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Title: Lost Sir Massingberd: A Romance of Real Life. v. 2/2

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Release date: August 23, 2011 [EBook #37171]

Language: English

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REAL LIFE. V. 2/2 ***

LOST SIR MASSINGBERD.

A Romance of Real Life.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

SAMPSON LOW, SON, AND MARSTON,

14, LUDGATE HILL.

1864.

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LOST SIR MASSINGBERD.

CHAPTER I.

OUT OF MIND, OUT OF SIGHT.

Notwithstanding the baronet's polite invitation, and although Mr. Long did not return, as expected, upon the ensuing morning, I felt no inclination to exchange my solitude for the society of Mr. Gilmore at bowls. I was, indeed, rather curious to see the bowling-green, which I had heard from my tutor was one of the very finest in England, fenced in by wondrous walls of yew; but, to arrive there, it was necessary to pass close to the Hall, and, consequently, to run great risk of meeting Sir Massingberd, my repugnance to whom had returned with tenfold strength since the preceding day. My reason, it is true, could suggest no possible harm from my having enclosed his letter to Marmaduke, but still an indefinable dread of what I had done oppressed me. I could not imagine in what manner I could have been outwitted; but a certain malignant exultation in Sir Massingberd's face when he was taking his leave, haunted my memory, and rendered hateful the idea of meeting it again. Moreover, the companionship of Gilmore, the butler, was not attractive. He bore a very bad character with the villagers, among whom he was said to emulate in a humble manner the vices of his lord and master; he had been his companion and confidential servant for a great number of years, and it was not to be wondered at, even supposing that he commenced that servitude as an honest man, that his principles should have been sapped by the communication.

Those who had known Richard Gilmore best and longest, however, averred that his nature had not been the least impaired by this companionship, inasmuch as it had been always as bad as bad could be. I never saw his pale secretive face, with the thin lips tightly closed, as if to prevent the escape of one truant word, without reflecting what a repository of dark and wicked deeds that keeper of Sir Massingberd's conscience needs must be. Such men usually hold such masters in their own hands; for they know too much about them, and it is that species of knowledge which, above all others, is power. But it was not so in this case; the antecedents of Gilmore's master were probably as evil as those of any person who has ever kept a valet, but there was this peculiarity about the baronet—that he cared little or nothing whether people knew them or not. When a thoroughly unprincipled man has arrived at the stage of being entirely indifferent to what his fellow-creatures think of him, he has touched his zenith; he is as much a hero to his *valet-de-chambre* as to anybody else. It was Gilmore's nature to be reticent; but, for all Sir Massingberd cared, he might have ascended the steps at the stone-cross at Crittenden upon market-day, and held forth upon the subject of his master's peccadillos. Sir Massingberd stood no more in fear of him than of any other man; otherwise, he would scarcely have used such frightful language to him as he did whenever the spirit-case had not been properly replenished, or he happened to mislay the key of his own cigar-chest. It was no delicate tending that the lord of Fairburn Hall required; no accurate arrangement of evening garments ere he returned from shooting; no slippers placed in front of the fire. As he was attired in the morning, so he remained throughout the day, and, if it were the poaching season, throughout the night also. He never was ill, and only very rarely was he so overcome with liquor as to require any assistance in retiring. The putting Sir Massingberd to bed must have been a bad quarter of an hour for Mr. Gilmore. I have mentioned that when I paid my only visit to the Hall, the front-door bell was answered by the butler with very commendable swiftness, under the impression that it was his master; and, indeed, it was rumoured that, on more than one occasion, the baronet had felled his faithful domestic like an ox, for dilatoriness. Wonder was sometimes expressed that Mr. Gilmore, who was supposed, as the phrase goes, to have feathered his nest very agreeably during his master's prosperous days, should cleave to him in his present poverty—the mere sentiment of attachment being deemed scarcely strong enough to retain his gratuitous services; but the reply commonly made to this was, I have no doubt, correct—namely, that, however matters might seem, Mr. Richard Gilmore, we might be well assured, knew his own business best, and on which side his bread was buttered.

Sagacious, however, as this gentleman doubtless was, I did not fancy him as a companion to play bowls with; and, instead of going in the direction of the bowling-green, I took my way to Fairburn Chase. I had not set foot within it for more than a year, and the season was much further advanced then when I had last been there. The stillness which pervaded it in summertime was now broken by the flutter of the falling leaf and the plash of the chestnuts on the moist and sodden ground; the autumn rains had long set in; there was that "drip, drip, drip" in the woods which so mournfully reminds us that the summer, with all its life and warmth, has passed away; and the dank earth was sighing from beneath its load of tangled leaves, which, "hanging so light and hanging so high," but lately danced in the sunny air. The presentiment of evil which overshadowed me was deepened by the melancholy of Nature. I moved slowly through the dripping fern towards the heronry; from the little island suddenly flew forth, not the stately birds who ordinarily reigned there, but a pair of ravens. I knew that such had taken up their residence in the old church tower, for I had seen them flying in and out of its narrow ivied window-slits; but their appearance in the present locality was most unexpected. I was far from being superstitious, but I would rather have seen any other birds just then. A few steps further brought me to that bend in the stream which had been such a favourite haunt of mine before I had dreamed there so unpleasantly. The lime-trees stood ragged and bare, and weeping silently, deprived of their summer bee-music; the sparkling sand, wherein I had seen the mysterious footprints, was dark and damp; a few steps further brought me to the stepping-stones, by which that unknown visitant must have crossed over, if she were indeed of mortal mould; the wood upon the other side was no longer impenetrable to sight; and through its skeleton arms I could see some building of

considerable size at no great distance. I knew where such of the keepers and gardeners as lived upon the estate resided, and it puzzled me to imagine to what purpose this cottage was assigned.

While I hesitated as to whether I should cross the turbid and swollen current, whose waters almost entirely covered the stepping-stones, a laugh prolonged and shrill burst forth from the very direction in which I was looking. It was the same mocking cry, never to be forgotten, which I had heard at that very spot some fifteen months before. Anywhere else, I should have recognized it; but in that place it was impossible to doubt its identity. Knife-like, it clove the humid and unwilling air; and, before the sound had ceased, a short, sharp shriek succeeded it—the cry of a smitten human creature. In a moment I had crossed the stream, and was forcing my way through the wood. As I drew nearer, I perceived the edifice before me was of stone, and with a slated roof, instead of being built with clay, and thatched, as were the rest of Sir Massingberd's cottages. There was no attempt at ornamentation, but the place was unusually substantial for its size, the door being studded with nails, while the window upon either side of it was protected by iron bars.

I was just emerging from the fringe of the wood, when another sound smote on my ear, which caused me to pause at once, and remain where the trunk of an elm tree intervened between me and the cottage; it was merely the bark of a dog, but it checked my philanthropic enthusiasm upon the instant. There was no mistaking that wheezy note, telling of canine infirmity, and days prolonged far beyond the ordinary span of dogs. Besides there was but one dog permitted to be at large in Fairburn Chase. It was the execrable Grimjaw. I could see him from my place of concealment turning his almost sightless eyes in my direction as he sat at the cottage door. Immediately afterwards, it opened, and out came Richard Gilmore; he looked about him suspiciously, but having convinced himself that there was nobody in the neighbourhood, he administered a kick to Grimjaw's ribs, reproached him in strong language for having made a causeless disturbance, and turning the key, and pocketing it, walked away by a footpath that doubtless led, although by no means directly, to the Hall. He had a dog-whip in his hand when I first saw him, which I thought was an odd thing for a butler to carry, and he seemed to think so, too, for he put it in a side-pocket before he started, and buttoned it up. Grimjaw, gathering his stiffened limbs together, slowly followed him, not without turning his grey head ever and anon towards my covert, but without venturing again to express his suspicions. I waited until the charming pair were out of sight, ere I advanced to the cottage.

