-two."

"And nine's a screw," said Salome seriously, taking another couple for thirty-one.

Then the played cards were solemnly turned down and the game went on.

"Eight," said Vidler. "How ill Miss Renée looks!"

"Fourteen," said Salome, playing a six. "Yes, poor girl! she's brought her pigs to a bad market."

"Got you this time," said Vidler, smiling, as he played an ace—"fifteen"—and scored his two.

"Twenty," said Salome; and so the game went on, the little woman playing with all the serious precision of an old stager, calling thirty-one "eleven," informing Vidler when she was well ahead that it was "all Leadenhall Street to a China orange," and proving herself such an adept that the little man was thoroughly beaten.

"Better luck next time," said Vidler, giving the Cards a good shuffle; and then the pair stopped to listen, for faint and low, like a melody from another land, came the sad sweet voice of Renée, singing that wonderful old Irish air, "Grammachree," putting an end to the play, for the couple sat and listened, Vidler nodding his head gently, and

waving a card to the melancholy cadence till it ended, when the game once more began.

Pop!

“Bless us and save us?” cried Salome, dropping her Cribbage-peg as she was in the act of scoring three for a run; “is it a purse or a coffin?”

Vidler rose, and, taking the tongs, carefully picked up the cinder which had flown from the fire, and was now making an unpleasant savour of burning woollen fabric to arise from the hearthrug. He laid it solemnly upon the table to cool, and then it was shaken by Salome, but gave forth no answering tinkle.

“It isn’t a purse,” she said, holding it to the light. “It’s a coffin!”

She handed the little hollow bubble of cindery coal-tar to her husband, and he laid it down, took off and wiped his perfectly clean spectacles, and replaced them before carefully examining the portent by the light.

“It’s a coffin for somebody,” he said solemnly; and then, as he carefully cremated the cinder in the most glowing portion of the fire, the couple sighed, resumed their places, and sat listening as the voice of Renée singing to Captain Millet once more came down to where they sat.

It was “Ye banks and braes” this time, and when the pathetic old air was ended Salome sighed.

“Ah, poor dear, yes—‘My false lu-huv has plu-ucked the ro-az, and le-heft the the—horn be-hi-hind with me,’” said and sang Salome, in a little piping plaintive voice. “I hope it isn’t for her!”

“It may mean only trouble,” said Vidler, with his head on one side. “I have known coffins pop out of the fire and no one die.”

“Oh dear no,” said Salome. “There’s not a minute passes but someone dies.”

“No,” said Vidler slowly, as if the great problem propounded required much consideration; “but so long as it isn’t anyone here, why, it don’t matter.”

“Quite so much,” said Salome correctively. “Let me see; it was three for a run. I shall beat you this time. You want fourteen.”

“Yes,” said Vidler, chuckling; “but it’s my first show. You want sixteen.”

“Yes,” said Salome, pegging one for a “go,” “but I’ve got hand and crib. Now then.”

“Sixteen,” said Vidler triumphantly, as he threw down his cards and stuck a peg in the winning hole.

“Think of that now,” said Salome, as she gathered up the cards for what she called a good shuffle, which was performed by dividing the pack in two equal portions and holding them as if about to build a card house, allowing them to fall alternately one over the other. Then they were knocked together hard and square, and handed to Vidler, who gave them what he termed “a Canterbury poke,” which consisted in rapidly thrusting his forefinger right to the centre of the pack and driving out a large portion of the cards, which were afterwards placed upon the top. Then the pack was cut once more, and game after game followed till suddenly there was a loud ring at the bell.

“What was that?” cried Salome.

“The coffin,” said Vidler solemnly.

“Bless us and save us, man, don’t look like that!” cried Salome; “it turns me cold all down my back;” and then, with a shiver, and very wide-open eyes, she followed her little lord up to the front door, where Huish’s maid was waiting with a note and a cab to take Renée away.

This caused a little flutter upstairs, and a greater one down, where Jane, with a few additions of her own, related the arrest of her master.

“It was trouble, then, and not death,” said Vidler sagely to his wife, who then had to answer the bell, and assist Renée, who, after a short conference with Captain Millet, dressed and hurried off to join her sister.

“Good-bye, my dear,” said the Captain, sighing. “I shall not go to bed. You may return.”

Renée was seen into the cab, and the Vidlers, upon receiving an intimation from their master, made up the kitchen fire and sat before it, as if cooking, to see if Mrs Morrison came back, which she did in about an hour, on finding from the cook that Huish had been and taken her sister away, the same personage informing her that Sir Humphrey and Mr Millet had not returned.

Renée hesitated for a time as to whether she should stay or go to Grosvenor Square to make inquiries; but this last she was averse to doing; and, with a full conviction upon her that Huish and Gertrude would be sure to call at Wimpole Street, even if she had not already missed them, she hurried back.

“They may come yet,” said Captain Millet quietly. “We will wait and see.”

Fresh candles were brought, and tea was made, of which no one partook, and then the occupants of the gloomy house waited hour after hour in full faith of some news coming during the night, with the consequence that everyone was on the alert when the bell rang about four o’clock.

Vidler hastened up to open the door, and uttered a cry of dismay which brought down Renée, for Gertrude Huish fell forward fainting into his arms, to lie where she was carried hour after hour, now awakening to a wild hysterical fit, now sinking back into semi-unconsciousness, and always unable to respond to the eager queries, till at last she started up wildly, and on recognising her sister, flung her arms round her neck, exclaiming:

"Oh, Ren, Ren! is there no more happiness on earth? My poor heart's broken: I shall die?"

Volume Three—Chapter Nine.

Lady Henry Grows Calm.

"Can you not take me into your confidence, Marie?" said Lord Henry, on meeting his wife at the breakfast-table the morning after her sister's revelation.

She looked at him wildly for a few moments, her large eyes encircled with dark rings, and the traces of terrible emotion in her blanched face.

She had been in a state of mental agony the night through, refusing to retire, and passing much of the time in pacing up and down the room. But towards morning she had grown calmer. Her mental pain was somewhat dulled, and as she perceived the terrible agitation into which she had plunged her husband, she began to feel a kind of remorse and pity for him as well as for herself.

At first she had been half maddened, for she did not for a moment doubt Clotilde's words. Everything was only too suggestive, and as she felt that she had hastily condemned Marcus Glen, who had been all that was chivalrous and true, there were moments when she told herself that she could not live.

It was so horrible. She had loved Marcus Glen with all the strong passion of her nature. For his sake she would have borne poverty and privation, and been truly happy, believing thoroughly in his love; but when, in place of finding him the true, honest gentleman she had trusted, she believed that he was base, her love had turned to hatred, and she had fled, telling herself that she had nothing to hope for now, and that if she could make others happy she need expect no more.

Awakening at last, after a night of bitter suffering, to the anguish of her husband, she had made a brave effort over self, and turned to him as her refuge from the suffering to which she was reduced.

She clung to him, praying for help and strength to cast out the image of Marcus Glen from her heart and at last she felt that she had the strength, and told herself that she would consider the past as dead.

But even as she lay there with her husband's hands pressed to her forehead, the thought would come that she ought to tell Marcus Glen that she knew the truth.

A paroxysm of agony followed this thought. What avail would it be now? She felt that he would curse her for her want of faith in him, and, think of it all as she would, she could only come to the conclusion that, in her haste and want of trust in him she loved, she had blasted her future, and must bear it to the end.

Daybreak at last; and with the sun came thoughts of her position, and the necessity for making some effort—an effort which she was now too weak to essay. But at last she rose, and as the time wore on begged Lord Henry to leave her, meeting him again a couple of hours later at breakfast, apparently calm, but with a tempest raging in her breast.

He uttered no word of reproach, but was tenderness itself, and the tears stole more than once down his furrowed cheeks; and when at last he appealed to her as her husband, she broke down, threw herself sobbing upon his breast, and begged him to spare her.

"I will not say another word," he replied gently. "My wish is to make you happy in my poor way, and I only pressed you for your confidence, so that I might help you to be more at rest."

"I don't like to have secrets from you," she whispered; "dear husband!"

He held her more tightly to his breast as she called him this, and she uttered a low sigh of relief, for it was as though he told her of his trust. It gave her strength to proceed, and she went on:

"My sister quarrelled with me, and said such bitter things that I could not bear them. She brought up the scene upon that terrible night of which you were a witness."

"Let it be buried with the past," said Lord Henry gravely. "It should never have been revived, and I see now but too plainly that I was to blame in accepting the invitation."

"Never accept one again; I could not bear it. Clotilde's path and mine must be separate through life. I could not meet her now."

"Are you not too hard upon your sister?"

"Hard?" cried Marie. "Oh no! You do not know all," she was about to say, but she refrained, and went on: "Clotilde has altered since her marriage. I think we should be happier apart. Help me in this, dear husband. It would be better so."

He raised her face, and gazed tenderly into her wild eyes, as he said:

“Your happiness is my care, Marie, my child. I promised to try and make your home one of rest and peace. Ask me what you will, and it shall be done.”

“Then you will keep our lives separate from my sister’s,” she cried eagerly.

“If you asked me my wishes on the subject,” he said quietly, and he smiled as he spoke. “I should gladly cut myself off from all connection with Mr Elbraham and his wife. But we have our social duties to perform, Marie, even if they are against our taste.”

“Duties!” cried Marie excitedly; “it is my duty to avoid my sister, yours to keep us apart. Believe me, this is for the best.”

“I gladly follow out your wishes, my child,” said Lord Henry, “and I will ask you no more questions if you will try to let this cloud go by.”

“Yes, yes,” she cried eagerly, “it is gone;” and she flung her arms round his neck, and sobbed hysterically upon his breast.

“There,” she cried with a piteous smile, for the face of Marcus Glen seemed to haunt her still. “Now I am quite calm, and I have a petition to make.”

“What is it?” he said with a sigh of relief, and the lines in his face grew less deep.

“I want you to let me ask my cousin Ruth to come and stay with me—to be like a companion to me. Don’t think,” she hastened to add, “that I am dull and want companions, but I have a double object to perform.”

“Yes?” he said inquiringly.

“I wish—I want to withdraw her from Clotilde’s influence.”

“A good and worthy desire, my child,” he said, bowing his approval. “I like Ruth very, very much. She is sweet, and natural, and true.”

“She is,” cried Marie eagerly.

“And your other object?”

“I wish to watch over her, and to try and influence her future. She would be happier with me, and if she is to marry I should like hers to be a worthy choice.”

“Of course, yes, you are quite right; and what do you say—shall we fetch her here?”

“Yes,” cried Marie eagerly.

“When? To-day?”

“Yes—no,” replied Marie. “I am not strong enough; I am not calm enough to-day. I will write and ask her to be ready to-morrow, and, if you will do it, let us drive down and fetch her.”

Lord Henry Moorpark sighed with relief and pleasure, and soon after, fighting bravely to crush down her own agony of heart, Marie wrote a note to ask her aunts’ permission for Ruth to come, and another to request her to be ready—and all the time with an intensity of sorrow striving with her wild and passionate love. She seemed to see in Ruth one who was to save her from the commission of a crime from which she shrank in horror. Ruth would be her protector. Ruth should be always with her, and she would learn from her sweet, innocent young heart how to school her own.

The visit of Ruth to her cousin in Saint James’s Square commenced during a temporary absence of Mr Paul Montaigne from his apartments at Teddington.

Business had taken him to London, where he stayed a week, at the end of which time he walked through the chestnut avenue quietly, as of old, paused by the Diana pool to cast a few crumbs to the fishes, and then continued his walk, with his hands behind him, to the Palace, where he was met by Joseph, at whom he smiled benignantly, and was shown in to where the honourable sisters were seated at their embroidery. The hands of the fair Isabella were a little more tremulous than was their wont, consequent upon an encounter during a walk, when she and her sister had met Glen.

The visitor was received most warmly, and heard glowing accounts of the happiness and brilliant establishments of the dear children.

“Yes,” he said blandly, “they must be happy. I had some thought of calling upon them when in town, but I bethought me that they must be fully occupied with their friends and the management of their homes, and that my visit, at present, might seem out of place.”

“I think it would have been a duty properly fulfilled—what do you say, sister?” exclaimed the Honourable Philippa.

“I think it would have been a duty and a kindness,” said the Honourable Isabella, making a couple of false stitches before she found out her mistake.

"I have been remiss," said Montaigne, with a bland smile, as he bent his head. "How day by day one awakens more and more to the fact that human nature is far from perfect!"

"Ah, indeed!" said the Honourable Philippa.

"Yes, indeed!" said the Honourable Isabella, with a lively recollection of her thoughts regarding Marcus Glen.

"I must try and remedy my failing, ladies, at my next visit to town. But how is the last lamb in this peaceful fold—Ruth?"

He uttered this inquiry with his eyes half-closed, and a calm, sweet smile played the while about his lips till he heard the Honourable Philippa's reply:

"Oh, she is in town! Lord and Lady Henry came down in the barouche the day before yesterday, and fetched her up to stay with them for some time."

The warm, pleasant look in Paul Montaigne's face changed to one of a grim cold grey; the smile disappeared, his lips tightened, and he seemed for the moment to have grown old and careworn. Even his voice changed, and sounded hard and harsh as he said quickly:

"Indeed? I did not know."

"Marie thought it would be a pleasant change for her, and companionable as well, and dear Lady Littletown, who was calling at the time, said it was the best thing we could do. So she is gone."

"It would be a most pleasant change."

"And, of course, you know, dear Mr Montaigne, Ruth is no longer a child, and—er—you understand."

"Yes, of course," said Montaigne; who, however, recalled to mind that Ruth was quite a child until her cousins were married.

At that idea of seeing company and the following suggestion of marriage the strange pallor became more evident in Montaigne's countenance, and in spite of his forced smile and self-control, he kept passing his dry tongue over his parched lips, and unconsciously drew in his breath as if he were suffering from thirst.

He grew worse as the conversation continued to take the ugly turn, to him, of marriage. For, said the Honourable Philippa:

"Lady Littletown informs us that a marriage is on the *tapis* between Mr Arthur Litton, a friend of Mr Elbraham, and our dear Lady Anna Maria Morton."

"I congratulate Lady Anna Maria, I am sure," said Montaigne huskily; and as he glanced at the Honourable Isabella that lady trembled more than usual, and believed that Montaigne was reading her heart, and mentally asking her whether she would ever be married to Marcus Glen.

Mr Montaigne refused to stay to lunch. He had so many little things to attend to consequent upon the business that had called him to London; in fact, even now he was only down for a few hours, having come to seek some papers. These he had found, and he was going back to town at once. Business was very tiresome, he said.

The honourable sisters agreed that it was, and Mr Montaigne took his leave with reverent, affectionate grace, and passed out into the gardens, along whose broad gravel paths he walked slowly in his customary way—bland, sweet, and introspective with his half-closed eyes. But though he did not increase his pace in obedience to his rapidly-beating pulse, a close observer would have noticed that he did not stop to feed the fishes on his way back to Teddington, while his landlady was surprised at the hurried way in which he again took his departure.