The door of course, was fast; so, approaching the right-hand window, I cautiously looked in through its iron bars; there was no casement whatever, therefore all the objects which the room contained were as clear to me as though I were in it. I beheld a sitting-room, the furniture of which was costly, and had been evidently intended for a much larger apartment, but which in variety was scanty enough. At a mahogany table, which retained little more of polish than if it had just been sawn from its trunk in Honduras, sat an ancient female, with her back towards me, supporting her chin on both hands; a cold chicken in a metal dish was before her, but neither a plate nor knife and fork; she was muttering something in a low tone to herself, which, if it was a grace, must have been a very long one. Her hair was scanty, and white as snow, but hung down almost to the ground; she was miserably thin; and her clothes, although they had once been of rich material, were ragged and old.

I had made no noise, as I thought, in my approach; and the day was so dull and dark that she could scarcely have perceived my presence by any shadow of my eavesdropping self; but no sooner had I set my eyes on her than she began to speak, without looking round, imagining, doubtless, that I was Gilmore. "So you are there again, peeping and prying, are you, wicked thief," cried she. "Don't you know that a real lady should take her meals in peace without being interrupted, especially after she has been beaten? Think of that, you cur. Why, where's your whip?" She uttered these last words with a yell of scorn; and turning suddenly, with one arm raised as if to ward a blow, she met my unexpected face, and I saw hers. So remarkable was her appearance, that although it was she, not I, who was taken by surprise, I think I was the more astounded of the two. Her countenance was that of an old woman, so wrinkled, or rather shrivelled up, that the furrows might have represented the passage of a century of time; yet the teeth were as white and regular as in a young beauty, and the black beaded eyes had a force and fire in them unquenched by age. In her thin puckered ears hung a pair of monstrous gilded ornaments, and round her skinny neck was a necklace such as a stage queen would wear; yet she had naked feet.

"Oh, it is you, is it?" observed she, with a grave distinctness, in strong contrast to her late excited and mocking tones. "If I had known that you were coming, young gentleman, I would have put on my bracelets. The family jewels are not all gone to the pawnbroker's, as is generally believed. Besides, you should never insult people because they are poor, or mad; one would not be either one or the other, you know, if one could help it."

"Heaven forbid, madam, that I should offer you any insult," said I, touched by the evident misfortune of this poor creature. "I merely ran hither because I heard the cry, as I thought, of some one in distress."

"Ah, that was the dog, sir," replied the old woman cheerfully; "the butler was correcting his dog, and it howled a little. Of course it could not have been me—certainly not; Sir Massingberd is so excessively anxious that I should have everything that is good for me; he said that with his own lips. And what a handsome mouth he has, except when he looks at *you*."

"Why at me?" cried I. "He has no cause to dislike me, has he!"

"No cause!" cried the old woman, coming closer to the bars, and lowering her voice to a confidential whisper. "Oh no—not if you were dead. I never wished you worse than myself; no, not when my poor baby died, and I could not weep. I feel that now; if I could only weep, as in the good old times with my husband! There was plenty of good weeping then—plenty."

"But why should you wish me dead, madam, who have never done you any harm?"

"No harm? What not to have taken the title from my boy? No harm, when but for you, he would have been the heir to house and land! Why, look you, if it had not been for something, I would have driven Gilmore's knife into you that day when you were sleeping under the limes. That was the very place where I used to meet my love—let me see, how many years ago?"

The eager eyes for one instant ceased to glitter; some fragment of a memory of the past claimed the restless brain; then once more she rambled on. "One, two, three, four—he never struck me more than four times; that's true, I swear."

"And what was the something that prevented you from killing me when I was asleep by the heron's island?" inquired I.

"What was it?" replied the old woman sadly. "Did you not cry, 'Mother, mother,' in your sleep, to make me think of my boy? I wept at that; just one tear. He might have been such another as yourself—with the same—Why, what's the matter with your forehead? What have you done with your horseshoe? Every Heath wears one of them; then why not you, young Marmaduke?"

"My name is not Heath," said I; "you are taking me for somebody else."

"Dear me—dear me, what a mistake! The fact is, that living in a house affects one's sight. Now, let me guess. If you are not Marmaduke Heath, you must be...—What a dark skin you have, and what kind eyes!" She looked suspiciously round the room, and laying her finger on her lip, observed beneath her breath: "You are not Stanley Carew, are you? They told me he was hung, but I know better than that. I have seen him since a hundred times. To be hung for nothing must be a terrible thing; but how much worse to be hung for love!"

"I am not Stanley Carew," said I; "I am Peter Meredith, who lives with Mr. Long at the Rectory."

"I never happen to have heard your name before, sir," replied the old woman, mincingly; "perhaps you have never heard mine. Permit me to introduce myself. Don't suppose that our people don't know good manners, I am Sinnamenta—Lady Heath."

"Madam," said I, deeply moved, "I apprehended as much. If I can do you any service, be sure that the will shall not be wanting. Pray, tell me what shall I do?"

"Well," returned the poor creature, quickly, "Marmaduke Heath should be killed at once, that is all important. We have been thinking of nothing else, my husband and I. But perhaps you have done it already." (How I shrank from that random shaft.) "If so, I have no further desire except to get out. If I could only be once more in the greenwood, my hair would reassume its natural colour. That is why Mr. Gilmore is so careful to keep me thus locked up. If my husband only saw me with my black hair again—it reached to the ground, sir—matters would be very different. I think I have already observed that it is not customary to watch a lady while she is partaking of refreshment."

With that, she once more seated herself at the table, with her back to me; and judging thereby that my presence was distasteful to her, and having no notion of how I could possibly give her any aid, I withdrew from the sad scene. I had not, however, gone many steps, when she called me back again through the iron bars.

"Mr. Meredith," said she, "you arrived somewhat unexpectedly. It is to that circumstance alone, I beg to repeat, that you must attribute the absence of bracelets. My very best regards to all your family. Sinnamenta, you know—Lady Heath."

CHAPTER II.

HARLEY STREET.

While I was thus passing my time at Fairburn, at work with my tutor, in rides rendered doubly lonesome by contrast with those made so enjoyable by the company of my friend, or in rambles about the solitary Chase, the course of true love was running more smoothly in Harley Street than it is fabled to do. During each of my visits there, I had perceived its silent increase even more clearly than those between whom it was growing up into the perfect flower, leaf by leaf, and bud by bud; they had tended it together—Marmaduke and Lucy—until it was well nigh in blossom, and yet they had not said to one another, and perhaps not even to themselves, "Why, this is surely Love." Mr. Gerard had watched it, not displeased, for he had found the young man all that my heart had foretold that he would; Mr. Clint had seen it, and won by the strong sense, as much as by the beauty of the gentle girl, forgot the revolutionary stock of which she came. This, thought he, is the wife for Marmaduke Heath; tender, but yet determined; dutiful, but indisposed to submit to unauthorized dictation; as fearless as kind. In her, once wedded to this