The change from Hampton Court to Saint James's was delightful to Ruth, who only felt one drawback to the pleasure of her visit—that she could not expect to see Marcus Glen and Richard Millet during her walks.

"I wonder whether she thinks him so guilty as she did," mused Ruth; and these musings were continued one evening after dinner, when she was seated at work in Lord Henry's drawing-room, with Marie, who was very pale, close at hand; Lord Henry being, according to custom, seated over his wine—a pleasant, old-fashioned fiction, wherein a decanter of excellent old port was placed before him every evening, of which he drank one glass only, and then went to sleep till the butler announced tea.

Just in the midst of her thoughts respecting Marcus Glen, and as if some electric mental chord of sympathy existed between them, Marie said, in a quiet, rather forced voice:

"Have you seen Captain Glen lately, Ruthy?"

It cost Marie a tremendous effort to say those words calmly. And then that terrible pang of jealousy shot through her breast once more as she saw the crimson blood flush into Ruth's cheeks and rise above her brows.

Poor Ruth faltered, and looked as guilty as if she had been discovered in some offence, as she replied:

"Yes, only a few days ago. He spoke to us in the Gardens. I was walking with my aunts."

Marie felt relieved. He could not have said much to Ruth if her aunts were by, and she sighed with content, but only

to take herself angrily to task once more, and strive to spur herself onward to her duty. It was in this disposition, then, that she said quietly:

“I thought it right to say to you, Ruthy, that I think you were correct about—about Captain Glen.”

“That he was not guilty, as you imagined?” cried Ruth eagerly.

Marie bowed her head, and she felt a strange constriction of the heart on seeing the bright animation in Ruth’s countenance—a suggestion of the pain that she was in future to feel; but she mastered her emotion, and Ruth went on:

“I am so glad, you cannot think!” she said.

“Why?” said Marie, in a cold, hard voice, which made Ruth colour highly; but she spoke out.

“Because it seemed so cruel to one who always was kind and chivalrous and—”

She stopped short with a curiously puzzled look gathering upon her brow, for it now occurred to her that Marie must be angry with herself for casting off Marcus Glen, but she could not read it in her eyes, while the puzzled look deepened as Marie said quietly:

“I am very glad, Ruthy—very glad to feel that I was not mistaken in him, and that he is indeed the true gentleman we believed.”

Ruth took a stool and placed it at Marie’s feet, seating herself there and clinging to her hand, while her cousin softly stroked her hair, vowing to herself the while that if Ruth cared for Marcus Glen, no jealous pang should hinder her from aiding in bringing them together, and no act of hers should be such as would be traitorous to Lord Henry, her confiding husband.

“Why do you look at me so strangely, Ruthy?” said Marie at last.

“I was thinking.”

“Thinking what?”

“Don’t ask me, Marie,” said Ruth in a troubled tone.

“Why not? Shall I tell you? You were thinking that I repent of having married Lord Henry, now that I know I was deceived. Tell me!” she cried, lifting up Ruth’s burning face, and gazing at her searchingly: “you were thinking that, were you not?”

“Yes,” faltered Ruth, “I was.”

“Then you were wrong, Ruthy,” said Marie gravely. “Perhaps I did feel something like compunction when I found this out, but that is all past now, and I am married to one of the best and kindest of men.”

“And you are happy, Marie?”

There was a pause, for it cost Marie a bitter struggle to utter that one word with a smile, but she spoke it bravely at last, and there was a sense of relief after it was said:

“Quite,” Then, after another pause: “Lord Henry is all that is tender and good to me; and now, Ruthy, about yourself?”

“Oh, I am only too glad to come and see you sometimes!”

“Yes; but about this little heart. Ruthy, will you confide in me?”

Marie drew the trembling girl closer to her side, and tried to gaze in her face, but it was averted.

“Yes,” she whispered; “of course I will.”

“Then tell me this—frankly: you love Marcus Glen?”

The pained aspect came back into Marie’s face, and her brow was rugged, as she waited for Ruth’s answer.

“I don’t know,” said Ruth at last.

“You don’t know? Is this your confidence?”

“Oh, don’t speak angrily to me!” cried Ruth passionately. “I will keep nothing from you, Marie. Indeed, indeed I do not know, only that I have prayed, so hard, so very hard, that I might not love him.”

“Prayed that you might not love him?” said Marie, smiling.

“Yes; for I felt that it would be so treacherous, and that it would cause pain to all—to you—to me. Oh, why do you ask me this?”

“Hush! you are growing agitated, and I want to talk to you quietly, and for your good. Suppose it had ceased to be

treacherous to think of Captain Glen—suppose he could be brought to love you, and were to ask you to be his wife: what would you say then?”

A servant entered and announced Mr Paul Montaigne; and, blandly calm and smiling, that gentleman entered the room.

It was a surprise for both, and Ruth’s heart began to beat strangely fast as, in his customary paternal way, Montaigne greeted each in turn. She recalled that evening when their visitor had talked with her in the drawing-room, but her dread had increased each time they met, and it was all she could do to keep from shrinking from him and showing her aversion.

But little was said more than that Montaigne told them he was in town on business, and that he had thought he would call, before Lord Henry joined them, greeting Montaigne very warmly, and ending, to Ruth’s horror, by asking him to dine with them next day, and to spend an hour with them whenever he could spare the time.

The rest of that particular evening was passed in quite a political discussion between Lord Henry and his guest, Montaigne taking so little notice of Ruth that her heart grew more at rest; but there was a something in his look as he said good-night, something in the pressure of his hand, that made her think this man loved her, and as she felt for the moment that it might be possible for him to ask her aunts to give her to him as his wife, the poor girl turned cold, and gladly went off shivering to her sleep-forsaken bed.

Ruth had not been with her long when Marie received the old-fashioned communication of wedding cards; the notice in the paper of the marriage of Arthur Litton, Esq., of Duke Street, Saint James’s, to Lady Anna Maria Morton, of the private apartments, Hampton Court Palace, having escaped her eye.

The young couple took a house in Bryanston Square, which Lady Littletown said was charmingly furnished; visits followed, at one of which an unexpected encounter took place.

Lady Anna Maria was at home, the servant said in answer to the queries, and Marie and Ruth descended from the carriage, and were shown up to the drawing-room, where, seated with his back to the light, talking to the bride, was Glen, in company with Dick Millet.

Marie felt as if all the blood in her body had rushed to her head, and the room seemed to swim round, but she mastered her emotion, and after receiving Lady Anna Maria’s greeting, she turned with quiet self-possession to where Glen stood, cold and stern, waiting to take leave, and calmly offered him her hand.

“I am glad to see you again, Captain Glen,” she said gravely; and Marcus started with astonishment, eagerly catching the extended hand, and hardly able to stammer out some words of greeting.

Then a bitter look crossed his face, and he turned from Marie coldly, and began, with a vivid recollection of the past, to talk to Ruth, while Marie made Dick colour with pleasure as she shook hands, and then sat and chatted with him with all the warmth of an old friend.

But the ice was broken, and that one meeting led to others, Lady Anna Maria, with all the eagerness of a young bride, lending herself to what was evidently in her eyes the making up of a match between Ruth, who was so charming and fresh and sweet, and Captain Glen.

The visits to Bryanston Square were not frequent, but, to her horror, Ruth noted that Glen was always there as if he expected to meet Marie; and though he was kindness itself and full of attention, his quiet deference and low-spoken words were for Marie alone.

Mr Arthur Litton was very rarely there, so that Lady Anna Maria was their sole entertainer, and this little lady had, after so many years of maidenhood, developed in her married life quite a girlish skittishness which resulted in a very silly flirtation with little Dick, who was most constant in his attentions, and seemed to ignore her ladyship’s excessively thin figure.

“I believe, Dick, you’d flirt with a mop if it was stuck in a petticoat,” said Glen to him one day on their way to Bryanston Square. “What’s it all for—practice?”

“I don’t ask you why you flirt with married ladies,” said Dick sharply.

Glen started, and looked grave. And at that time a little friendly counsel might have turned him aside, for he thought a good deal of quiet, grave Lord Henry. But he frowned, and said angrily, “He is no friend of mine. He came between us. Why should I study him?”

He closed his eyes then fast to the risk and danger, giving himself up to his revived passion, and went on gliding slowly down the slope towards the precipice that threatened both.

On the other side, Ruth was passing through a strange course of education. At first, in her innocency, she could hardly believe it possible, but more and more the fact dawned upon her that a kind of self-deception was going on with Marie, who apparently believed that she was furthering Ruth’s happiness, while she was yielding to the delight of being once more in company with Glen, listening to his voice, living a delicious, dreamy existence, of whose danger she seemed to be unaware.

Volume Three—Chapter Ten.

A Dangerous Enemy.

Much as Ruth was in Marie's confidence, and sisterly as their intercourse had become, there were points now upon which each feared to touch.

Of late Glen's name had ceased to be mentioned, and Ruth's feelings towards Marie were a strange intermingling of love, jealousy, and fear.

Ruth was alone one day in the drawing-room, having stayed at home on account of a slight headache, while Marie had gone to make a few calls after setting down Lord Henry at his club.

Ruth had taken up a book, but though she went through page after page, she had not the slightest recollection of what she had been reading, her thoughts having wandered away to Marcus Glen and Marie.

"I ought to have gone with her," she thought; and then she began to tremble as she felt a kind of dread overcoming her.

"It is terrible," she thought; "I cannot bear it. He does not care for me, and I cannot save him; but," she cried, setting her teeth, "I will not leave her again, and I will speak to her at once."

She hesitated for a moment, as if in alarm at the determination she had made, and then moved towards the door.

"I will go on there at once; she may be there. If she is not, Marcus Glen will be, and I will appeal to him, for I cannot bear this agony."

It was a good resolve, one which she would have carried out; but just then she recoiled, and her heart began to beat painfully, while the blood forsook her cheeks.

Mr Montaigne had softly closed the door behind him, and was advancing towards her, with a smile upon his lip, and a peculiar look in his eyes, which made her tremble.

"What!" he said, "alone? This is an unexpected pleasure."

"He knew I was alone," thought Ruth, "and that is why he has come."

He advanced towards her, and in spite of her determination to be firm, she took a step or two backwards before she held out her hand, and said with tolerable firmness:

"Lady Henry has gone out in the carriage."

"And will not be back just yet," he said with a smile. "Ah, well, it does not matter."

He had taken her hand and pressed it firmly, retaining it in his, and before Ruth could realise it he had drawn her to him, and pressed his lips to hers.

"Mr Montaigne!" she cried, struggling to free herself. "This is an insult!"

"What! from me?" he whispered, his face flushing, and his arms clasping her more tightly. "Why, what nonsense, Ruth! You know how I have loved you from the time you were a child, and have always meant that you should some day be my little wife."

"Oh no! It is impossible! Mr Montaigne, are you mad?"

She cast a despairing glance at the bell, but it was beyond her reach, and he smiled as he kissed her passionately again and again.

"Why are you left alone?" he said in a hoarse whisper; "because fate has arranged it expressly for us. See how I have patiently waited for an opportunity, ever since that night when we were surprised in each other's arms by that wretched servant. Why, Ruth, Ruth, my little one, what is the use of this struggling? It is absurd. You are a woman now—the woman I have always loved. It is our secret, darling, and—"

"Help! help!" cried Ruth loudly as the door opened and Marie walked in, Mr Paul Montaigne, carried away by his passion, having failed to hear the carriage stop, quite a couple of hours sooner than he had expected.

"What is the meaning of this?" cried Marie fiercely, as Ruth ran to her arms, panting and sobbing with shame.

"Marie—why did you leave me? He—insulted—this man—"

"Is a villain who hides his true nature beneath a mask," cried Marie indignantly. "I always doubted him. How comes he to be alone here with you? Leave the house, sir! Lord Henry shall be made acquainted with the conduct of his guest."

Marie placed Ruth in a chair, and was crossing towards the bell, when Montaigne said quietly:

"Ah, yes; poor Lord Henry! He does not know us all by heart."

Marie stopped as if she had been stung, and faced round, darting an indignant glance at Montaigne, who, in place of leaving the room, coolly walked to one of the mirrors, and readjusted his white tie.

Marie recovered herself, and had her hand upon the bell, when Montaigne said quietly:

“Don’t be foolish, my dear; exposures are such awkward things.”

“For you, sir,” cried Marie. “Then leave the house, and never enter it again. But for the fact of your being so old a friend, I would have you turned out.”

“Words, words, words, my dear Marie,” he said, taking a chair and crossing his legs. “Let me see. It is Hamlet says that, I think. Now look here, my dear child—but sit down, I want to talk to you.”

“Will you leave this room, sir?” cried Marie angrily.

“No, my child, I shall not,” he said, smiling. “You say you are ready to expose me for this playful little interview which you interrupted between Ruth here and myself—Ruth, the lady who is to be my wife.”

“Your wife!” cried Marie indignantly.

“Yes: my wife; and don’t raise your voice like that, my dear child. By the way, you are back soon. Was not our dear Marcus at Bryanston Square?”

“Marcus? Captain Glen?” cried Marie, whose lips turned white.

“There, my dear little girl. You are not little now, but you seem little to me. You forget, in this wondrous fit of virtuous anger, that I have stood for so many years towards you in the light of a father. In my way I have helped you to position and a rich husband, and when I found that, womanlike—fashionable womanlike, I should say—your ladyship was beginning to show taste for pleasure, and even taking to your handsome self a lover, I did not interfere. While because I, in due course, and after a long and patient courtship, take the girl I love in my arms, you talk of turning me out, call me scoundrel and villain, and threaten me with Lord Henry’s displeasure.”

“It is disgraceful, sir,” said Marie; “you are old enough to be her father.”

“Humph! Yes. Perhaps so, but nothing like so much older as Lord Henry is than you. Now look here, my dear Marie, I am obliged to speak plainly. I don’t ask for a truce; but I demand your help and countenance. I mean to marry Ruth.”

Marie stood pointing to the door, but Montaigne did not stir.

“Pshaw!” he exclaimed—“a stage trick. Are you aware of what it means to make me your enemy, my dear child? You are angry and excited now. You did not quite realise my words. Do you think I am blind about Captain Glen? As to dropping the mask, well, there, it is down. I am a man even as you are a woman, and why should I not love?”

Marie’s arm dropped to her side, and she stood gazing at him with her cheeks and lips now ashy of hue.

“There,” he continued, laughing, “the storm is over, and we understand each other. I will go now, and mind this, dear Marie, I will religiously keep your ladyship’s secrets so long as you keep mine.”

He rose, and, taking her hand, mockingly kissed it. Then, crossing to Ruth, he would have caught her in his arms, but she started from him, and stood at bay on the other side of a table.

“You foolish child!” he said, laughing; “you must be a little wiser when I come again.”

As the door closed upon him Marie stood with her eyes closed, listening, and then with a cry of despair she threw herself into her cousin’s arms.

“Oh, Ruth, Ruth, Ruth, what have I done! what have I done! I swear to you I am innocent, indeed—indeed.”

“I believe it, I know it,” cried Ruth, holding her to her heart; “but oh, Marie, you must never see him again! Pray, pray keep away.”

“Yes, yes,” she cried; “I will. I am innocent, I am indeed. But, oh, it is horrible! I will stay away. I will see him no more. But you—that man—he has us in his power.”

“I beg your pardon,” said a soft voice; “I think I must have left my gloves in here. Yes, there they are!” and Paul Montaigne quietly crossed the room, took a pair of gloves from a chair, and then smiled and went softly out.

The cousins gazed in each other’s eyes, motionless, till they heard the closing of the front door.

“Oh, Marie,” whispered Ruth, in an awe-stricken way, “he must have heard every word you said!”

And Marie echoed hoarsely, “Every word!”

Mr Montaigne allowed a couple of days to elapse before he called again in Saint James’s, and then, serious man as he was, he swore, for the shutters were closed: the family was out of town.

It was no unusual time for anyone to go, for, as he stood there hesitating on the step, a slatternly-looking girl was making the streets ring with her minor-pitched cry of “Sixteen branches a penny—new lavender; sixteen branches a penny.” It was well on in August, and fashionable London was taking wing.

“Clever woman!” thought Montaigne: “this is her move; but I can mate her when I please.”

He rang, and a woman-servant answered the bell.

"His lordship is out of town," the woman said.

"At his country seat?" said Montaigne at haphazard.

"Oh dear no, sir! his lordship has taken my lady and Miss Allerton on the Continong, and they are not coming back for some time. Mr Harvey, his lordship's agent, will send on all letters."

"Thank you. I am very much obliged," said Montaigne with his blandest smile; and he raised his hat and went away smiling, cursing Marie in his heart.

"'All comes to the man who waits,'" he thought.

Volume Three—Chapter Eleven.

Ruth's Work Undone.

The Continental trip extended to months, after which there were a few visits, so that it was well into the next season before they were back at the house in Saint James's, and after their return Marie devoted herself to Ruth, hoping that Montaigne would not show himself again, though they both trembled at the thought of his coming.

Still, he did not show himself, and matters went on so happily and well that Ruth began to hope that Marie's love for Glen was dead, when, in an evil hour, and, as Marie said, to fulfil a social duty, they called upon Lady Anna Maria Morton, meeting Lady Littletown there; when that lady insisted upon their dining with her at her town house, and it was next to impossible to refuse.

Lady Littletown was a match-maker at heart, and she always looked upon her conservatory, with its brilliant flowers, as her greatest aid in such matters. Hence it was that her ladyship took care to have a conservatory wherever she lived.

She had taken a handsome house in South Kensington for a short season, one that was admirably furnished in this respect, though far from being equal to Mr Elbraham's glass palace. Still, it was enough.

Lord Henry frowned slightly on finding that Captain Glen was among the guests, and deputed by Lady Littletown to take Marie in to dinner; but his brow cleared directly, and he smiled at his wife as she went by him and gave him an appealing look that seemed to say, "Don't blame me."

Hardly had they passed on to the staircase before Glen said in a quick, agitated voice: "I thought I was never to see you again. I must have a few words with you before you go."

Five minutes before, Marie had told herself that she was brave and strong, and that the past fancy was dead; but on hearing these words her hand trembled, her heart beat fast, and she knew that she was as weak as ever, and that she could only falter: "It is impossible!"

"It is not impossible!" he said angrily. "I must—I will see you."

They entered the dining-room, and for the next two hours everything seemed to Marie like a dream. Lord Henry was at the bottom of the table, taking his old place of host, and the flower-filled vases completely shaded his wife from sight: still, Ruth was exactly opposite, apparently listening to the conversation of Glen; but Marie knew that she was watching them narrowly.

She went upstairs in a dream, just as she had come down, and answered questions, talked and entered into the various themes of conversation as if she were quite collected; but all the time there had been a restless throbbing of her pulses, and she trembled, and felt that she would have given the world to be away!

At last!

Marie heard the dining-room door open, and the sound of ascending voices. Lord Henry would be there directly, and she would ask him to take her back.

That was Marcus Glen's voice speaking loudly, and every fibre of her body seemed to thrill as she listened to its tones.

Marie's back was to the door as he entered, and she could not see him; but she seemed to feel his approach, and all was a dream once more, as he seated himself on the ottoman by her, and began to talk about some current topic.

She answered him, took the opposite side, talking freely and well, and Lord Henry chided himself for his uneasy feeling, and felt that he ought to be proud of such a wife. She was devoted to him, and he trusted her with all his heart.

The conversation was very animated for the time that Glen stood by her; but all the while Marie's pulses kept up that quick, feverish throb, and there was the hidden sense of danger still within her heart.

May had come round again, the Academy pictures were once more drawing their crowds, and directly after an early breakfast one morning Marie and Ruth walked up into Piccadilly to spend a couple of hours while the rooms were

empty and cool.

How it happened Marie afterwards hardly realised, but she had become separated from her cousin, who had wandered on into the next room, leaving her gazing listlessly about, when suddenly her heart seemed to stand still, for close beside her there was a low sigh, and she felt more than saw that Glen was at her elbow.

Mastering her emotion, she turned quickly to reproach him for following her there, when she saw that he had his back to her, and was gazing intently at a portrait. She did not speak. It was a kind of gasp or catching of the breath; but he heard it, and turned sharply round to face her.

"Marie!" he exclaimed.

"Hush! Don't speak to me, for God's sake!"

She said no more, but reeled, and would have fallen had he not caught her arm, and led her through the next opening and downstairs to the refreshment-room, quite empty at that early hour, the waiters not being ready for visitors.

There were a couple of the attendants at hand, ready to bring water and ice, and at the end of a few minutes Marie gazed wildly about her—starting violently, though, as she heard the deep voice at her side.

"That will do," he said quietly. "A few minutes' rest and she will be quite recovered." Then they were alone, with Glen whispering to her eagerly, and she listening with her eyes half-closed and a strange dazed look in her pallid face.

"No, no!" she said at last feebly.

"You shall," he cried, and his strong will prevailed over her more and more. "You must leave him, Marie. I do not ask it: I know you love me. You always have loved me. Come to me, my darling, or I must die."

"Die!" she moaned. "No, no; not you. O God, forgive me! Would that I were dead!"

"Dead, when there is a life of happiness before us?" he whispered. "Marie dearest, at last! You understand?" he said, after whispering for some time.

"Yes, yes," she said slowly; and he spoke again very quickly, but in low, distinct tones.

"Yes," she repeated heavily, "I understand."

"Marie!"

"Lady Henry was taken suddenly ill in one of the rooms, Miss Allerton," said Glen hurriedly. "Fortunately I was there."

"Ill," said Ruth slowly, as she ran to Marie's side. "Fortunately you were there. Captain Glen, I will see to my cousin now. Will you have the goodness to go?"

He raised his hat and slowly walked away.

"Marie, Marie!" cried Ruth piteously. "How could you deceive me so?"

"No, no!" cried Marie excitedly. "I did not know he was here. It was an unexpected meeting. Take me—"

She was about to say "home," but she could not utter the word, and as they walked back Ruth thought of this, and a hand seemed to compress her heart as she said to herself:

"The work of months undone!"

Volume Three—Chapter Twelve.

John Huish Gets Back Part of his Brains.

More than once during the severe attack of brain-fever from which John Huish lay prostrate at Highgate, Dr Stonor compressed his lips and asked himself whether he would save his young friend's life. At such times, as he sat by the bedside and gazed in his patient's face, the lineaments brought back the scene by the pit and his father's agony, as Captain Millet lay apparently dying.

"How time has gone!" the doctor would mutter, "and how like he looks to his father now!"

But a change for the better came at last, and after a long and weary convalescence he was once more about, month after month gliding by, and the brain refusing to accompany the body on its way to health.

He was very quiet and gentle, but he seemed to have no recollection of what had gone by, neither did he evince any desire, but passed his time mostly in the doctor's study, where an unrolled mummy had apparently so great an attraction for him that he would sit near and watch it hour after hour when no one was by.

"Must get him better first," the doctor would say. "I can't run the risk of bringing on a relapse."

So John Huish remained in utter ignorance of the fact that his young wife had been confined to her bed at the gloomy

house in Wimpole Street, so prostrated by all she had had to pass through, that the doctors called in advised total rest and quiet, combined with careful nursing. Nothing calculated to excite her was to reach her ears. Hence, when in his turn Dr Stonor called, his lips were sealed respecting John Huish's state; and poor Gertrude never mentioned his name.

After leaving Renée by her sister's side, the doctor had a long chat with his old friend, whose white hand trembled as he thrust it forth to be taken by the visitor.

"How is she?" said the latter. "Ah, poor girl, she is very ill!"

"But she will get better? Oh, Stonor, don't flatter me: tell me the truth!"

"Tell you the truth?—of course I shall! Well, she'll be better when she gets back to her husband."

"And how is John Huish?" and the white hand trembled inside the panel, like some leaf agitated by the wind.

"He is bad—very bad," said the doctor. "I've had a hard fight with him, for his brain has had some serious shock. Poor fellow! he has been a little queer in the head for some time past, and consulted me at intervals, but I could make nothing of it. It's a very obscure case, and I would not—I could not believe that there was anything more than fancy in his symptoms. But he was right, and it seems like a lesson to me not to be too conceited. His mind has been very impressionable, and from what I can gather he has not been carrying on as he should."

"No, no, I'm afraid not!"

"There was some sad scene with his young wife, I suppose."

(Text on pages 164 and 165 missing.)

"Well, I always think that it was a very insane, morbid proceeding, tinged with vanity, to shut yourself up as you have done these thirty years."

"I took an oath, when I found to what I was reduced, that I would never look upon the face of man again, and I have kept it."

"I should think that you were more likely to be forgiven for breaking such an oath than for keeping it," said the doctor drily.

"But I have kept it!" said Robert Millet sternly. "In a few short hours I found that I had lost all worth living for, and I retired here to die."

"Yes," said the doctor, in his bluff, dry way; "but when you found that you were so long dying, I think you might have done something useful."

There was no reply to this, and the doctor loosed the thin white hand, and began to tap the little ledge by the panel.

"I wrote down to Huish about his son's illness," he said at last.

"Yes: well?" said the recluse eagerly.

"He begged me to do all I could. He never leaves his room now. Gout or rheumatism has crippled him. Strange how things come about with the young people."

"Yes: I'm getting old now, and I wanted to feel full of forgiveness towards Huish, and that is why I took to his boy. It is hard that matters have turned out as they have."

"Very," said the doctor. "Well, I'm not going to advise, but I should like to know that you had broken your oath at last, and let light into your brain as well as into your house. Good-bye; I'll let you know how John Huish gets on."

Dr Stonor went straight to Highgate and found what seemed an improvement in his patient, for Huish was sitting up; but he seemed strangely reticent and thoughtful, and never asked any questions as to his wife or his relatives, but seemed to be dreaming over something with which his mind was filled.

Time passed, and with closely cut hair, and a strange sallowness in his complexion, John Huish was up, and had been out times enough in the extensive garden, but there was a something in his manner that troubled the doctor a great deal, and was looked upon by him as a bad symptom. He was always dreaming over something, and what that was he never said.

Miss Stonor conversed with him, and he was gentle and talked rationally. He answered the doctor's questions reasonably enough, and yet, as soon as his attention was released, he was back again, dreaming over the one thing that seemed to trouble his mind.

"Will he get well?" said Miss Selina to the doctor one morning.

"I'd give something to be able to say," was the reply. "At times I think not, for I fear the impression upon his mind is that he is insane, and if a man believes that of himself, how can we get him to act like one who is sane?"

This was at breakfast-time, and the doctor soon after went out, leaving an assistant in charge.

It was a glorious afternoon, and Huish and the three patients were out in the garden, where Captain Lawdor was

practising throwing biscuit, as he called it, at a stone balanced on the end of a stick. Mr Rawlinson had a table out and was writing a series of minutes on railway mismanagement; and Mr Roberts was following John Huish about as he walked up and down beneath the old red-brick wall which separated the garden from the road.

This went on for a time, and then Mr Roberts crept softly up to Huish, to whom he had not spoken since the night of the dinner, and said:

"I told you not to look at that Egyptian sorcerer. I knew it would send you mad."

"Mad!" exclaimed Huish, smiling. "I am not mad."

"Oh yes," said Mr Roberts. "You came here and asked the doctor to cure you. No man could do that if he were not mad."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Huish, looking at him strangely. "I am quite well."

Mr Roberts shook his head.

"No, you are not; I know how you feel, just like a man I knew used to feel. He always felt as if he were two; and sometimes he was one, sometimes the other. The other was the one the lawyer said was dead. It was so sad, too, for her. What have you done with your wife?"

At last!

John Huish started as if he had been stung. That was the something he had, in a strange secretive way, tried to think of for days past—his wife; and now the mention of her sent a shock like that of electricity through his brain.

He hurried away, and began to walk up and down, growing more and more excited. His wife! Where was she? Yes, he remembered now; the mist that had shrouded his brain was dispelled, and he could think. That something like him had been and taken her away, and he was doing nothing here.

With all the cunning of an insane person he became very calm all at once, for the doctor's assistant strolled out in the garden just then, walked up to and spoke to him, and not seeing any change, went back to the house, while, glancing sharply round him, John Huish waited for an opportunity to put a plan that he had instantly matured into operation.

He had sense enough to know that he should be refused if he asked leave to go outside, so walking up and down for a few minutes, he suddenly made a run and a bound, caught the top of the wall and scrambled up, and dropped into the lane.

The captain raised a shout, and the assistant came running out, but by the time he reached the gate Huish had disappeared, taking as he did a short cut across the fields, while the assistant searched the road, and then, after fruitless efforts, hurried off to the nearest station, and made his way to Finsbury Circus. Here he broke the news to the doctor, who left him to finish his cases, and, calling Daniel, set off as fast as they could go to Westbourne Road, as being the most likely point for Huish to make for now he was free.

As soon as he had run sharply across the fields, John Huish subsided into a walk, and going along at a pretty good pace, made straight for his home.

To all appearances he was perfectly sane and in his right mind; but there was only one dominant idea there, and to fulfil this he was hurrying on. Still there was a certain amount of strange caution developed in his acts. He seemed to know that there was something wrong with him, and that he must be cautious how he spoke to people; and to this end he carefully avoided everyone who appeared to take the slightest notice of him, till he reached Westbourne Road. There he rang the bell, and the door was answered by his domestic.

The servant looked at him strangely, but said nothing, and he hurried up to his room to try and remove any traces that might strike a stranger of his having been lately ill. His mind was clear enough for that, and as he hastily bathed his face, the cold water refreshed him and he felt more himself.

He was terribly confused, though, at times, and had to ask himself why he was there.

That acted as a touchstone—Gertrude—he had come to seek his wife; he had escaped so that he might find her, for the doctor would not let him go. He told him—yes, he told him his wife was well, and he should see her soon; but it was a lie to quiet him. That devil had got her—his other self. Of course—the servant and the cabman told him so; but he must be quiet, or they would stop him. Perhaps the doctor had sent after him now.