young man, so morbid, so sensitive, so yielding, Sir Massingberd would find, if it should be necessary, not only a foe, resolute herself, but as firm as steel for him whom she had dowered with her love. What Marmaduke's nature wanted, hers would supply. The keen lawyer foresaw for that unhappy family, whose interests he and his had had in keeping so many scores of years, a future such as had never been promised before. It was an admission painful to me enough at that time, but which I could not conceal from myself, that the real obstacle which prevented the open recognition of attachment between these two young people was Marmaduke himself. No girl more modest or less forward than Lucy Gerard ever breathed, but I knew—ah, how well I knew!—that a word from him would have brought the love-light to her eyes, which now lay waiting but for it in the careful keeping of her maiden heart. But that word had not been spoken. Perfect love, Marmaduke did not yet feel, for he had not quite cast out fear. How can a man offer heart and hand to a woman whom he does not feel certain that he can protect? It is for this reason that marriage among slaves must for ever be a mockery. There was, of course, no danger to Lucy Gerard in her marrying with Marmaduke, although his uncle should storm "No" a thousand times; but the young man felt that he was unworthy of her, while he entertained any terror of him. It was wearing away; it was weakening day by day, through genial influences, and the absence of all things which reminded him of Fairburn and its master, but it was not dead yet. If by these words, I lead any of my readers to suppose that Marmaduke Heath had the least resemblance to that thing which is called a Coward, I have done my friend a grievous wrong. Let me do away with the possibility of this most mistaken notion, at once and for ever, by the recital of an event which, although it does not come within the scope of the present narrative, nearly concerns one of its most important characters.

After the peace in 1815, there were more officers—English and French—killed in single combat in Paris than in any one of the most bloody battles of the late war. This desire to exterminate individual Englishmen extended over the whole of France. A certain gentleman of my acquaintance, then a very young man, chanced to be passing through a town in Normandy, where an assemblage was collected outside the office of the mayor. This arose from the very uncommon circumstance that that functionary had been appealed to by a post-captain in the English navy to punish a bullying Frenchman, who had striven to fasten a quarrel upon him, although entirely unprovoked on his part. Now-a-days, the captain would have been held to have behaved rightly enough, perhaps, but in those fire-eating times an honest man's life was at the mercy of every worthless ruffian who chose to run an equal risk with him from powder and bullet. The decision, wonderful to relate, was given by the mayor against his compatriot, and the crowd were correspondingly enraged. My friend, whose nationality was apparent, was hustled and ill-treated, and one person, well-dressed, and evidently of good position, knocked his hat off, observing at the same time: "You will complain of me to the mayor for that."

"Certainly not," returned the young Englishman quietly, picking his hat up, all broken and muddy, from the trampled ground: "I shall treat you very differently."

"You will fight, will you? Come—I challenge you. Let us fight to-morrow morning," exclaimed the bully, who was, as it turned out, a notorious provincial duellist.

"Not to-morrow, but now," rejoined my friend; "I have no time to wait here, for I must be in Paris on Tuesday."

"Then it will be in Père la Chaise," responded the other brutally.

There was no difficulty in procuring seconds, which were even more plentiful in those parts than principals, and the whole party immediately left the town for a wood outside its suburbs. The choice of weapons of course lay with the Englishman.

"Which do you prefer," asked the Frenchman who acted as his friend upon the occasion—"the pistol or the sword?"

"I have never fired a pistol in my life," replied the Englishman, "nor handled a sword."

"Heavens!" cried his second, "what a barbarous education, what a stupendous ignorance! You are as good as dead, I fear. I know not which to recommend you. It is, however, at least sooner over with the pistol."

"The pistol be it then," said the Englishman coolly. "I elect that only one shall be loaded; and that we fire within four paces of one another. We shall then have an equal chance."

The duellist turned pale as the death that threatened him, but he did not venture to make any objection. It was manifest no other proposal would have been fair. The seconds went apart, and placed powder and ball in one weapon, powder only in the other. The combatants drew lots for choice. The Frenchman won. The pistols were lying on a log of wood; he advanced towards them, took one up in his hand, and retired with it, then once more came back, and exchanged it for the other. He fancied that the weapon was lighter than it should have been if it had a ball within it. My friend's second objected strongly to this course; he called it even unfair and shameful; he protested that the pistol taken first ought to be retained. But the young Englishman, who was leaning carelessly against a tree, exclaimed, "Let the gentleman have which he likes. Whether he is right or not will be decided in a few seconds." So the combatants were placed opposite to one another, and advanced to within four paces. They raised their weapons; the word was given to fire, and the Frenchman fell, pierced through the heart.

"His blood is upon his own head," exclaimed the other solemnly. "He was brave enough to have

been a better man." Then perceiving that his help could be of no avail to his late antagonist, he lifted his battered hat to the Frenchman that remained alive, and returning to his carriage, immediately resumed his journey.

It is not possible, without putting some very strained and unusual meaning on the word, to call the hero of such an adventure a coward; yet the man who acted thus was Marmaduke Heath.

The above relation is but a clumsy method of proving him courageous, I am well aware; but I really know not otherwise how to make him appear so, slave, as it is seen he was, to terrors which must seem almost imaginary. It is said that no man, however fearless, quite gets over his awe of his schoolmaster. An exaggeration of this sentiment probably possessed this unfortunate young man; added to which was the fact that Sir Massingberd was his uncle, a family tie which was doubtless not without its influence, notwithstanding Marmaduke's evil opinion of his own race. I suspect, too, he entertained a morbid notion that his own life and that of his relative were somehow bound up together in one; and on the few occasions when I ever saw him moved to wrath, a similarity—mental as well as physical—between him and his uncle became apparent, which actually inspired him with a sort of awe and hatred of *himself*. A noble mind more injured and misshapen by ill-training it was impossible to imagine. For the last few months, however, as I have said, it had been growing aright, and gaining strength and vigour. No home—even Mr. Clint and my tutor felt that—could possibly be better adapted for him than his present one; the society of Mr. Gerard, a man independent almost to audacity, and despising the haughty and the strong with a supreme contempt, was the very tonic he needed. Rarely, however, was his uncle's name mentioned in his presence: at first, Mr. Gerard had purposely spoken of Sir Massingberd lightly and jestingly, but it was found that the subject had better be altogether avoided. It is ill to jest upon earthquakes with one who, having but just recovered from certain shocks of a volcanic nature, is not without apprehensions of more to come. This anticipation turned out to be but too well grounded. A day or two after my discovery of the baronet's poor gipsy-wife at Fairburn, whose existence was well known, I found, to both the rector and Mr. Clint, and of course to Marmaduke himself, the postman carried misfortune from me to Harley Street, although I was myself as unconscious of the fact as he. Marmaduke did not come in to luncheon from his study, as usual, and Mr. Gerard was sent with a gay message to him by Lucy, to bid him do so. He was not wanted, he was to be assured, upon his own account at all, but she was dying to hear news of Peter, whose handwriting she had perceived upon the letter that had been sent in to him that morning. Mr. Gerard found the poor lad with his eyes riveted upon an autograph that was not mine, and upon words that I would rather have cut off my hand than knowingly have sent him:

"Nephew Marmaduke,—I am told, whether falsely or not, it does not matter now, that you have not seen the letter which I previously sent to you. I think you can scarcely have done so, or you would not have dared to disobey my orders therein contained, but would have returned to Fairburn long ago. At all events, you will read *this* with your own eyes, and beware how you hesitate to comply with it. *Return hither, sir, at once*. It is idle to suppose that I wish you harm, as those you are with would fain persuade you; but it is far worse than idle to attempt to cross my will. Come back to Fairburn, and I will behave towards you as though you had not acted in your late undutiful manner. Delay to do so, and be sure that you will still have to return, but under very different circumstances. Marmaduke Heath, you should know me well by this time. When I say 'Come,' it is bad for the person to whom I speak to reply, 'I will not come.' I give you twenty-four hours to arrive here after the receipt of this letter; when these have elapsed without my seeing you, I shall consider your absence to be equivalent to a contumacious refusal. Then war will begin between us; and the strife will be unequal, Nephew Marmaduke; although you had fifty men at your back like lawyer Clint and this man Gerard, they could not keep you from my arm. It will reach you wheresoever you are, at the time you least suspect it, and from the quarter to which you have least looked. However well it may seem to be with you, it will not be well. When you think yourself safest, you will be most in danger. There is indeed but one place of safety for you: come you home.