He shuddered and gazed about him for a moment as if his mind were going beyond his control. Then, mastering himself once more, he took up his hat, opened the door, and passed out into the road.

Volume Three—Chapter Thirteen.

Lord Henry Receives a Telegram.

"I shall be waiting for you this evening at the Channel Hotel. It is an easy walk from the square. Ask to be shown to Number 99. If you are not there by ten o'clock, good-bye! There will be the report of a pistol heard. Without you I can bear my life no longer."

Every word burned into her mind, and she seemed to be mentally repeating it constantly, even as some familiar tune will keep on humming in the brain.

"If you are not there by ten o'clock there will be the report of a pistol heard."

Marie felt that he would keep his word.

Over and over and over again, with dreary reiteration, those words kept recurring, and then, as the day wore on and she went to her room, she found herself repeating them aloud.

She bathed her burning temples, but found no relief. She threw herself upon a couch, and tried to obtain rest, but those words kept on, and she repeated them as if they were a lesson, till everything seemed dreamlike and strange, and she wondered whether she had really met Glen that morning.

At last she dropped into a feverish, uneasy sleep, the result of her weariness, but the words kept on, and she felt that she was repeating them as she went straight on towards a thick darkness, whose meaning she could not penetrate. All she knew was that she was irresistibly impelled towards that darkness, and it made her shudder as she drew nearer and nearer, till she felt that her next step would be into this strange mystery, when she found herself confronted by Ruth.

"Are you ill, dear?"

"No, not ill; only weary in spirit, dear. There, I am better now. But tell me about yourself. Have you seen Montaigne lately?"

"Yes," said Ruth with a shiver. "He seems to watch and follow us. He was in Piccadilly this morning as we came back from the Academy."

"The insolent!" said Marie calmly. "Is it time to dress?"

"Oh no," cried Ruth, looking curiously at her cousins ashy face. "You have been to sleep, and forgotten how time goes."

"Have I? Yes, I suppose I have. Let me see, there is no one coming to dinner to-night?"

"No, not to-night," said Ruth, gazing with wondering eyes at her cousin.

"No, no, of course not! My brain feels hot and confused to-day. I shall be better soon!"

She rose, and then descended with Ruth to the drawing-room, chatting calmly with her over the five o'clock tea, and seemed as if she had forgotten the morning's incident. This went on till the dressing-bell rang, when, placing her arm round her cousin, she went with her upstairs to their several rooms, kissing her affectionately, and bidding her not be late.

Marie looked perfectly calm when they met again in the drawing-room, where Lord Henry was awaiting their descent, and as Ruth entered she saw her cousin half seated upon one of the arms of a lounge, resting her soft white arm upon her husband's shoulder as she bent down and kissed him tenderly upon the forehead.

She did not start away, but rose gravely, and directly after, dinner was announced, and Lord Henry took Ruth down.

The dinner passed off much as usual. The conversation was carried on in the quiet, calm way customary at that house, and Lord Henry smiled gravely and pleasantly first at one, then at the other, as he retailed to them, in his simple, placid manner, some piece of news that he had heard at the club, to which Marie listened with her quiet deference to her husband, whose slightest word seemed always to rouse her to listen.

When they rose Lord Henry left his chair in the most courtly way to open the door for them, Marie drawing back for Ruth to pass out first, while she hesitated, before placing her arms round her husband's neck. She kissed him on his forehead, holding him tightly to her for a moment or two, and then she passed into the hall and began to ascend the stairs, looking handsomer than she had ever looked to him before, as she went up with the soft glow of the lamp shining down upon her pale face.

As she reached the first landing she smiled back at him in a strange way, hesitating for a moment or two before passing out of his sight.

"God bless her," said the old man, with tears in his eyes. "I wish I was years younger—for her sake."

He returned to his chair, poured out his customary glass of port-wine, and sat sipping it in a calm, satisfied spirit. So happy and at rest did he feel, that, for a wonder, he finished that glass and poured out another, which he held up to the light and examined with all the air of a connoisseur.

Then sip after sip followed, with the dark ancestral paintings seeming to look down warningly at him from the wall, till he finished that second glass and began to doze. Then the doze came to an abrupt conclusion, and his lordship started up, for he thought he heard the closing of a door, but his eyelids dropped lower and lower till they were shut, and this time he slept deeply—so deeply that he did not hear the butler enter with his cup of coffee, which the old servitor placed softly upon the table, and then went out.

"Eh? What?" exclaimed Lord Henry, starting up.

“Beg pardon for waking your lordship,” said the butler, holding out a silver salver, upon which was a reddish—brown envelope; “but here is a telegram.”

“Telegram? Bless me!” exclaimed the old man, fumbling in rather a confused way for his glasses. “I hope—nothing wrong!”

His hands trembled as he opened the envelope and took out the message, while as he read the pencilled words his jaw dropped, and the old butler took a step forward.

“My lord!”

These words brought him to himself.

“That will do, Thompson. I will ring.”

The old butler glanced at his master uneasily, but obeyed, and then Lord Henry, with palsied hand, held the sham telegram to the lamp and read once more:

> “From Smith, West Strand.
>
> “To Lord Henry Moorpark,
>
> “300, Saint James’s Square.
>
> “If you care for your honour, follow her ladyship. She has gone to keep an appointment at Channel Hotel.”

He crushed the paper in his hand, and caught at the table for support.

Then he recovered, and drew himself up proudly.

“It is a lie—a scandal!” he said in a hoarse whisper. “The dog who could send that slur against my wife deserves to be hung!”

He tottered slightly at first as he walked, but he kept pulling himself together, twitching his head and crushing the paper more tightly in his hand, as he went slowly towards the door.

He would not hurry, he was too proud and full of trust and belief in Marie for that; and thrusting the telegram into his pocket, he, in his usual leisurely way, touched the bell for the dessert to be cleared away, threw open the door, and gave his customary cough as he crossed the hall before mounting the handsome staircase, step by step, where Marie had turned when she left him a short time before.

The old man held his head up more and more erect as he went on, and when the butler came from below in answer to the bell, he noted that his lordship was humming in a low voice a snatch of an air that was often played in the square by the organs.

He was too chivalrous to believe the message, and in the calmest manner possible he placed his hand upon the door-knob, turned it, entered the softly-lit drawing-room, closed the door in his usual gentle way, and crossed towards Marie’s chair, where she would be seated by the steaming urn, with Ruth reading aloud as was her wont.

“I have been thinking, my dear—” he said.

Then he stopped, perfectly calm, though both chairs were empty, and his lips quivered slightly.

“It is a lie—a cruel lie! God bless her! I’ll not believe it!”

He muttered this as he went on, and was about to ring the bell, when he hesitated. Should he?—should he not?

It would be braver and better to do so, he thought, and would show his calm confidence to his servants.

But why should he trouble them? Poor sweet! her head had been aching a good deal that day, she said, and she had gone to lie down. Ruth, perhaps, was with her. He would go up and see.

He went slowly up to the bedroom—tapped; there was no answer, and he softly entered, to find the lights burning and something white upon the toilet-table—something white that caught his eye on the instant, and involuntarily he said:

“A note!”

Of course—a note to explain why she was not there.

He glanced at himself in the long cheval-glass that had so often reflected the form of his beautiful wife. His face was very pale, but he could see that he looked perfectly cool and collected as he crossed to the toilet-table and took up the note.

He raised his glasses, and saw that it was open—a note directed in a feminine hand to Lady Henry Moorpark.

The note fell from his fingers and a frown gathered on his brow as, after a few moments’ hesitation, he walked rapidly out of the chamber and down into the drawing-room, where he rang the bell, and a footman came to the call.

"Has her ladyship gone out, Robert?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And Miss Allerton?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Did they have the carriage?"

"No, my lord; Miss Allerton went out directly after dinner, and her ladyship soon after."

"That will do."

The man left the room, and Lord Henry stood for a few minutes gazing straight before him, and with a strangely stern aspect in his face.

Love and chivalry were fighting hard with ordinary worldliness, and it was a question which would win.

"I ought to go," he said at last—"I will go. Heaven knows that I do not—that I will not doubt her; but she is not here, and it is very strange. I will go."

He went downstairs, all in the most calm and deliberate way, as if everything depended upon his being perfectly cool, and after ringing for one of the servants, he was helped on with his light overcoat, his hat and gloves were handed to him, his black cane with its crutch handle, and he went quietly out into the square. He raised his cane as a hansom cab came by, got in, and was driven to the Channel Hotel, where he paid and dismissed the man.

An attendant was in the vestibule as he entered, and, beckoning to the man, he placed a half-sovereign in his hand, a feeling of shrinking on the increase, and the shame making him hesitate as he asked whether two ladies had come there since eight or nine o'clock.

"Two ladies, without luggage? Yes, sir. And a gentleman. In Number 99, sir."

Lord Henry hesitated again, for love and chivalry seemed to throw themselves in his way to prevent him from doing what he told himself was a mean action.

But he felt that he must go on now, and, going a little closer to the man, he said:

"Take me up at once, and show me in without announcing my name."

The man nodded, and led him up the great staircase, passing what seemed to be innumerable rooms before stopping at one where he waited for his lordship to come close up before throwing open the door for him to enter.

The telegram was right so far: Lady Henry Moorpark was there, but she was in company with Ruth.

So far good; but Captain Marcus Glen, her old lover, was present, and Mr Paul Montaigne.

Marie sank into the nearest chair. Paul Montaigne caught Ruth by the wrist, and whispered a few words; while, on seeing who had come, Marcus Glen stepped boldly forward, and seemed ready to defend the woman he loved.

"Be silent," whispered Montaigne—"not a word! Your only hope now is to cling to me."

"May I ask what is the meaning of this meeting, Lady Henry?" asked his lordship. "I had a telegram advising me to come here, and I find you in company with Captain Glen."

"Who came to meet me, Lord Henry," cried Ruth, flinging off Montaigne's grasp and clinging to Glen's arm.

Glen directed one glance at Marie, who had turned from him, and was standing with knitted brow, half-closed eyes, and blanched face, crushed down as it were by her shame, and with all a soldier's quickness of decision he determined to try and save her.

"Let me explain, Lord Henry—Lady Henry," said Glen quickly. "I am to blame for this clandestine meeting. Lady Henry, you meant well by your pursuit, but you cannot alter matters now. Ruth accepts me as her husband, and nothing but force would take her away. If I have spoken too plainly, you must forgive me. Once more, I am to blame."

"Well acted," muttered Montaigne. "Now, my Lady Marie; it is your turn now."

But Marie stood as if stunned.

"This is fine, heroic language, Captain Glen," said Lord Henry; "may I ask to how many ladies you have used it before?"

"I deserve your rebuke, my lord," said Glen; "but there comes a time to every man when he feels that he is in earnest. I am in earnest now."

"If, sir, you are in earnest, why did you not make your advances like a gentleman?"

"One moment," interposed Montaigne, who had now recovered himself, and stood with a smile upon his lip; "Lord Henry, I have been protector, tutor to these ladies from their childhood: I wish to say a few words to Captain Glen."

Lord Henry bowed.

"Ruth, my child," continued Montaigne, "leave Captain Glen for a few minutes."

She shrank from him with such a look of revulsion that the rage in his breast flamed up again, and his craftiness for the moment failed.

"Now, sir," said Glen sternly, and he looked menacingly at the man whom he blamed for the frustration of that night's plans.

"You have cleverly hoodwinked the poor old fool amongst you," whispered Montaigne, "but you have not blinded me. I have a prior claim to Miss Allerton's hand, and I tell you this," he cried, his rage making him tremble, "that after this night, if you so much as approach her again, I'll expose Marie to her husband—I'll tell him all."

Glen glanced at Marie, who was talking in a low voice to Lord Henry, while, suffering now from the reaction, Ruth had sunk into a chair, trembling at what she had dared to do.

"You understand," continued Montaigne, upon whose forehead the veins stood out. "That is my price for silence. Ruth is mine, or I drag that woman into the dust."

He stood there with his face thrust forward, his hands clenched, and a fiercely vindictive look in his eyes, while Glen seemed to be weighing his position, but he was not. He let his eyes wander from Montaigne to Lord Henry. Then he glanced at Ruth, who for a moment met his gaze with a piteous, appealing glance, before flushing deeply, and drooping in very shame.

"Heaven bless her, she is too good for me!" thought Glen; "but before this scoundrel should lay hands upon her—"

"You understand me," reiterated Montaigne; "now go."

"Understand you!" whispered Glen; and as he spoke he laid one hand sharply on Montaigne's shoulder, clutching him in so fierce a grip that he caused intense pain. "Yes; now understand me."

Montaigne glared at him, and he suffered acutely, but he did not wince.

"You have uttered your threats: now hear mine. That lady's reputation is in your hands."

"Is this all?" said Montaigne defiantly.

"No," whispered Glen, placing his lips close to Montaigne's ear; "I have not read your death-sentence: betray us, and I will kill you, so help me God!"

The two men were glaring at each other, and by degrees, as Montaigne's face grew of a sickly, leaden hue, his eyelids drooped, and he shrank away.

Glen crossed to Ruth and took her hand.

"Heaven bless you?" he whispered. "I dare not say more to you now. I am not worthy, Ruth. Would I were a better man! Be kind to her, for she wants your aid."

She did not speak, but stood there trembling, till he led her to Lord Henry.

Will you take her, sir? he said. "You will not refuse her a home for what has occurred?"

If Lord Henry Moorpark had felt any hesitation, it was chased away by the action of his wife, who caught her cousin to her heart.

"Some day, Lady Henry—Lord Henry," continued Glen, "I will come as a gentleman, and ask that the past may be forgotten, and that Ruth Allerton may be my wife. Mr Montaigne—"

He signed toward the door, and vainly trying to resist the stern eyes fixed upon him, Montaigne led the way, and was followed out.

Volume Three—Chapter Fourteen.

A Woman's Work.

Directly after leaving the dinner-table Ruth set herself to watch her cousin, asking herself the while what course she had better pursue.

At times she thought she would speak to Lord Henry, but she shrank from such an exposure. Marie would perhaps be saved from the step she evidently contemplated, but at what a cost! Her husband's confidence would be for ever gone, and the old man's happiness at an end.

Marie was very pale, but there was a red spot burning in either cheek, and as Ruth watched her she could see a deep frown upon her brow, while from time to time she pressed her hand upon her breast as if to still the beatings of her heart.

Then came those words she had heard Marie mutter perfectly distinctly in her unquiet sleep—the room she was to ask for at the Channel Hotel; the threat Marcus Glen had uttered respecting his action if she did not come; and as Ruth sat there in the terrible silence of the large drawing-room, she felt that if she did not do something at once the strain upon her mind would be more than she could bear.

All at once Marie gave a start, and drew in her breath as if in sudden pain. She seemed to forget the presence of Ruth, and, rising, walked quickly to the mantelpiece, pressing her hair back from her forehead, while, taking advantage of her back being turned, Ruth glided softly into the smaller drawing-room, which was in comparative darkness.