"MASSINGBERD HEATH."

The wily baronet had fooled me, and doubtless, when I rose to light the taper, had substituted the above letter for that which he had persuaded me to enclose to his unhappy nephew.

CHAPTER III.

BEFORE THE BLOW.

As yet in ignorance of the mischief which I had unwittingly done to my dearest friend, I could not but wonder why I received no news from Harley Street. I had confessed to Mr. Long what Sir Massingberd had persuaded me to do, and although he had thought me wrong to have acted without consulting him in the matter, he anticipated no evil consequences. He rather sought to laugh me out of my own forebodings and presentiments. Still there was this somewhat suspicious corroboration of them, that the newborn courtesies of our formidable neighbour had suddenly ceased, as though the end for which they had been used was already attained. The baronet's manner towards us was as surly as ever, and even a trifle more so, as if to recompense himself for his previous constrained politeness. To myself, his manner was precisely that of a man who does not attempt to conceal his contempt for one whom he has duped. Since Marmaduke's

departure, there had gone forth various decrees, injunctions, and what not, from the Court of Chancery, obtained doubtless through Mr. Clint, on behalf of the heir-presumptive, against certain practices of Sir Massingberd connected with the estate. Formerly he had done what he chose, not only with "his own," but with what was not his own in the eye of the law. But Marmaduke's reversionary rights were now strictly protected. Not a tree in the park could fall beneath the axe, but the noise thereof reached the Chancellor's ears, and brought down reproof, and even threats, upon the incensed baronet. His hesitation to institute proceedings for the recovery of his ward, had given confidence to his opponents; and Mr. Gerard was not one to suffer the least wrong to be committed with impunity; it was out of his pocket that the expenses came for the edicts necessary to enforce compliance, and I have heard him say that he never remembered to have spent any money with greater personal satisfaction.

This "thinning the timber" (as Sir Massingberd euphoniously termed cutting down the most ornamental trees, in his excusatory despatches), having been put a stop to, the squire took to selling the family plate. A quantity of ancient silver, with the astonished Griffins upon it, was transferred from the custody of Gilmore to that of certain transmuters of metal in town, and came back again to Fairburn Hall in the shape of gold pieces. But even the melting-pot was compelled to disclose its secrets; and the squire received such a severe reprimand upon the text of heirlooms, as made him writhe with passion, and which put an end to any friendly connection that might have before existed between himself and John, Lord Eldon, at once and for ever. I think it must have been immediately after the receipt of that very communication, that Sir Massingberd came over to the rectory upon the following errand. Mr. Long and myself were at our "Tacitus" in the study one evening, when the baronet was announced, and I rose to leave the room. "Stay where you are, young gentleman," said he roughly; "what I have to say will, it is like enough, soon be no secret to anybody. Mr. Long, I must tell you at once that money I must have. The way in which my property is meddled with by the lawyer in London, set on to do it by friends of yours, too, is beyond all bearing. I declare to you, that I—Sir Massingberd Heath, the nominal owner of twenty thousand acres, and of a rent-toll of half as many thousand pounds—have not five guineas in my pocket at this moment, nor do I know how to raise them. Now, am I a man, think you, to sit down with my hands before me, and submit to such a state of things as this?"

"Really, Sir Massingberd, I cannot say," returned my tutor; "I cannot see how I can help you in anyway."

"Yes, you *can* help me, sir. You have influence with those persons—curse them!—who have taken it in hand to do me these injuries, who have interfered between uncle and nephew, between guardian and ward. Now, I have made up my mind what I will do, and I am come here to let you know it. You pretend to entertain some regard towards your late pupil, Marmaduke."

"The regard is genuine, Sir Massingberd. I wish others entertained the like, who are more nearly connected with him than by the bond of pupil and tutor."

"Pray put me out of the question," returned the baronet coolly. "What I have to say concerns others, not myself. You like this lad, and wish him well; you hope for him an unclouded future; you trust that the character of the family will be redeemed in his virtuous hands, and that the remembrance of what it has been will not cleave to him, but will gradually die out."

"That is my earnest desire," replied Mr. Long, gravely.

"I am glad to hear it," continued the other; "and I suppose Mr. Clint cherishes some similar notion; and this man Gerard—this rebel, this hypocrite——"

"Sir Massingberd Heath," said I, interrupting him, "you have bidden me stay here; but I shall not remain to listen to slanders against Mr. Harvey Gerard; he is no hypocrite, but a very honest and kind-hearted man."

"He has hoodwinked this young wise-acre already, you see," pursued the baronet. "His object is evidently to secure the heir of Fairburn for his daughter; I have not the least doubt the jade is making play with the poor molly-coddle as fast as——"

Mr. Long and myself both rose before the speaker could finish the sentence. My tutor checked with his finger the wrathful words that were at my lips, and observed with energy: "Sir Massingberd, be silent! Under my roof, you shall not traduce that virtuous and excellent young girl."

I never saw Mr. Long so excited; I never admired him so much. The baronet paused, as though hesitating whether it was worth while to indulge himself in uttering insults; I am thankful to say he decided that it was not. It would have been pollution to Lucy Gerard's name to have heard it spoken by such lips.

"Well, well," returned he, "I have nothing to say against the young woman. It is probable, however, you will allow, that some attachment may arise between herself and my nephew. You grant that, do you? Ah, I thought so. In that case, Mr. Gerard would prefer the husband of his daughter to be free from all stain. Good! There are three persons then, at least, all interested in my nephew's good name. Now, listen: you know something, parson, of the mode of life pursued by the Heaths from generation to generation; you know something of the deeds that have been committed at Fairburn Hall. What is known, however, is honourable and harmless compared to what is *not* known; the vices which you have shuddered at are mere follies—the offspring of idleness and high spirits—compared to those of which you have yet to hear."

It is impossible to imagine a more repulsive spectacle than this man presented, exulting not only in his own wickedness, but in that of his forefathers. He took from his pocket a huge manuscript, and thus proceeded:—"The records of the House of Heath are red with blood, and black with crime. I hold them in my hand here, and they are very pretty reading. Now, look you, I will leave them here for your perusal, parson—they have at least this attraction about them, they are *true*—and when you have made yourself master of the contents, perhaps you can recommend to me a publisher."

"Is it possible," cried my tutor, "that you can do this dreadful wrong at once to ancestors and descendant? Have you no mercy even for kith and kin? Do you dare to defy God and Man alike?"

"I dare publish that pamphlet, unless I have money," quoth Sir Massingberd scornfully, "and that is the sole question with which we need now concern ourselves. A pretty welcome young Sir Marmaduke will meet with when he comes into the country among all who know his family history. As for me, my character is one which is not likely to suffer from any disclosure."

"Are all the murders done and attempted set down here, Sir Massingberd?" inquired my tutor, taking up the pamphlet "The catalogue of crime is truly frightful; but you do not seem to have brought the narrative down to the most recent dates."

"The most recent dates?" reiterated the baronet mechanically.

"Yes, sir," responded my tutor, "the history is evidently incomplete. If it should come out in its present form, it would need an appendix. I would scarcely recommend you to run the risk of another person publishing a continuation. You had better take it home, and reconsider the matter."

The baronet affected to receive this advice in earnest, and retired, foiled and furious.^[1] He never more set foot in the Rectory, save twice; once when he called upon me, and persuaded me to forward that hateful letter to Marmaduke, and again upon the occasion I am about to describe. The errand he then came upon was of small consequence, but the circumstance I shall never forget. After-events have made it one of the most memorable in my life, for it was the last time, save one, that I ever beheld Massingberd Heath. Little did I think what a mystery was then impending—so frightful, so unexampled, that it now seems almost strange that it did not visibly overshadow that giant form, that ruthless face. If we could thus read the future of others, how fearful would be many a meeting which is now so conventional and commonplace! It is true that we should always part, both from friends and from enemies, in some sort as though we were parting with them for the last time; but how different a leave-taking would it be, if we were indeed assured that they and we would meet no more upon this side the grave! How I should have devoured that man with mine eyes, had I known that they would not again behold him—save one awful Once—before we should both stand together in the presence of God! What terrors, what anxieties, what enigmas were about to be brought to us and to others by the morrow's sun! Yet, at the time, with what little things we occupied ourselves! It was in the morning that Sir Massingberd paid his visit—a morning of early November, when the first sharp frost had just set in. He came about money matters, as usual. We were surprised to see him, because, as I have said, he had relapsed into his accustomed stern unsociable habits, and had seemed to have given up all attempts to gain any furtherance of his plans from Mr. Long. He had called he said, about a matter that affected the parson himself, or he would not have troubled him. Certain Methodists had offered him twenty pounds a year as the ground-rent of a chapel to be built upon the outskirts of the Park, and within view of the Rectory windows. For his part, he hated the Methodists; and had no sort of wish to offend Mr. Long by granting their prayer. Still, being grievously in want of money, he had come to say that if Mr. Clint could not be induced to give him some pecuniary help, the chapel must be built.

My tutor, who had a very orthodox abhorrence of all dissent, and especially when it threatened his own parish, was exceedingly disturbed by this intelligence.

"What!" cried he; "you preach to your nephew doctrines of Conservatism, Sir Massingberd, and yet are induced for a wretched bribe to let a nest of sectaries be built in the very avenue of your Park!"

"It is terrible indeed," quoth the baronet drily; "but they might set it up opposite my front door for an extra five-pound note. I announce their offer solely on your account. They call on me to-morrow for my final decision, and I cannot afford to say, 'No.' Now, you can do what you please with Mr. Clint, and may surely represent to him that this is a case where twenty pounds may be well expended. The matter will thus be staved off for a year at least; and next year, you know, I may be in better circumstances—or dead, which many persons would greatly prefer."

"Certainly," returned my tutor gravely, "I will do my best with Mr. Clint; but in the meantime, rather than let this chapel be built, I will advance the money you mention at my own risk. I happen to have a considerable sum in the house at present, which I intended to lodge with the bank at Crittenden to-morrow. So you shall have the notes at once."

"That is very fortunate," said the baronet, coolly; and Mr. Long counted them out into his hand—twenty flimsey, but not yet ragged, one-pound notes, for the imitation of the like of which half-a-dozen men were at that time often strung up in front of the Old Bailey together. From 82961 to 82980 the numbers ran, which—albeit I am no great hand at recollecting such things—I shall remember, from what followed, as long as I live. I can see the grim Squire now, as he rolls them

tightly up, and places them in that huge, lapelled waistcoat-pocket; as he slaps it with his mighty hand, as though he would defy the world to take them from him, however unlawfully acquired; as he leaves the room with an insolent nod, and clangs across the iron road with his nailed shoes.

I watch him through the Rectory window, as, ere he puts the key in his garden-door, he casts a chance look-up at the sky. He looks to see what will happen on the morrow. Does he read nothing save Continuance of Fine and Frosty Weather? Nothing. All is blue and clear as steel; not a cloud to be seen the size of a man's hand from north to south, from east to west. There is no warning to be read in the cold and smiling heaven; no "*Mene, mene*," for this worse than Belshazzar on its broad cerulean wall!

- [1] Years afterwards I became possessed of the pamphlet in question, which, having glanced at, I very carefully committed to the flames. I do not doubt, however, that Sir Massingberd would have carried his threat into execution, had not Mr. Long's menace shaken his purpose.

CHAPTER IV.

LOST.

The morning subsequent to Sir Massingberd's visit to the Rectory was bright, but intensely cold. I was very particular about my shaving in those days, and would not have dispensed with that manly exercise upon any account; but I remember that the frost made it a difficult process. In the course of the ceremony, Mrs. Myrtle, who was a very privileged person, knocked softly at my door. A visit from her at such a time was unusual, but not unprecedented. I said, "Pray, come in." My attire was tolerably complete, and perhaps I was not indisposed to let people know what tremendous difficulties were entailed upon a gentleman by the possession of an obstinate beard. I was not prepared for her closing the door behind her, sinking into the nearest chair, and fanning herself, as though it had been midsummer, with her outspread fingers. I looked at her with a face all soap-suds and astonishment.

"My dear Mrs. Myrtle, what is the matter?"

"Oh, don't ask me, Master Peter," cried she, although she had come for no other purpose than to be cross-questioned. "Oh, pray, don't, for it's more nor I can bear. Dearey me, if I ain't all of a twitter!"

"Nothing the matter with your master," said I, "surely? I saw him out of the window a little while ago on the lawn, talking to one of the under-keepers of the Hall."

"I dare say you did, sir," quoth Mrs. Myrtle, with one of those aggravated shudders which are generally produced by the anticipation of senna and salts. "No, master's all well, thank Heaven."

"No bad news from Harley Street?" exclaimed I, laying down my razor in a tremor. "I trust Miss...—I mean that Mr. Marmaduke is as he should be."

"For all that I know to the contrary, he is, sir," returned the housekeeper; "and likewise all *friends*" Mrs. Myrtle laid such an accent upon "friends" that my mind naturally rushed to the opposite.

"You don't mean to say," said I, "that anything has happened to Sir Massingberd?"

Mrs. Myrtle had no voice to speak, but she nodded a number of times in compensation.

"Is he DEAD?" asked I, very solemnly, for it was terrible to think of sudden death in connection with that abandoned man.

"Wus than dead, sir," returned the housekeeper; "many times wus than dead; Heaven forgive me for saying so. Sir Massingberd is LOST."

"Lost!" repeated I; "how? where?"

"There is only One knows that, Master Peter; but the Squire is not at the Hall, that's certain; he never returned there last night, after he had gone his rounds in the preserves. He spoke with Bradford and two more of the keepers, and bade them keep a good look-out as usual; but he did not come to the watchers in the Home Plantation. He never got so near the house as that; nobody saw him since midnight. Gilmore put out his cigars and spirits as usual for him in his room; but they are untouched. The front-door was not fastened on the inside; Sir Massingberd never came in."

Here I heard Mr. Long calling upon the stairs in a voice very different from his customary cheerful tones, for Mrs. Myrtle.

"Mercy me, I wonder whether there's anything new!" cried she, rising with great alacrity. "As soon as I knows it, you shall know it, Master Peter;" with which generous promise she hurried from the room.

After this intelligence, shaving became an impossibility, and I hurried down as soon as I could

into the breakfast-room. My tutor was standing at the window very thoughtful, and though he greeted me with his usual hilarity, it struck me that it was a little forced.