The idea had come at last. It seemed reckless and wild, but she knew that it was useless to appeal to Marie. She would go herself to Marcus Glen. He was noble-hearted and true. There was a simple manliness in his nature that made her hope, and she would kneel and appeal to him to spare her cousin, to pause before he wrecked the happiness of the good, chivalrous old man who trusted his wife in the pride and nobleness of his heart.

“I shall be too late,” thought Ruth; and, wound up now to a pitch of excitement which seemed to urge her to act, she softly turned the handle of the door, glided out, and without stopping to close it, ran up to her room.

Money she had, and in a very few minutes she had dressed herself for her task, and, closely veiled, she stepped softly to the door.

It opened silently, and she was about to glide downstairs, when she heard a faint rustle, and, drawing back, she peered through the nearly closed door, and saw Marie come up the stairs and enter her room.

Nerving herself for her task, she stepped out, and softly passed Marie’s room, hesitated for a moment as she heard a door close downstairs, and the servants’ voices ascending—all else was still in the great mansion; and as quickly as she could she ran past the drawing-room door and down into the hall, where she stopped and clung to the great coil of the balustrade for support.

Her heart had failed her. There was that great dark door to pass, just beyond which, at the foot of the table, she knew Lord Henry was seated with his decanter and glass before him.

But just then a slight sound somewhere upstairs brought back the memory of Marie’s face, and, hesitating no longer, she stepped quickly to the front door, her hand was upon the lock, and then she felt as if she were turned to ice, for the voice of the old butler said respectfully:

“I will open it, ma’am.”

He had been seated in the great hall-porter’s chair waiting for his lordship to leave the dining-room, and he now swung open the wide door for her to pass out.

She went down the two or three steps, feeling like one in a dream, wondering, though, whether the butler would go and tell Lord Henry that she had gone out, and feeling each moment, as she hurried along the pavement, that someone was about to place a hand upon her shoulder and bid her stay.

Her mouth felt dry, her breath came fast, and the throb of her pulses was painful; but she was on her way to the place of rendezvous, and it was to save those she loved from ruin.

There were wheels behind, and she stopped instinctively and looked round. It was an empty cab, and, taking this as a signal, the driver drew rein. Ruth mechanically stepped in, and then started as the little trap above her was opened, and the driver asked where to drive.

“Channel Hotel,” came mechanically from her lips, and in her agitation it only seemed a minute before she was in front of the great entrance.

“Take me to Number 99,” she said as indifferently as she could, and a waiter led the way.

She trembled so that she could hardly proceed, for the idea was horrible. What did she hear Marie say? Was it Number 99, at this hotel?

She was not sure now, and she felt faint and giddy as she followed the man upstairs, and along a wide corridor. Should she ask him to stop? She dare go no farther, and her lips moved to stay him, when he paused by a door. Before she could find breath to speak or power of utterance, he tapped lightly, and she heard him say:

“A lady to see you, sir.”

There was the noise of a chair pushed quickly back, and a heavy tread upon the carpet as she entered, moved, it seemed to be, by some power that was not her own. Then as the door closed behind her she saw that she was right, for, exclaiming loudly, “Marie! my darling!” Glen caught her in his arms.

“Captain Glen!”

Ruth struggled indignantly from him, and snatched off her veil.

He staggered back.

“Ruth! you here?” he cried.

“Yes. I was compelled to come. Marie—my cousin—Lady Henry—Oh, Captain Glen!”

“Is she ill? Has she sent you? Do you know?” he whispered hoarsely.

“She has not sent me,” cried Ruth. “She does not know I have come. Oh, Captain Glen!” she cried, sobbing violently as she threw herself upon her knees and clasped his feet, “for heaven’s sake, spare her! Do not bring down such misery upon that home.”

“Ruth, my child, hush! for heaven’s sake!”

“No, no, no, no!” sobbed Ruth, and she went on incoherently as she clung to his feet: “You are not thinking of the horror of your crime. You do not love her—you cannot care for her, or you would not drive her to this terrible sin.”

“Not love her—Marie? Is she coming?”

“I pray heaven, no,” said Ruth simply. “I would sooner see her dead.”

“Then I will go and fetch her,” cried Glen, furious with disappointment. “I will not bear it; I cannot bear it. I’ll tear her away from him—but no,” he said bitterly, “I promised something else, and I know she will come.”

“Is this Marcus Glen?” said Ruth simply, as she remained there upon her knees; “is this the man who I told Marie was the soul of truth and honour?”

“No; it is the poor deluded, wretched man who has been twice tricked and cozened of his love. It is useless; I cannot, I will not listen to you!”

“You shall!” she cried, springing to her feet. “You shall go away from here, for she shall not leave her home for you. I would die sooner than see this shame brought upon her. Coward, to force me, a mere girl, to speak to you as I do! Oh, it is cruel, it is shameful, and yet you talk of love!”

“Hush!” he cried, as she stood before him flushed with her indignation; “what do you know of love?”

“That there is no such thing, if it is to bring shame and disgrace on a weak woman, and death and dishonour upon a good, confiding man. Oh, where is God, that He does not strike you dead for even thinking such a cruel wrong!—Marie, Marie, you shall not go!”

For as she spoke in the anger and bitterness of her heart, the door opened, and, veiled and in a large black cloak, Marie glided in, to shrink cowering away in horror and shame, holding up her hands to keep Ruth off, but in vain, for the girl flung her arms round her, and then turned her head, so as to face Glen.

“You here, Ruth!”

“Yes, to save you from this shame. Oh, Marie, think of dear Lord Henry!” she cried passionately; “think of the disgrace, the horror and remorse to come!”

“I have thought till I can think no more,” moaned Marie. “Oh, Ruth, Ruth, why did you come?”

“In heaven’s name, yes! Why did you come?” cried Glen fiercely, as he tried to tear the couple apart.

“No; keep off!” cried Ruth. “I have told you why: because I would not stand by and be a witness of this shame.”

“But, Ruth, you do not know; you cannot tell. It is too late now.”

“I tell you it is not too late!”

“Yes, my child, it is,” said a low, soft voice; and there stood Paul Montaigne, with his calm aspect and bland smile. “It is too late; the step is taken by you, Ruth, as well as by Marie here. Captain Glen, I will see that Miss Allerton comes to no harm.”

“By what right do you intrude?” cried Glen hotly.

“The right of an old protector of these ladies,” said Montaigne, smiling. “There, do not be angry, my dear sir. I come as a friend. Their interests have been mine for so many years that I, knowing something of the tender passion myself, can sympathise with all. Mind, I do not counsel flight, and if I had been consulted I should not have hesitated to stop you; but as you have taken the irrevocable step, all I can say is—go, get the divorce over as soon as possible, and then I insist upon your marrying my darling ward.”

“Of course, of course!” cried Glen angrily. “Marie, my love,” he whispered, “come.”

“No, no!” cried Ruth, interposing, and clinging to her cousin’s arm. “Marie dear, you will come back?”

Marie looked at her in a piteously helpless fashion, and shook her head.

“My dearest Ruth,” said Montaigne, “your interference is ill-timed. You are fighting against fate. Come, come! I know it seems very dreadful to you, but you must let matters have their course.”

He advanced to take her hand, but she shrank from him with horror.

“No, no!” she cried. “Why do not you interfere?”

"Captain Glen, your train must be nearly due."

"And Ruth?" said Glen, hesitating. "Will you see her back?"

"Hardly," said Montaigne, smiling. "She cannot return there; but you can rest content if she is under my charge. Recollect, sir, I have known her almost from a child."

"Mr Montaigne is right; you are fighting against the irrevocable. The step is taken, and Marie cannot return. Now, for all our sakes, pray go!"

"With Mr Montaigne?" cried Ruth excitedly. "No; I will not go; and I will not leave Marie!"

"Then, in heaven's name, go with us!"

"No!" said Montaigne fiercely; "Ruth goes with me!"

"Marcus Glen—Marie—I claim your protection from this man!" cried Ruth excitedly.

"Then you shall come!" cried Glen. "Marie, be firm," he whispered. "Now, Mr Montaigne—you hear Miss Allerton's decision; stand aside!"

"Miss Allerton stays with me!" said Montaigne firmly; and, in place of giving way, he stepped forward, and an angry collision seemed imminent, when the door was once more thrown open, and Lord Henry Moorpark, looking blanched and old, came into the room.

Ruth had gained her end.

Volume Three—Chapter Fifteen.

Face to Face.

John Huish's brain was still confused. At times he was ready to give way to the idea that he must be quite mad, and at such times he had a dire mental struggle to master the wild rush of thoughts so that he might get one uppermost and let it have due course—that one wild idea that he must bring himself face to face with the fiend who mocked his existence, had tortured him for years, and who lived in his semblance; and he felt in nowise surprised, as he passed down the road, at seeing himself, dressed exactly as he then was, turn suddenly out of a side-street and walk rapidly towards the house he had just left.

"At last!" he said beneath his breath; and he drew back into a garden to avoid being seen.

He was in nowise surprised either, as, with the cunning of a madman, he watched till his semblance went straight up to the house and knocked; and, feeling that he would enter, Huish stole slowly out of his hiding-place and followed.

"Trapped!" he said in a low voice. "Only room for one of us in this little world."

His teeth grated together, his fingers were tightly clenched, and he crept on towards the gateway of his house, hidden by the tall privet hedge within the railings, and reached the entry just as his semblance came back from the door frowning and savage with disappointment at the result of his quest of her who had disappeared just as he had triumphed in his heart over a long-cherished idea of revenge.

The two men were face to face; and with a cry of savage delight John Huish sprang at his semblance's throat, but to be met by a blinding flash and a tremendous blow, which sent him staggering back, clutching vainly at the railings before he fell upon the pavement and rolled over and over half stunned.

He sprang to his feet, though, and gnashed his teeth with rage as he looked up and down and saw that a couple of the very few people about, alarmed by the shot, were coming to his assistance, but him he sought was gone.

Before anyone could reach him, John Huish had started off running hard to the bottom of the road, chancing which way the man he hunted had gone, and was just in time to see him enter a hansom, to be rapidly driven off.

Running pretty quickly, he became aware that he was exciting attention, and, remembering his appearance, he subsided into a slower pace, for another cab was on ahead, and he hailed it just in time.

"Follow that hansom!" he cried to the man as he leaped in. "Double fare."

The horse sprang forward, and to his great satisfaction he saw that he gained upon the fugitive, so he sat back patiently waiting, with the determination now to hunt him down.

Mad or sane, there was but one thought still in John Huish's brain, and that was to get this fiend, this haunting demon, by the throat. Whether he was human or some strange creature from another world, he had ceased now to speculate; his head had been troubled with too much stress. All he felt was that they two could not exist together upon earth: that was his evil half, and he must kill it.

Once or twice a thrill of mad rage made his nerves tingle, for he seemed to see Gertrude resting lovingly in that other's arms, responding to his caresses, smiling in his face, and blessing him with her love; and at such moments his brain whirled like one of the wheels by his side.

The sight of the cab in front drove these thoughts away, though, and, clenching his teeth, he shook his head as if to clear his brain for the one object in view.

And now, for the first time, he became aware of a strange pain, and of something warm trickling down beside his ear, and putting up his hand, he withdrew it covered with blood.

“He could not kill me,” he muttered, taking out his handkerchief and applying it to where the bullet had struck the top of his head and glanced off, making a deep cut which bled freely.

He did not know it then, but it was the one thing for which he had reason to thank the man he pursued. Though sent with a mission to destroy, it was the saving of his life.

On still through the crowded streets, which were empty to John Huish, for he saw nothing but the cab before him. As in his then wild state there seemed to be room in the world for but one of them two, so in his vision there was room but for the single object he pursued.

There were turnings and checks, and more than once the cab was nearly lost; but the driver he had knew his work, and twice over, when Huish was about to leap out and continue the pursuit on foot, there was the cab on ahead.

Over a bridge, and then down a turning for a short cut. Yes, he must be making for Waterloo Station; and as Huish sprang out he saw the man he sought at the ticket-office, and darted towards him.

The fugitive looked round in the act of taking his ticket, saw the wild face of Huish, and turned and fled, with his pursuer hunting him like a dog and close upon his heels.

Without a moment’s hesitation, on reaching the platform, he ran to the right, doubled back along the next, leaped down on the line, crossed it, reached the next platform, doubled again in and out, amidst the shouts of the porters, passed through a tangle of trains and empty carriages, and so reached again another platform, before glancing back to find Huish doggedly on his track.

A wild, strange look of horror came into his face as he glanced around him, seeking which way to go, and for the moment he made for the way down to the waterside by Hungerford Bridge; but a train was on the point of starting—not the one for which he had taken a ticket, but anywhere would do, so that he could get away from the madman who hunted him like fate.

He dashed to the gate just as it was closed, and the stern official uttered the words. “Too late.”

He glanced over his shoulder, and saw that John Huish was within ten yards, and half a dozen porters in pursuit. Had he possessed the presence of mind now to face him, he had but to say. “This is an escaped lunatic,” to see Huish secured.

But his nerve was gone, and in his horror he glanced wildly from place to place, ran a few yards, dashed through another gate, and ran along another platform just as the train was gliding away by the next.

Shouts and orders to stop reached him, but they fell upon ears that heard nothing, and, boldly leaping down at the end of the platform, he ran along the line, caught the handle of one of the carriages about the middle of the train, and climbed on to the footboard.

“Safe!” he muttered. “Curse him! he is a devil incarnate!”

As he spoke he climbed into the compartment, which proved to be empty; and then, with a smile of triumph, he thrust his head out of the window to gaze back at his discomfited pursuer; for the engine was now rapidly gathering speed, and being one of the long-distance trains, it would probably run ten or a dozen miles without stopping.

As he looked out, though, his eyes became fixed and his teeth chattered together with horror, for there, far back, standing on the footboard of the guard’s break, was John Huish, and as the young men’s eyes met there was a strange kind of fascination which held the fugitive to the window, while his pursuer seemed to come nearer and nearer till their eyes almost touched.

Occurring as these incidents did on the off side of the train, they had not been seen by the guard, who was in profound ignorance of what had taken place, while the officials at the terminus gave him the credit of seeing the strange passengers, and taking such steps as were necessary at the first stopping station. But he saw nothing till, looking out, about a couple of miles down the line, he saw John Huish standing on the footboard, and the next minute he entered the brake.

To the guard’s remarks there was no reply, and finding himself in company with a wild-looking man, with closely cut hair, his head bleeding, and who paid no heed to his words, he was about to check the train; but as his hand was stretched out to the wheel that bore the line, John Huish’s eyes blazed up and he shrank back, afraid to enter into an encounter with one whom he looked upon as mad.

“Where do you stop first?” said Huish at last.

“Bulter Lane,” replied the man, naming a station some fourteen miles down the line; and John Huish was silent during the half-hour’s run, while the guard kept glancing anxiously out at the stations they passed, and longed for help to rid him of his strange companion.

They were over two miles from their destination when, before he could arrest him, the guard saw Huish—who had been leaning out of the window, first on one side, then on the other—suddenly open the door, step down, and leap

from the train.