"Why, you are early this morning, Peter; and how profusely you have illustrated yourself with cuts; it is sad to see one so young with such a shaky hand. One would think you were one of the five-bottle-men, like Sir—like Lord Stowell."

He had been about to say "Sir Massingberd," I knew, and would on ordinary occasions not have hesitated to do so.

"De perditis nil nisi bonum?" quoth I inquiringly.

"Oh, so you have heard of this nine hours' wonder, have you?" returned my tutor. "Because our neighbour has chosen to leave home for a little, on some private business best known to himself, everybody will have it that he is Lost."

"But it does seem very extraordinary too," said I, "does it not? He has never done so before, has he?"

"Not in all the years he has lived in Fairburn," returned my tutor musingly.

"And he made no preparations, I suppose, for departure, did he? Took no clothes with him?"

"Nothing, nothing," interrupted Mr. Long, pacing the room to and fro, with his hand to his forehead. "But he had money, you know; he was eager to get that money yesterday."

"Then he would probably have hired a vehicle," urged I; "Sir Massingberd is not the man to use his own legs, beyond the limit, that is, of his own lands. You have heard him say that he would never be seen on the road without four horses."

Mr. Long continued his walk without reply, but I thought I perceived that he was not unwilling to have the subject discussed. He seemed to be eager to take as light a view of the matter as possible, although like one who contends against his own more sombre convictions. I, on the contrary, had that leaning towards the gloomy and mysterious not uncommon with young persons, and both imagined the worst, and endeavoured to picture it.

"He went out after the poachers did he not?" said I.

"Yes, as usual," replied my tutor; "he has done it before, scores of times."

"The pitcher goes often to the well, but is broken at last," returned I. "I should not be surprised if the wretched man has been murdered by some of those against whom he waged such unceasing war."

"Then if so, he must have been shot, Peter," returned the rector hastily: "without firearms, it would have been hard to dispose of the gigantic baronet, armed as he doubtless was with his life-preserver. Now no gun has been heard to go off by any one, although it was thought that Sir Massingberd expected some raid to be made last night, by the gipsies or others; at all events, he seemed more alert than usual, Oliver tells me."

The gipsies! My heart sank within me, as I thought of Rachel Liversedge consumed with the wrongs of her "little sister;" and of the young man, relative of that unhappy Carew whose life had been sworn away through the Squire's machinations. I had seen nothing of them since my memorable interview, but it was like enough that the tribe were yet in the neighbourhood. True, they had waited so long for vengeance, that it was not probable they should have set about it at this time; but if Sir Massingberd had really come across them alone, while they were committing a depredation, violence might easily enough have ensued; and if violence, murder. I was very glad that Mrs. Myrtle came in at this juncture with the eggs and buttered toast, and concealed my embarrassment.

"No news, sir," said she lugubriously, as she placed the delicacies upon the table. "The last words were, 'Nothing has been heard of him.'" The housekeeper had established a system of communication by help of her kitchen-maid and the stable-lad at the Hall, whereby she received bulletins, every quarter of an hour or so, with respect to Sir Massingberd's mysterious disappearance.

"Well, no news is good news, you know," responded Mr. Long gaily. "We should always look upon the bright side of things, Mrs. Myrtle."

"Yes, sir; but when a thing ain't got a bright side," remarked the housekeeper, shaking her head. "Why, it's dreadful now he's Lost; and it would be dreadful even if, after all, he was al——"

"Hush, hush, Mrs. Myrtle; you don't know but you may be speaking of a poor soul that is gone to his account. Sir Massingberd is doubtless a bad man; but let us not call it dreadful if he should be permitted to return among us, and have some time yet, it may be, to repent in."

"Then you think he's dead and gone, do you, sir? Well, that's what I think, and that's what Patty thinks too, and she's a very reasonable girl. 'Them ravens,' says she to me, 'didn't come to that church-tower for nothing;' and though, of course, I told her to hold her tongue, and not talk folly like that, there was a good deal in what she said. Why, we have not had ravens here since Sir Wentworth came to his awful end in London; there was a mystery about that too, wasn't there, sir? Lawk-a-mercy! Mr. Meredith, you gave me quite a turn."

I had only said "Look there!" and pointed to the window, through which Gilmore and the head-keeper were seen approaching the Rectory, and engaged in close conversation.

"I'll go with Patty, and let them in," quoth Mrs. Myrtle, unconsciously betraying that she was unequal to opening the door alone, in such an emergency. It is probable that, when it was opened, the incomers and she had a great deal to talk about, for they were not ushered into the breakfast-room for many minutes, and after the very moderate meal which sufficed us both upon the occasion had long been finished. The butler and Oliver Bradford were by no means good friends, and it must have been something portentous indeed which brought them to the Rectory together. It was, in fact, their very rivalry which had produced the double visit. Each conceived himself to be the superior minister of the absent potentate, and called upon, by that position, to act in his master's behalf, and give notice to neighbouring powers, such as the parson, of the event that had paralyzed affairs at the Hall. It seemed only natural (as he himself subsequently expressed it) to Oliver Bradford, who had been servant, man and boy, to the Heath family for nearly sixty years, that he should be the spokesman on an occasion such as this, and sleeking his scanty white hairs over his forehead with the palm of his hand, and passing the back of it across his mouth, he commenced as follows:—

"Muster Long, I make bold to come over here, having been upon the property going on for three-score years and ten——"

"As out-door servant," interrupted Mr. Gilmore, severely; "but not as confidential in any way. Mr. Long, this old man here insisted upon accompanying me in the performance of my duty, and I have humoured him."

"You've what?" cried the ancient keeper; "you've humoured *me*, you oily knave, have you? No, no, you never did that to Oliver Bradford. It wasn't worth your while. I come here about my master's business as a matter of right. Are a few years of truckling, and helping the devil's hand, and feathering your own nest pretty comfortably, to be weighed against a lifetime of honest service? Let Mr. Long here decide."

"Look here, men," quoth my tutor, "it is no use quarrelling about precedence. You are both in the same service, and owe the same duty to your master. I know what has happened in a general way, and require no long story from either of you. But you have doubtless each of you some information concerning this matter peculiar to your own positions, and I will ask you to communicate it in time. Twelve hours have not elapsed since your master's disappearance, a very short time surely to set it down so decidedly to some fatal accident."

"He was as regular in his rounds as clockwork," interposed the old keeper, shaking his head; "he would never have left the Home Spinney unvisited last night, if life had been in him."

"And if he had meant to leave Fairburn of his own head," added the butler, "he would have come back for his brandy before he started; for all his hearty look, Sir Massingberd could not get on long without that; and he would not have taken Grimjaw out with him neither."

"Oh, the dog was with him, was it?" said my tutor, musing.

"It was not in the house, sir," replied Gilmore, "after Sir Massingberd had left. I went to make the fire in his sitting-room, and I noticed that the creature was neither on the hearthrug, nor under the sofa, as is usually the case. I don't know when I have known the dog go out with him o' nights before. When I went to open the front door as usual this morning, there was Grimjaw, nigh frozen to death."

"Your master had made no sort of preparation, so far as you know, for his own departure anywhere?"

"None whatever. I set out his cigars for him, and I noticed that he had only put two in his case, a sure sign that he meant to return soon. He had no greatcoat, although it was bitter cold."

"Was he armed in any way?"

"No, sir; that is to say, he had his life-preserver, of course, but no gun or pistol."