“Why, there’s another!” he cried, looking out. “I wonder they haven’t broken their necks.”

Had he been gazing out as the train ran on through the pretty country place, he would have seen the fugitive, after anxiously looking ahead, suddenly step down upon the footboard, leap forward, stagger as his feet touched the ballast, and then go down on hands and knees, but to get up and begin walking fast to the boundary hedge, which he crossed just as John Huish also took his leap from the train, alighted in safety, and once more began the pursuit.

“Why, the hunt’s t’other way on,” cried the guard excitedly, as he looked back. “Madman’s hunting his keeper, I think; and he’ll have him too,” he added, as the train thundered rapidly along, and they glided into the station, his last glimpse of the two strange passengers being as they ran across a meadow nearly two miles back. He gave information to the station-master, and two or three passengers who had seen the fugitive leave the carriage, and whose destination this proved to be, set off at a trot in the direction taken by the hunted man, while, after telling the engine-driver and stoker that it was a rum start, the guard resumed his place and the train continued its way.

It was a desperate leap, but in the dread which had seized him, the fugitive would have taken one of greater danger, for something seemed to tell him that he was fleeing from death, and that death was the stronger of the two.

He fell heavily, and cut his knees and hands upon the rough gravel, but he was up again, leaped the hedge beside the lane, and was hurrying across the meadow in the hope that Huish would not miss him until he reached the next station.

Glancing back, though, when he had run some fifty yards, he uttered a shriek that was like that of a frightened woman, for he could see Huish passing the hedge, and now he knew it was a trial of speed and endurance.

“He’ll kill me,” he cried hoarsely, as with trembling hands he pulled out the revolver from his breast, and, thrusting a hand into his pockets, sought for a cartridge to replace that which he had fired; but his fingers refused their office; and giving up the task, he ran on across meadow after meadow, checked by the hedges, and aiming afterwards at the gates.

A grim smile overspread his face as, after about a mile had been covered, he glanced back to see that he was the faster of the two, and, aiming for the open country, he pressed on.

“I shall tire him out,” he muttered as he toiled on, feeling disposed to throw away the revolver, but fearing to part with what might prove the means of saving his life.

The country was wooded and park-like; and with a strange perversity he sought the open, when he might have obtained help had he sought the nearest village. It was as if, in this time of peril, he, the clever, scheming, ready-witted man, had lost all command over his actions, and every nerve seemed concentrated upon the sole thought of fleeing from his pursuer.

They were too far ahead in their start to be seen by the porters who ran up the line from the station, and then followed their footprints across the meadows, so that there were no witnesses to the savage, relentless pursuit of the one, and the blind, terror-stricken flight of the other.

The pursued was right: unchecked by illness and confinement, he was the swifter of the two, gradually placing more distance between himself and his pursuer; but he had not calculated upon the latter’s stern determination.

For after a few minutes, in place of exerting himself to overtake his quarry, John Huish settled down into a steady, plodding run, husbanding his strength, and contented to keep his double in sight.

A few minutes later, as he still kept his eyes upon the man ahead, he slipped off his coat and steadily ran on, easier now that he was freed from this encumbrance.

A mile was covered, then, more slowly, another, and now the exertions of pursuer and pursued showed in the sluggish pace at which they toiled on. Huish’s face was black with the heat, and the veins in his forehead were starting, his breath came thick and fast, and now, dragging off his vest, collar, and tie, one by one, he threw them aside, and seeming to nerve himself as he saw his enemy stagger in his track, he increased his pace.

Fields were everywhere, save that in the distance were the spires of a couple of churches. At the end of a hundred more yards they came suddenly upon a wide expanse of undulating common-land, dotted with clumps of Scotch firs, and tufts of gorse and bracken, offering plenty of places of concealment to a hunted man, could he but reach one unseen.

But Huish was too close, while now the endurance was telling over speed, and as, like a hunted hare, the pursued glanced back with wild and starting eyes, he could see that his pursuer was gaining steadily, and the distance between them becoming short.

The afternoon sun cast long shadows, and glorified the golden gorse and bronzed the dark-green pines, while ever and again a rabbit scuttled away to its safe sanctuary in the sandy earth, and turned as if to gaze pityingly at the hunted stranger. Now and then, too, a blackbird darted away, uttering its alarm note, while high overhead in the peaceful arch of heaven a lark sent forth its trill of joy and peace.

Peace, while war to the death was in preparation for enactment by those two men, who, with bloodshot eyes, hot, dry tongues, and hoarse breathing, stumbled on over the heath and gorse! All around was a scene of silent beauty, such as the wild parts of Surrey can display in the greatest perfection; but bird, wild-flower, the mellow afternoon sunshine, all were as naught to John Huish, who saw but the tottering figure some forty yards ahead, and with his

chest seeming to be aflame, the foam at his lip, and the taste of hot blood in his mouth, he toiled on.

“I can go no farther!” panted the man he pursued, as, after wildly looking round for help, he made for a clump of firs, to one of which he clung as if to steady himself as he laid the pistol against the trunk and fired, while his pursuer was twenty yards away.

The bullet whizzed by John Huish’s head as he came on, and there was another report and the strange singing noise of a second bullet, but he passed on unharmed. His bloodshot eyes were fixed upon the half-hidden figure by the fir-tree, now not ten yards away—now not five, as there was a flash, a report, and a jerking feeling in his left arm.

The next moment the hunted man had dropped the pistol and turned to flee, running amongst the trees to where there was a hollow beneath a bank of yellow sand, capped with golden broom, and here he crouched, half turned away, thrusting one arm into a rabbit burrow, pressing himself against the crumbling soil, and literally shrieking in a wild, hoarse way as might some rat that has been hunted into a corner where there is no escape.

As Huish came at him he made another effort to flee, running a few yards, shrieking still in his agony of fear, more like some wild creature than a man. Then in his horror he faced round just as, gathering up his remaining strength, Huish sprang at his breast and they fell, the latter lying upon his enemy’s chest with his hands feebly clasping his throat.

“At last!” he panted with a savage laugh, and then lay helpless. He had overtaken his enemy, the creature who had blasted his life, maddened him, and robbed him of his fame and all he loved, and now he was helpless as a child.

For a time there was the hoarse panting of their laboured breath, and the eyes of the two men alone engaged in deadly strife; their limbs were completely paralysed. The sun sank lower, casting the shadows of the pines across them, and, emboldened by the silence, the furze chats twittered here and there, while from the distance came the soft mellow caw of a rook in homeward flight. Then from the dry grass hard by came the shrill crisp *chizz* of the grasshopper, and soft and deep from the clump of firs the low rattling whir of the evejar preparing for its hawking flight round the trees in quest of the moths and beetles that formed its fare.

But one thing in the soft evening beauty seemed to accord with the passions and hellish fury of the two men, and that was the low hiss and writhing shape of a short thick viper which glided slowly from beneath one tuft of heath where it had been driven by the coming footsteps, to seek its lurking-place beneath another.

For fully twenty minutes, panting, heated, exhausted, did the two men lie there, glaring into each other’s eyes. Once only did the hunted move, and his hand stole softly towards his breast-pocket; but it was pinioned on the instant, and he lay prone, waiting his time.

Meanwhile the sobbing hoarse murmur of their breathing grew more subdued, the heavy beating of their hearts more even, and the great drops of sweat ceased to trickle down from neck and temple, to coalesce, and then drop upon the grass. The feeling of helplessness, of paralysed muscles, passed away, and with the fire in his eye growing fiercer as he felt his strength returning, John Huish uttered a sigh of content as he told himself that he could now crush out the life of the creature who had destroyed his happy life.

The sun sank lower as he gazed down at the face beneath him. It was like looking at his own angry countenance in a mirror, and for the moment he was startled; but that passed away, for the thought of Gertrude came like a flash through his insane brain.

It was for vengeance.

“Devil!” he cried hoarsely; and with one sharp movement he struck at the prostrate man.

The latter had seen the change in his countenance, and was prepared for the assault. With the activity of a panther he seized the coming hand, and throwing up his chest as he bent his spine like a bow, he tried to throw his adversary off, and then a deadly struggle began.

At this moment there was little difference in the physical power of the two adversaries. Huish, though, from his position had the advantage, one that he fought hard to keep. At first it seemed that he would lose it, for, having somewhat recovered from his horror and fear of death, the hunted man threw the strength he had been husbanding into his first effort, flung John Huish aside, and nearly escaped. His advantage, however, was but a matter of minutes, for Huish steadily held on, and he was never able to rise to his feet. The grass was crushed down, the purple heather broken, and the sand torn up, while, growing giddy and weak with his exertions, the old fear came back, and once more the man lay prone upon his back, gazing up into Huish’s relentless eyes, and shuddered at the remorseless countenance he saw.

Then he raised his head slightly to try and look round for help, but he could see nothing but the setting sun, now glorifying the whole scene of peace made horrible by the life-and-death struggle that was going on. He thought of the past, of his wife, and as a strange singing arose in his ears, it seemed to take the form of words imploring for mercy—the mercy that he would not show.

“I can’t die—I am not fit to die!” he gasped. “John Huish, have mercy on me!”

He shuddered as his adversary burst into a wild, hoarse laugh, and glared down at him; and truly his face was horrible, distorted as it was by passion, his brow smeared with blood from the wound in his head, and every vein knotted and standing out from his exertions.

“He is mad!” the man muttered, as he saw the wild look in the other’s eyes, and once more he shrieked aloud. “No,

no! do not kill me!” he cried; “I cannot die!”

“Not die!” cried Huish. “We shall see!”

He tightened his hands now fiercely, when, with almost superhuman strength, the hunted man made a dying effort to wrench away his neck, shrieking out: “Huish—John Huish—mercy—do not kill—I am—your brother!”

John Huish’s hands relaxed their grasp, and a strange pang of fear and wonder combined struck through his brain. This man—his very self in appearance—his double—who knew his every act, his very life, and who had impersonated him again and again—was it possible?

He stared down at the distorted countenance before him, his hands clawed and held a few inches from the prostrate man’s throat, while doubt and incredulity struggled for the mastery. Then a curious smile crossed his face as his former thought re-mastered his beclouded brain.

“Another wile—a trick—a lie, for a few more moments’ breath,” he cried, catching him by the throat once more. “It is a lie, and you are a devil!”

“Mercy, help!” shrieked the other once more. “Huish—John—would you kill your brother?”

“I have no brother.”

“I am the son of James Huish and Mary Riversley!” cried the other with starting eyes; and then, as the young man loosed him once more, he cried: “It is true, I call God to witness—it is true!”

John Huish clasped his forehead with his hands, and tried to comprehend the fact thus suddenly brought before his clouded brain.

“You—my brother?”

“Ask in the other world!” yelled the other, as, with a stroke like lightning, he struck Huish full in the shoulder with a long keen-bladed knife, and, with a low groan, the young man fell over sidewise, and lay motionless amongst the heath.

“Curse him!” hissed the man savagely, as he rose to his feet, and then sank down feeling faint and giddy. “I’m sick as a dog. I’m torn to pieces. Curse him, it was time to strike!”

He wiped the blood from his hands, sought for and picked up the revolver that had fallen before the struggle began, and came back to think.

“Not room for two John Huishes,” he said, with a coarse laugh.

“Shall I go on with the game?” he said at last. “Yes? No? Too late. I shall be hunted down for this. The Baillestone people must know of the jump from the train. He will be found here to-morrow. I must get back.”

He bent over the prostrate man for a few moments, gazing at his calm, placid face, which now in the twilight seemed sleeping.

“Poor devil!” he muttered; “I didn’t want your life, but if, as you said, there was only room for one of us, why, you had to go! Brother, eh? Good-bye, dear brother Abel; I’m going to play Cain with a vengeance now; but my mark is on my arm, and not on my brow. Curse it, how it throbs and burns!”

With a low inspiration of the breath he hurriedly threw off his coat, and drew up his shirt-sleeve, for half was torn away in the struggle, and laying bare a great puckered scar upon his arm, it showed red and fiery, probably, though, from injury in the struggle.

“It is nothing, I suppose. One would think he had had the bite, and not I. Rabid as a maddened dog!”

He hastily drew on his coat, shivering with cold and horror.

“That would be horrible,” he muttered, “to go mad like a dog! What a fool I am! I shall stay here till I am taken.”

He glanced sharply round, and then started off at a steady walk, thankful for the coming shades of night, which would hide his disordered apparel.

His figure had hardly grown faint in the distance when a couple of young men crossing the common with rod and basket on their shoulders came upon the prostrate form of John Huish, as they chatted carelessly of the day’s sport.

“Drunk, or a tramp?” said one.

“Both,” said the other carelessly, as he glanced at the figure. “By Jove! Harry, there’s blood. It’s suicide!”

They hurried to the spot, and there was still light enough to display the tokens of the fierce struggle in the trampled turf, and the torn neck of the injured man’s shirt.

“It’s murder!” cried the first speaker. “Run for help!”

“Here it is!” said the other excitedly, as several figures were seen approaching; and he uttered a loud shout.

“What is it? Have you found them?” cried the first of the fresh party, panting.

“Found this man—he’s dead.”

“We’ve been hunting them for long enough,” said the other. “Yes, that’s one; here’s his coat and waistcoat. Good God! is he dead?”

“I don’t know,” said the man, leaning over Huish’s body. “He’s got an ugly wound. I wonder who he is?”

“I know,” said the man who had come up. “We have found his pocket-book and a letter. His name’s Huish—John Huish—and the letter’s from a doctor—Stonor, I think the name is.”

“Never mind the name as long as it is a doctor!” cried the man who knelt by Huish. “Someone run for him. Here, who’s got a flask?”

Volume Three—Chapter Sixteen.

Not Room for Two.

The hunted man’s wife sat watching at her window hour after hour, as she had watched days and nights before—bitter, vindictive, dwelling on the cruelty, the blows and wrongs, from which she had suffered at this man’s hands, and from the woman who played the part of mother to him—jealous tyrant to her.

“I have forgiven so much,” she said, “and would forgive again—anything but this! So young, and handsome, and fair! He’ll find her again, and bring her back, and then I may go. Why didn’t he kill me outright?” she added bitterly, as she went slowly to the lamp, took it up, and held it so that she could gaze at her bruised face in the glass.

It was a handsome face, but bitterly vindictive now, as she gazed at the bruises and an ugly cut upon her lip.

“Better have killed me for letting her go. He hates me now. Yes,” she said sadly; “better do it at once—better do it.”

But she crossed the room again with a sigh to open the door and listen, habit mastering anger and bitterness, as a look of eagerness and longing such as had often been there before came into her face. It was the old anxious look with which she had watched for him who did not come. Then, by degrees, the look faded out, and her brow contracted as bitter thoughts prevailed.

It was getting late now, and she lit the candles in an automatic fashion, pausing at intervals to think. Then, going to the little sideboard, she took out a glass and the spirit decanter, half full of brandy, placing both on the sideboard ready before seating herself at the open window to listen. Nine o’clock struck, then ten, and the half-hour had chimed, but still he did not return.