"Had he any sum of money, or valuables of any kind about him, Gilmore?"

"I don't think that is at all likely," replied the butler, grinning. "We haven't seen money at the Hall this many a day. As for valuables, Sir Massingberd had his big gold chain on, with a silver watch at the end of it, borrowed from me years ago, and my property."

It was remarkable how this ordinarily cautious and discreet person was changed in manner, as though he was well assured that he would never more have a master over him. Both Mr. Long and myself observed this.

"What time was your master usually accustomed to return home from his rounds in the preserves?"

"I did not sit up for him in general," returned Gilmore; "but when I have chanced to be awake, and to hear him come in, it was never later than three o'clock. His ordinary time was about half-past twelve, but it depended on what time he started. He left the Hall last night at about ten, and should, therefore, have returned a little after midnight. I never set eyes on him since nine o'clock, when he was in his own sitting-room reading."

"And when did *you* see him last, Bradford?"

"When did I see Sir Massingberd Heath?" replied the old keeper, who had been chafing with impatience through his rival's evidence—"well, I see'd him last nine hours ago, at nearly twelve o'clock at night. I was on watch in the Old Plantation, and he came upon me sudden, as usual, with his long quick stride."

"Was there anything at all irregular about his manner or appearance; anything in the least degree different from what you always saw upon these occasions?"

"Nothing, whatever, sir. Look you, I knew my master well," [He had already begun to talk of him in the past tense!] "I could tell at a glance when he was put out more than usual, or when he had anything out of ordinary in hand; he never swore, saving your reverence's presence, what you may call *freely* then. He might have knocked one down, likely enough, if you gave him the least cross, but he was not flush of his oaths. Now I never heard him in a better fettle in that respect than he was last night. He cussed the lad Jem Meyrick, who had come up to me away from Davit's Copse for a light to his pipe; and he cussed me too, for giving it him, up hill and down dale, and in particular he cussed Grimjaw for being so old and slow that he couldn't keep up with him. Sir Massingberd never waited for him, of course; but after he'd been with us a few minutes, the old dog came up puffin' and wheezin'; and when the Squire left us, it followed him as well as it could, but with the distance getting greater between them at every step. I watched them, for the moon made it almost as light as day, going straight for the Wolsey Oak, which was the direct way for the Home Spinney; and that was where Sir Massingberd meant to go last night, although he never got there, or leastways the watcher never saw him.

"Have you any reason to believe, keeper, that there were poachers in any part of the preserves last night?"

"No, sir," replied Oliver, positively. "On the contrary, I knows there wasn't, although Sir Massingberd was as suspicious of them as usual, or more so. Why, with Jack Larrup and Dick Swivel both in jail, and all the Larchers sent out of the parish, and Squat and Burchall at sea, where was they to come from?"

"Sir Massingberd must have had many enemies?" mused my tutor.

"Ay, indeed, sir," replied old Oliver, pursing his lips; "he held his own with the strong hand; so strong, however, as no man would contend against him. If Sir Massingberd has been killed, Mr Long, it was not in fair fight; he was too much feared for that."

"There has been a gang of gipsies about the place this long time, has there not?" quoth my tutor.

"There has, sir; but don't you think of gipsies and this here matter of Sir Massingberd as having anything to do with one another. They're feeble, feckless bodies at the best. They ain't even good poachers, although my master always bid us beware of them. They would no more have ventured to meddle with the squire, than a flock of linnets would attack a hawk, that's certain."

My tutor had been setting down on paper brief notes of his conversation with these two men; but he now put the writing away from him, and inquired what steps, in their judgment, ought to be taken in the matter, and when.

"You know your master better than I. If he chanced to come back this afternoon, or to-morrow, or next day, from any expedition he may have chosen to undertake, would he not be much annoyed at any hue and cry having been made after him?"

"That he just would," observed the keeper with emphasis.

"I would not have been the man to make the fuss," remarked the butler, sardonically, "for more money than he has paid me these ten years."

"In a word," observed my tutor, "you are both come here to shift the responsibility of a public search from your own shoulders to mine. Very good. I accept it. Let sufficient hands be procured at once, Bradford, to search the Chase and grounds, and drag the waters. And you, Gilmore, must accompany me, while I set seals on such rooms as may seem necessary up at the Hall."

The butler was for moving away on the instant with a "*Very well, sir,*" but Mr. Long added, "Please to wait in Mrs. Myrtle's parlour for me. We must go together."

"I don't like the look of that man Gilmore at all, sir," observed I, when the two had left the room.

"No, nor I, Peter," returned my tutor, sententiously, as he set about collecting tapes and sealing-wax; "I am afraid he is a rogue in grain."

Now, that was not by any means, or rather was very far short of, what I meant to imply; what I had had almost upon my burning lips was, "Don't you think he has murdered Sir Massingberd?" But the moment had gone by for putting the question, even if Mr. Long had not begun to whistle—a sure sign with him that he did not wish to speak upon the matter any further, just at present.

THE STONE GARDEN.

When Mr. Long took his departure with Gilmore, he did not ask me to accompany him, and assist in an undertaking which was likely to be somewhat laborious. Perhaps he wished if the baronet did chance to return in a fury, that he alone should bear the brunt of it. Perhaps he thought there might be things at the Hall I had better not see, or perhaps he wished to observe the butler's behaviour at leisure. I think, however, he could scarcely have expected me to stay at home with my books, while such doings as he had directed were on the point of taking place. Euripides was doubtless in his day a sensation dramatist, but the atrocities of Medea could not enchain me, with so much dreadful mystery afoot in my immediate neighbourhood. Her departure through the air in a chariot drawn by winged dragons, was indeed a striking circumstance; but how much more wonderful was the disappearance of Sir Massingberd, who had departed no man knew how!

The news had spread like wildfire through the village. Numbers of country folk were hanging about the great gates of the avenue, drinking in the impromptu information of the lodge-keeper; but they did not venture to enter upon the forbidden ground. The universal belief among them was, I found, that their puissant lord would soon reveal himself. Doubting Castle, it was true, was for the present without its master; but it was too much to expect that he would not return to it. The whole community resembled prisoners in that fortress, who, although temporarily relieved of the tyrant's presence, had little hope but that he was only gone forth upon a ramble, and would presently return with renewed zest for human flesh. The general consternation, however, was extreme, and such as would probably not have been excited by the sudden and unexplained removal of a far better man. The rumour had already got abroad that there was to be an immediate search in the park, and that Oliver Bradford had been empowered to select such persons as he thought fit to assist in the same. There were innumerable volunteers for this undertaking, principally on account of the excessive attraction of the work itself, which promised some ghastly revelation; and secondarily, for the mere sake of getting into Fairburn Chase at all—a demesne as totally unknown to the majority of those present as the Libyan Desert. The elders indeed remembered the time when a public footpath ran right through the Chase, "close by the Heronry, and away under the Wolsey Oak, and so through Davit's Copse, into the high road to Crittenden," said one, "whereby a mile and a half was wont to be saved." "Ay, or two mile," quoth another; "and Lawyer Moth always said as though the path was ours by right, until Sir Massingberd got his son made a king's clerk in London, which shut his mouth up and the path at the same time."

"Ay," said a third, mysteriously, "and it ain't too late to try the matter again, in case the property has got *into other hands*."