There were a couple of figures, one at either end of the lane, but they did not attract her attention, and she still sat listening till a faint noise below made her start up and hurry to the door.

Yes, at last. Someone coming up the stairs two steps at a time. The door was flung open, and her husband entered hastily, looking pale and disordered. There was so jaded and despairing an aspect in the man’s eyes that the woman’s sympathies were aroused, her troubles were for the moment forgotten, and she laid her hand upon his arm.

“Back at last, John dear!” she said tenderly. “Are you tired?” And then something in his face startled her. “John dear!” she cried.

“Curse John!” he cried. “There, I have done with that masquerading. Here, quick—my little bag—a change of things!”

“Are you hurt?” she cried anxiously.

“Do you hear me?” he cried, and struck at her savagely with the back of his hand.

She staggered back with a low moan, but sprang to him the next moment, and threw her arms round his neck.

“John dearest,” she whispered, in a low, frantic tone, “for God’s sake tell me you are sorry you did that. For your own sake ask me to forgive you; it makes me mad!”

“Curse you, keep away!” he cried, flinging her off; but she staggered back, and tried to nestle in his breast, only to be flung off again. “Get me my clean things—quick!”

“No, no, not yet!” she cried, falling upon her knees and grasping at his hands. “John, dear John, one kind word; say one gentle word to me, pray, oh, pray!”

“Are you mad?” he said savagely, as he tried to release his hand.

“No; but you are driving me so!” she cried hoarsely. “I forgive you your infidelity, your unkindness—everything—the way in which you have wronged me. John—husband—for God’s sake, for your own sake, be kind to me now. You do not know the temptation that is on me.”

“To run away and leave me?” he said mockingly. “Pray go.” He stood glaring down at her for a moment, and then exclaimed, in a cold, cutting way: “Will you get me the things I want?”

“Yes, yes, dear—yes, my own love!” she cried excitedly; “in one minute. But John, husband, my heart is nearly broken. I am maddened by my wrongs.”

He must have been mad himself, for as she clung to him he struck her again, more savagely this time, and, with a shudder running through her whole frame, she cowered on the floor.

But it was only for the moment. She struggled up again, joining her hands together as she wailed once more:

“I ask you again, for our dead babe’s sake, John—husband—give me one kind word, and I will forgive all!”

“Do you want to drive me wild!” he yelled savagely. “I am not John Huish—I am not your husband. Out of my sight, or —”

He raised his hand again to strike her, but she did not flinch. She stood up, seeming as if turned to stone, and a sickly pallor appeared on her cheeks.

“There, quick; get me the brandy! I have a long way to go.”

“Yes,” she said quietly, as a low moan escaped her lips; “you have a long way to go.”

She fetched the brandy decanter and glass from the sideboard, placed them before him, and he poured out a goodly quantity, raised the glass, listened, and then put it down.

“Who’s below?” he said sharply, as he turned towards the door.

“Jane Glyne,” she said, moaning; and then once more she tried to clasp his neck.

“What’s the matter with you?” he cried mockingly, as he thrust her arm away, and, catching up the glass, he raised it to his lips.

“No, no!” she cried, her coldness giving way to a look of horror; “don’t drink it;” and she threw up her hands to seize the glass. But once more his hand fell heavily upon her, and she shrank away, covering her bruised face with her fingers, as he drained the glass and then dropped it, to shiver to atoms on the fender.

“What! That brandy?” he cried, with his face convulsed. “What have you given me to drink?”

“Death!” she said sternly, as she dropped her hands, to stare him full in the face.

He caught at the mantelpiece and steadied himself, his lips parting, but no words came. Then, with his countenance changing horribly, he said in a hoarse whisper:

“How long?”

She grasped his meaning, and shook her head. He smiled, and swung himself to the table, caught the decanter in his hand, and stood pointing.

“A glass—quick!”

She glided to the sideboard, and returned to place one before him. The neck of the decanter chattered loudly against the thin edge, and his teeth gnashed horribly as he poured out half the glass full, and then dropped the vessel, for the remainder to run gurgling out with a strange noise, as if the spirit within the decanter were dying. Then, grasping the glass, he raised it and held it out.

“Drink!” he said huskily—“drink!”

The woman stood motionless for a few moments, rigid, as if petrified. Then, without a word, she raised her hand, took the glass calmly, and raised it to her lips, when in a paroxysm of agony the dying man threw out his arms, the glass was dashed from her hand, and he fell heavily upon the floor. As he fell writhing upon the rug the door was thrust open, and a detective-sergeant and a couple of policemen entered the room.

“John Huish, *alias* Mark Riversley, I have a warrant—Good heavens!” The sergeant stopped, caught the decanter from the table, smelt it, and set it down. “Too late!” he exclaimed, as a strong odour of bitter almonds floated through the room. “Here—a doctor—quick!”

As one constable reached the door the man they sought uttered a low animal cry, writhed himself partly up, and caught at the woman’s hands as she sank upon her knees at his side.

“Too—late,” said the man faintly, as he threw up his head and seemed to be speaking to someone invisible to those present. “Your—fault, your sin—a curse—a curse!”

Those present glanced at one another and then at the woman who knelt there silent and motionless, as if carved in stone.

They thought him dead, but he struggled faintly, and the woman held his head upon her arm, as his eyes slowly turned upon her, and a smile played round his pinched blue lips.

She shuddered, and her brow knit as she bent her head to hear his dying curse.

“Only a dog, and a dog’s death,” he whispered—“a wolf—in my blood—cursed—cursed. Gentlemen, too late; poison; I

took it myself. An accident—I— Ah! No room for us both. Good-bye!—my—”

He made a faint effort to throw one arm round the woman’s neck, but it fell lifeless by his side, and as a shudder ran through him a piteous cry rang through the room, and all turned to see that a wild-looking, haggard woman had entered the room.

“My poor, handsome boy!” she wailed. “Dead, dead!”

Volume Three—Chapter Seventeen.

The Family Doctor.

Being a matter-of-fact man, Dr Stonor had communicated with the police, and many hours had not elapsed before he learned from them that a gentleman, such as he described, with a letter bearing his name, had been found, seriously injured, on one of the Surrey commons in the neighbourhood of Ripley.

On running down, he found John Huish lying at a cottage, bandaged up, and very weak, but quite sensible, and ready to smile in welcome of his old friend.

“Why, my dear boy, how could you be so foolish as to leave me like this?” exclaimed the doctor, who had heard of the condition in which his patient had been found. “You might have known that all I did was for your good.”

“Yes, doctor, yes,” he whispered; and his visitor noticed how calm and sane were his looks and words; “but I could bear it no longer. I had that dreadful idea in my head that I was going mad.”

“And you know now that it was only a fancy?”

“I do,” said Huish. “Can you find my wife? Use every plan you can to rescue her from—”

“You had better not talk, my boy,” said the doctor, laying his cool hand upon the patient’s head, to find it, however, as cool. “She is quite safe—at her uncle’s.”

“Is—is this true?” said Huish eagerly. “You are not deceiving me?”

“My dear boy, I would not deceive you; but now be calm and quiet, or I will not answer for the consequences. You see, I do not even ask you about your encounter with the man that did this, although I am full of curiosity; for I have heard a strangely confused account.”

“Tell me one thing, doctor, and then I will ask no more,” said Huish faintly. “You knew my father before I was born. Had I ever a brother?”

The doctor’s brow knit, and then he nodded.

“Yes, I believe so; but it is a sad story. Don’t ask any more. He died in infancy: at birth, I believe.”

“No,” said Huish calmly; “he lived.”

Dr Stonor sat watching the injured man, to see him sink into a calm, easy slumber, and on repeating his visit next day found him very weak, but refreshed and perfectly calm, and ready to converse upon the subject of his brother, when, feeling bound, under the circumstances, he told the wounded man what he knew of the past—of the encounter between Robert Millet and the elder Huish, and the latter’s marriage to Mary Riversley, while Captain Millet, who was terribly injured by his fall, had taken to his peculiar life, and held to it ever since.

“But I was always given to understand that this child died,” said the doctor, musing. “Your father and mother always believed it dead. It’s a strange story, my dear boy, and it seems impossible that there could be such a resemblance.”

“Seems impossible, doctor, perhaps,” said Huish, smiling; “but I have looked him in the face. Thank God,” he said fervently; “the knowledge of his existence sweeps away the strange horror that has troubled me, and accounts for all the past. Doctor, it must have been he who applied to you that day while I was abroad.”

Dr Stonor’s answer was to lay his hand upon his patient’s forehead again, and John Huish smiled.

“My dear boy, it is absurd,” he exclaimed pettishly. “I could not have made such a mistake. There; I must get back to town.”

“Come and see me to-morrow,” said Huish earnestly, “and bring me back some news of—”

The doctor nodded and left; and by that time next day he had come to the conclusion that there were strange lives in this world, for he had had such information as took him to an old house in a City lane, where he had gazed upon the face of the dead semblance of the man he knew to be lying ill in the Surrey cottage. Moreover, he had found with the dead a thin, harsh-spoken woman, red-eyed and passionate with weeping, and ready on the slightest encouragement to burst into a torrent of grief and adulation of “her boy,” as she called him.

“So handsome and so brave as he was, and such a gent as he could make himself, and live with swells,” she sobbed, “though he wouldn’t know me sometimes in the street.”

“Did you know his father and mother?” said the doctor, hazarding a shot.

"I am his mother," said the woman sharply. "Poor, brave, handsome boy! The times I've found him in money, and warned him about danger, and watched for him when he wanted it done. I am his mother."

"Nonsense!" said the doctor. "You don't know me. I attended Captain Millet after his fall in the gravel-pit near the Dingle."

"He was the gent that come to see Miss Ruth two years before, wasn't he?"

"To be sure," said the doctor. "You see, I am an old friend. Stop a moment," said the doctor, referring to some notes he had made that morning in Wimpole Street. "Why, let me see, you must be Jane Glyne."

"Which I ain't ashamed to own it," said the woman, pushing back her thin grey hair.

"Of course not," said the doctor. "You were Mrs Riversley's servant. You heard, of course, of the struggle between the two young men?"

"I heard of it after," said the woman sharply; "and what's more, I heard one of them shriek out at the time. It was when I was going away to where I had left the child."

"To be sure," said the doctor quietly; "but Miss Riversley thought it was dead."

"Yes," said the woman, "that was missus's doings. She said no one must know it was alive. That's why I took pity on the poor little thing, and brought him up."

"That, and the allowance," said the doctor significantly.

"Well, thirty pounds a year wasn't such a deal," said the woman; "but I somehow got fond of him, because he grew so clever. My! how he used to hate everybody of the name after he got to know who he was. I've known him to curse everybody who belonged to him, saying the bite of the dog I saved him from had given him a dog's nature. It was his going down to the Dingle when he was fifteen and threatening an exposure that gave Mrs Riversley the illness she died of; but I'd made her settle my money on me," chuckled the hag; "and it's safe enough as long as I live. He'll never want now what I saved for him, poor dear! nor me neither. My poor boy—dead!"

The doctor drove back to Wimpole Street, where he had a long talk at the panel with Robert Millet, and the result was that they were both satisfied as to the identity of the elder natural brother of John Huish, whose aim through life seemed to have been to take advantage of his extraordinary resemblance, and to improve it by copying Huish's dress, carriage, very habits in fact, and using them to the injury of the younger brother, whom he bitterly hated for occupying the position that should have been his.

Miles away in the pleasant Surrey lane John Huish lay in happy ignorance of the fate of the man who had been his bitterest foe. He was very weak; but an awful load had been taken from his brain—the dread of insanity—and beside his bed knelt Gertrude, holding his hand with both of hers, and humbly asking his forgiveness for the doubts she had had.

"My darling!" he whispered, as he laid his other hand upon her soft, fair hair. "I am so happy, and life seems so bright before me that I cannot bear for you to lay one cloud upon its sunshine. Why, Gertrude, you might easily be deceived, when his presence, and the knowledge of such an existence, nearly drove me mad. There, little one, try and nurse me back to strength, for I have the hope now that nothing can take away. But if I die—" he said sadly, as he gazed out of the window.

"John—husband!"

"Yes, sweet," he sighed, "if I die, remember I have been yours, and yours alone. Let no other hand touch me after death."

"Husband!" cried Gertrude, in an agonised voice. "But no; you shall not die. John, darling, live for my sake—for the sake of our little child."

Volume Three—Chapter Eighteen.

The Events of Two Years.

Two years slipped rapidly away, and society rolled on as usual. Many events had taken place, some of which had had their special interest to the characters in this story.

Ruth was thinner than of old, but she looked bright and happy, for the past two years had been very peaceful. She had paid occasional visits to Hampton Court, but Lord Henry's house seemed to be definitely her home, and the old man always treated her as if she were his child.

In the course of time various matrimonial speculations were set on foot at Hampton Court to provide Ruth with a rich husband; but as in each case the proposition of her joining a dinner-party where either a wealthy plebeian or an elderly titled *roué* was to be the honoured guest, was crushed emphatically by Lady Henry Moorpark, who was firm in the extreme, the ladies by degrees gave Ruth's over as a hopeless case, leaving her to the tender mercies of her cousin.

In fact, as she was off the honourable sisters' hands, and their expenses were lessened, Ruth's name was not often mentioned except during Mr Paul Montaigne's periodical calls, when, after walking across from Teddington, that gentleman would sip their tea and sigh, as he blandly alluded to the ingratitude of the world, and the fact that the servants at Lord Henry's had been instructed to say "not at home" whenever he called.

Often and often bland Mr Paul Montaigne would gnash his teeth when alone, and vow vengeance, but somehow Marcus Glen's threat had had so great an influence upon him that the thought thereof would make him pale and nervous for twenty-four hours after, and quite spoil his night's repose. But he heard merely with a grim smile that Captain Glen had become a constant visitor at Lord Henry Moorpark's, and that his lordship gave Ruth Allerton away upon a certain happy day, for it is a world of change, and the time had come when Ruth's cousin could think quite calmly of the past.

The calm was not without its disturbance, though, for as Lord Henry sat one evening sipping his port and wondering whether he might not now go up and join the ladies, he heard a carriage stop at the door; there was a thunderous knock, a terrific peal at the bell, and directly after the old butler entered.

"Mr Elbraham, my lord. I have shown him into the library."

"Hang Mr Elbraham!" said his lordship to himself; but feeling that the visit must be one of importance, seeing how little intercourse they had, he followed the butler into the library, where the financier was walking hastily up and down. "Ha, Elbraham!" he said, "come into the dining-room. I was having my port."

"Port, eh? Ah, yes! my throat's like a limekiln;" and, following Lord Henry into the dining-room, the butler placed fresh glasses, and the financier gulped down a couple as quickly as he could.

"Why, it's an age since we met," said Lord Henry.

"Good job for you," said Elbraham, mopping his red face and bald head. "Clo's a regular devil. Is she here?"

"Here!" said Lord Henry. "Oh no! she has not been here for a long time."

"Then she *has* bolted!"

"Has what?" cried Lord Henry.

"Bolted, Moorpark—bolted, damn her! Left a note for me saying she was going to dine with her sister, and I took the bait, till, thinking it a good opportunity to go and look over her jewels, hang me if they weren't all gone!"

"Her jewels gone?"

"Yes; and that made me suspicious. I went down directly and was going to ring, when I ran up against our buttons."

"Ran up against your buttons?" said Lord Henry wonderingly.

"Yes: the page-boy—with the large travelling-case in his hand. 'Hullo, you sir,' says I, 'what have you got there?'

"'A case missus said I was to take to Cannon Street Station, sir, and meet her there; and I've been waiting about for ever so long and couldn't see her, sir, so I thought I'd better bring it back!'

"'Quite right, my boy,' I says. 'Give it to me. There, be off down!'

"Well, sir, as soon as I was alone, I ripped up the bag, for it was locked; and hang me if it hadn't got in all her jewels—every blessed thing: diamonds and sapphires and rubies and emeralds and pearls; thousands and thousands of pounds' worth, for she would go it in jewels; and when I offended her I used to have to make it up by giving her something new. That woman cost me a pot of money, Moorpark, 'pon my soul she did, for I never shilly-shallied. If she was upset I always bought her something new."

"But, really, I don't understand all this!" said Lord Henry feebly.

"Wait a bit. She had meant to take her jewels with her, and the idiot of a boy blundered the thing, somehow, and instead of her having them I have the whole blessed lot. For I pitched the cases in the iron safe where I keep my papers, locked 'em up, came on here to see after her, and there's the keys!"

He slapped his pocket, and looked at Lord Henry as he spoke.

"I never expected it," said Elbraham coolly; "it was her dodge."

"Then where do you expect she is?"

"Why, bolted, man; gone to the devil—or with the devil, that black-looking rascal Malpas; and a deuced good job too!"

"But this is very dreadful!" said Lord Henry.

"It would have been if she had got away with all those stones," said Elbraham, helping himself to more wine. "But she was done there. By Jingo! what a cat-and-dog life we have led!"

"But, my dear sir!" cried Lord Henry, hardly able to conceal his disgust; "what steps are you going to take to save her?"

“Save her? save her?” said Elbraham. “She don’t want any saving.”

“Oh yes, from such a terrible fall. It may not yet be too late!”

“Save her?” cried Elbraham, with a hoarse chuckle. “Why, Moorpark, you don’t know her. Keep it dark from your wife, who is a good one. You drew the best lot. There’s no saving Clo; she’s bad to the core, and I’m devilish glad she’s gone, for I shall get a little peace now.”

“But you are going to pursue her?” said Lord Henry.

“Pursue her! What for? To have her scratch my eyes out, and that black scoundrel Malpas punch my head? No, thankye—deuced good port this! She’s gone, and jolly go with her! I wash my hands of her now.”

“But this is terrible, Elbraham.”

“Terrible? Why, it’s bliss to me; she’d have killed me. I used to be a bit jealous at first; but I had to get over that, for she was always flirting with someone.”

“But you must fetch her back, Elbraham!” exclaimed Lord Henry excitedly. “Think of the family credit!”

“Family credit!” cried Elbraham. “Why, they hadn’t got none—poor as Job, and nobody would trust them.”

“The family honour, then, sir,” said Lord Henry sternly.

“Family honour’s best without her. Jolly good riddance of bad rubbish, I say! She’s gone, and she won’t come back; and as for hunting for her, why, it would be disgracing your wife to do so.”

“But really—” began Lord Henry.

“Bah! Moorpark, you leave that to me; I’m a business man, and know what’s what. But, I say, it’s a lark, isn’t it?”

“I don’t understand you,” said Lord Henry, who could not conceal his disgust for the contemptible little wretch before him.

“Why, about those jewels. My! how fine and mad she’ll be! It’s about the best thing I ever knew. She won’t get ’em now.”

Elbraham laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks, and then he wiped his eyes.

“I say, Moorpark, I ought to be devilishly cut up, you know, about this; but the fact is, I’m devilish glad. I shall look nasty and make a show about being all wrong, you know, for one’s credit’s sake; but it ain’t my fault. I couldn’t help it; she had it all her own way. And the money she has spent—my!”

Elbraham helped himself to some more port, while Lord Henry sat and tapped the table with his carefully cared-for nails.

“I’m not going to cry over spilt milk, Moorpark, I can tell you! She’s gone, and, as I said before, a good riddance!”

It was a good riddance for Lord Henry Moorpark when Elbraham went, which he did at last, after stubbornly refusing either to take or to allow any steps to be taken in pursuit of Clotilde.

“No,” he said, after his sixth glass of port. “I won’t spend the price of a Parl’y ticket on her; and I don’t know as I shall bother myself about divorce proceedings. What’s the good? Malpas hasn’t a penny in the world, so there’d be no costs; and as to being free, that’s what her ladyship would like. But, I say, Moorpark.”

“Yes?”

“What a sell about those jewels!”

He said it again as Lord Henry saw him into his carriage, and the next day he settled himself down in his sanctum with a very big cigar stuck between his lips, giving him the aspect of a very podgy swordfish that had burnt the tip of its weapon. Before him was a huge leather bill-case gorged with slips of bluish paper, every one of which, as he took it carefully out, bore a stamp in one corner, a reference to so many months after date, and was written across and signed. Many of them were endorsed with sign-manuals as well; and these slips of paper he quietly examined as he took them out of one pocket of the great case and then thrust them into another.

By degrees an observer, had he been present, would have noticed that the pockets in which these slips were placed varied according to their dates, and that for the most part they were examined and replaced in the most unemotional manner; but every now and then as Elbraham took one out he laid it on the table, drew violently at his cigar, emitted a tremendous cloud of smoke, and burst into a hoarse series of chuckles. Then he rubbed his hands and laughed again in an unpleasant, silent manner, twisting about in his pivoted library chair.

As he spun round, which, evidently being the result of practice, he did very cleverly, he wrinkled his face up in a way that with him indicated pleasure, the whole performance giving him the aspect of some gigantic grotesque Japanese top.

Then he would stop short, puff at the great cigar, and stare with his prominent lobster eyes at the slip of paper, examining the date and turning it over and over.

“Old cat!” he ejaculated; and the slip of paper was laid aside, and a heavy paperweight banged down upon it.

There were half a dozen of these heavy paperweights, and every now and then one was lifted and a fresh slip of paper placed beneath it.

“Old cat!” he exclaimed again. Then there was another chuckle. “Let’s have another dive in the lucky bag!” he exclaimed, and a fresh slip was brought out.

He did not laugh now, but glowered at the paper savagely.

“Only wait; I’ll make him curl his black moustache to a pretty tune this time! He’ll have to sell out, and what will he do then? I wonder what a Major’s commission will fetch. Oh, hang it! they don’t sell ’em now. What the deuce do they do? I don’t care; I’ll ruin the beast, and then he may go to Clo to comfort him.”

He did not spin round this time as he did when he came upon slips of paper bearing the signature of Lady Littletown, and of which he now had a tiny heap, but sat glancing at the bold, striking autograph evidently written with a soft quill pen, and resembling a pair of thin Siamese twins with their heads together, and the word “Malpas” after them, the said twins evidently doing duty for the letter A.

“Curse him! I’ll ruin him, and then she’ll cut him like a shot. Doosid glad I got the jewels! Bet sixpence he made sure of them, and now he’s got her without a fifty pound in her pocket.”

Elbraham sat glaring at the bill, the big signature seeming to fascinate him, and for the moment it was so suggestive of the swarthy Major that unconsciously he took up an ivory-handled penknife, and, holding it dagger fashion, began to stab the paper through and through.

The holes reminded him that the slip of paper was valuable, so he threw the penknife aside with an oath, smoothed the bill, and, laying it by itself, he thumped a heavy paperweight upon it, and seemed in his act as if he meant to crush Major Malpas as flat.

Several more acceptances followed, all representing heavy sums of money; but they had no special interest for the financier, who went steadily on till, in succession, he found half a dozen accepted by one John Huish, and over these he frowned and snarled.

“Repudiated ’em all,” he said—“swore he never accepted one; and his lawyer set me at defiance. But I’ll keep ’em. He’ll buy ’em some day to keep the affair quiet. Rum start that! I could not have told t’other from which, if it hadn’t been for the voice.”

He replaced these in his pocket-book, and at last came upon five accepted by Arthur Litton, the effect being to make Elbraham roar with laughter.

“Puppy!” he exclaimed, bringing his fist down bang upon the slips of paper, “puppy! Fine gentleman. Haughty aristocrat. My dear Arthur, what a fix you are in, and how this will diminish dear Anna Maria’s money!”

“Here’s another, and there are more to come!” he cried, roaring with laughter; and then he had a spin till he felt giddy, after which he spun back in the other direction to counteract the dizziness, chuckled, rubbed his hands, found his cigar was out, and paused to light it before going through a less heavy batch of bills, the result being that he had beneath these paperweights a goodly show of the acceptances of Lady Littletown, Major Malpas, and Arthur Litton, over which he sat and gloated, smoking the while.

“What a beautiful thing a bill is!” exclaimed Elbraham at last. “It’s a blessing to an honest man: helps him out of his difficulties; gives such a nice discount to the holder; and shows him how to punish wicked people like these.”

He had another chuckle and a spin here, his feelings carrying him away to such an extent that he rather over-spun himself, and felt so giddy that he had to refresh himself from a silver flask that he kept in a drawer.

“How I shall come down upon ’em!” he said at last, as he puffed away reflectively at his cigar, which now grew rather short. “A thousand of bricks is nothing to it. My dear Lady Littletown will go down upon her knees to me, and ask me to dinner. Ha! ha! ha! she’ll want to find me another wife, perhaps, curse her! What a bad lot they are! I only wish I’d a few bills of the old cats’ at the private apartments—our dear aunts.”

He seemed to reflect here.

“I don’t think Marie’s a bad sort, after all,” he said at last. “Old Moorpark had a deal the best of the bargain. I haven’t anything to say against them: they cut Clo long enough ago, and quite right too. She’s a devil! What that gal has cost me!”

There was another fit of reflection here, during which Mr Elbraham threw the end of his cigar into the waste-paper basket, and lit another, longer and stouter than the last, after taking a band of white and gold paper from around its middle.

“Then there’s Master Arthur Litton,” he said. “Pitched me over as soon as he’d married his rich wife. Called me an Israelitish humbug. Yes, conceited fool. Forgot all about his paper, and how I had helped him. Regularly cut me dead. Nice bit of money he had with Lady Anna Maria Morton, but he has made it fly, and all he could finger has gone. Wait a bit! I’ll have him on his knees. He’ll talk about Shylock then, eh? Only wait! I’ll have something better than a pound of flesh.”

He chuckled and smoked for some minutes, and then the smoke began to come in longer puffs, the lines marked by

his triumph and mirth disappeared, and he glared and rolled his unpleasantly prominent eyes.

“Curse him!” he cried at length hoarsely. “He hasn’t a clear hundred to bless himself with, and I hold his paper for thousands. I believe it was with my money he carried off Clo. Well, let him have her. I’ve had enough of the wicked devil. Let him have her. Ha! ha! ha! My grand Major Malpas in the sheriffs hands, and Clo in lodgings without a penny! I needn’t want to trouble myself any more.”

The picture he mentally drew was so satisfactory that he indulged in another hoarse hollow laugh that was ugly upon the ear.

Then he carefully gathered together the three little batches of bills and secured each lot with an elastic band, before placing them in the pocket-book he carried in his breast, buttoned them up tightly, as if they were the greatest treasures he possessed, and ended by locking up the bulky case.

“Ha!” he said, rising, “I’m sorry for poor Major Malpas. I wonder whether that chap Glen will get the step up. What a lovely invention a piece of paper is!”

Volume Three—Chapter Nineteen.

Last Words.

The result of Elbraham’s consideration of the acceptances can be briefly told. There were sale bills out before long at Lady Littletown’s bijou residence at Hampton, and also at Lady Anna Maria Morton’s house in Bryanston Square.

The former lady had been in her carriage, and called upon Elbraham at his City office, and he laughed and asked her to take wine and biscuits, which she did, feeling sure that she could persuade him to make some arrangement to give her time; but as soon as this was demanded, Elbraham, who had a tight hold upon her ladyship’s property, politely told her, but in coarser language, that he would see her condemned first.

Mr Arthur Litton also, seeing that he had been going too fast, called upon the financier, who seemed delighted to see him, and offered him a very choice cigar; but as to leniency, Elbraham was as immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar, so Mr Arthur Litton left, saying strange things, and went and placed his affairs in a solicitor’s hands.

Major Malpas fared worst, for if ever man was socially ruined it was he. Elbraham seemed to spare no pains to weave a strong network round him, in which he buzzed till he got free, but only to skulk about the Continent, save when he paid a stolen visit to his native shore.

In company with Clotilde?

By no means, for their intimacy soon came to an end, and news reached the private apartments at Hampton Court that the dove which had left that dovecote had further besmirched her beautiful plumage. The honourable ladies, however, spoke of her in the future as dead, and by degrees became quite reconciled to Ruth’s marriage to Captain Glen, principally through the constant dropping of the water that is said to wear a stone.

The water dropped from the Honourable Isabella’s eyes, and the stone was her sister, who invited the happy pair down to Hampton Court to spend a few days at the Palace, where the Honourable Isabella’s heart would flutter and her hands shake, but all in a very innocent way, for her love for Marcus Glen had become subdued to one of a very motherly kind, even as another love was dead and buried in the past.

There was a change at the house in Wimpole Street. First one window used to have the shutters unclosed, then another and another; and at last it was noticed that the windows were cleaned. By the time John Huish had quite recovered from his injury, the place, though still suffering greatly from the want of paint, was so altered that, when the cab which had brought the convalescent and his young wife from the Waterloo Station, stopped, Huish had stared and told the driver to go on.

“This here’s the number, sir,” said the man sturdily; and so it proved, for just then Vidler opened the door, and they entered a house they hardly seemed to know.

There were voices, too, as well as an abundance of light in the house; and when the young couple, whose coming was expected, entered the drawing-room, it was to find quite a party assembled.

John Huish stopped short to gaze in wonderment, as Gertrude left his side, and ran forward to embrace a little thin old man, so grey and blanched that he looked almost ghostly as his white hands trembled over Gertrude and then were placed upon her head as she laid it against his breast.

The young man’s eyes turned sharply then to the panel in the wall, to see that it was closed and painted over.

“I’m very glad to see you, John Huish,” said a familiar voice, though, the next moment, as Gertrude rose to embrace her father, and the little white, bent old man stood up to limp painfully two or three steps to grasp both his hands.

John Huish could not speak, knowing what he did; and, pale and flushed by turns, he stood grasping the old man’s hands and thinking of how his father had robbed him of his love, almost of his life.

“My dear John,” he said, “you have taken my darling, and, as I have looked upon her always as my child, why, you must be my son. God bless you! The past is dead.”

The End.

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