This remark brought back at once the immediate cause of their assembling together, and I began to be made the victim of cross-examination. To avoid being compelled to give my own opinion (which I had already begun to think a slander) upon the matter in hand, I took my leave as quietly as could be, and escaped, whither they dared not follow me, through the griffin-guarded gates. All within was, as usual, silent and deserted. A few leaves were still left to flutter down in eddies from the trees, or hop and rustle on the frosty ground, but their scarcity looked more mournful than utter bareness would have done. It was now the saddest time of all the year; the bleak east wind went wailing overhead; and underneath, the soil was black with frost. Instead of pursuing the avenue to the frontdoor of the Hall, where, as it seemed, I was not wanted, I took a foot-track to the left, which I knew led to that bowling-green whither I had been previously invited by Sir Massingberd, although I had not taken advantage of his rare courtesy. If he did now appear, no matter in what state of mental irritation, he could scarcely quarrel with me for doing the very thing he had asked me to do. Had I known, however, the character of the place in which I found myself, I should have reserved my visit for a less eerie and mysterious occasion.

The time of year, it is true, had no unfavourable influence upon the scene that presented itself, for all was clothed in garments of thickest green. Vast walls of yew shut in on every side a lawn of perfect smoothness; everything proclaimed itself to belong to that portion of the Hall property which was "kept up" by subsidy from without. The quaint oak-seats, though old, were in good repair; the yew hedges clipped to a marvel. Still nothing could exceed the sombre and funereal aspect of the spot. It seemed impossible that such a sober game as bowls could ever have been played there, or jest and laughter broken that awful stillness. The southern yew-screen was in a crescent form, at the ends of which were openings unseen from within the enclosed space. Passing through one of these, I came upon what was called the Stone Garden. It took its name from four stone terraces, from the highest of which I knew that there must be a very extensive view. This space was likewise covered with yew trees, clipped and cut in every conceivable form, after the vile taste of the seventeenth century. There was something weird in the aspect of those towering Kings and Queens—easily recognizable, however, for what they were intended—and of those maids of honour, with their gigantic ruffs and farthingales. One was almost tempted to imagine that they had been human once, and been turned into yew trees for their sins. The whole area was black with them; and a sense of positive oppression, notwithstanding the eager air which caught me sharply whenever I lost the shelter of one of these ungainly forms, led me on to the top terrace, where one could breathe freely, and have something else than yews to look upon.

Truly, from thence the scene was wide and fair. I stood at that extremity of the pleasure-grounds most remote from the Hall, and with my back to it. Before me lay a solitary tract of wooded park, thickly interspersed with planted knolls and coppices. Immediately beneath me was the thicket called the Home Spinney, the favourite haunt of hare and pheasant, and the spot in all the Chase

most cherished by Sir Massingberd. He would have resented a burglary, I do believe, with less of fury than any trespass upon that sacred ground. Beyond the Spinney, and standing by itself, far removed from any other tree, was the famous Wolsey Oak. Why called so, I have not the least idea, for it had the reputation of being a vast deal older than the days of the famous Cardinal. Many a summer had it seen—

"When the monk was fat,
And issuing shorn and sleek,
Would twist his girdle tight, and pat
The girls upon the cheek;
Ere yet, in scorn of Peter's Pence,
And numbered bead and shrift,
Bluff Harry broke into the spence,
And turned the cowls adrift."

Yet still was it said to be as whole and sound as a bell. It was calculated to measure over fourteen yards in circumference, and that for many feet from its base; while its height, although it had lost some of its upper branches, still far exceeded that of any other of its compeers. Beyond this tree, but at another great interval, was the wood known as the Old Plantation, where Oliver Bradford had last seen his master alive. I was looking down, then, upon the very route which Sir Massingberd had been seen to commence, but which he had never ended. It was to the Home Spinney he had been apparently bound, when something—none knew what—had changed his purpose. He would probably have passed through it, and come up by that winding path yonder to the spot where I now stood; it was the nearest way home for him. Perhaps he had done so, although it was unlikely, since the watcher had not seen him. Perhaps those very yews behind me had concealed his murderers. Shut in by those unechoing walls of living green, no cry for aid would have been heard, even if Sir Massingberd had been the man to call for it; he would most certainly have never asked for mercy. But hark! what was that sound that froze the current of my blood, and set my heart beating and fluttering like the wings of a prisoned bird against its cage? Was it a strangled cry for "Help!" repeated once, twice, thrice, or was it the wintry wind clanging and grinding the naked branches of the Spinney? A voice had terrified me in Fairburn Chase once before, which had turned out to be no mere fancy; but there was this horror about the present sound, that I seemed to dimly recognize it. It was the voice of Sir Massingberd Heath, with an awful change in it, as if a powerful hand were tightening upon his throat. It seemed, as I have said, to come from the direction of the copse beneath, and yet I determined to descend into it, rather than thread again the mazes of those melancholy yews. The idea of my assistance being really required never entered into my thoughts; what I wanted was to escape from this solitude, peopled only with unearthly cries, and regain the companionship of my fellow-creatures. How I regretted having left the society of those honest folk outside the gates! To remain where I was, was impossible; I should have gone mad. Fortunately, the Spinney was well-nigh leafless, and a bright but wintry sun penetrated it completely. I fled over its withered and frosted leaves, looking neither to left nor right, till I leaped the deep ditch that formed its southern boundary, and found myself in the open; then I stopped indeed quite short, for, before me, not ten paces from the Spinney, from which he must have just emerged, lay the body of Grimjaw. It was still warm, but lifeless. There were no marks of violence about him; the struggle to extricate himself from the ditch, it is probable, had cost the wretched creature his little remaining vitality, weakened as he must have doubtless been by his previous night's lodging on the cold stone steps. But how had he come thither, who never moved anywhere out of doors, except with Sir Massingberd or Gilmore? and whither, led perhaps by some mysterious instinct, was he going when death had overtaken him—an easy task—and glazed that solitary eye, which had witnessed so much which was still a mystery to man?

Was it possible that he had perished in endeavouring to obey his master's cry for aid? that terrible "Help! help!" which rang in my ears a while ago, as I stood in the Stone Garden, and which rings, through half a century, in them now?

CHAPTER VI.

THE SEARCH.

Shrinking away from the body of the unhappy Grimjaw, and fleeing from the solitary spot in which it lay, I ran down towards the Heronry, where, in the distance, I could now perceive a number of persons assembled upon the lake-side. Below and above it, the stream flowed on as usual; but the larger area of water which contained the island, was frozen over with a thin coating of ice. This was being broken by men armed with long and heavy poles, after which the work of dragging the water was commenced. The scene was as desolate as the occupation was ghastly and depressing. Perched upon stony slabs of their now leafless home, the huge birds watched the proceedings with grave and serious air: at first, they imagined, I think, that the thing was done for their own behoof, and to the end that they might supply themselves with fish as usual; but the appearance of the grappling-irons disabused them of this idea. Now one, and now another, unable to restrain their curiosity, would rise slowly and warily into the air, and making a circuit over our heads, return to their old position to reflect, with head aside, upon what they had seen. The presence as spectators of these gigantic creatures, certainly increased the weird and

awful character of the employment in which we were engaged, and struck quite a terror into the village folk, who were unaccustomed to see them in such close proximity. Still the work was not gone about by any means in reverent and solemn silence. If any man wishes his neighbours to speak their mind about him thoroughly and unreservedly, I should say, judging from what I heard on that occasion, Let him disappear, and be dragged for. It is not so certain he is dead, that any delicacy need be exercised in telling the severest truths about him; nor yet is there sufficient chance of his reappearance to make folks reticent through fear. Only when the drags halted a little, meeting with some hidden obstruction, all tongues were silent, and pale faces clustered about the toilers, expecting that the dreadful thing they sought was about to be brought to land.

"I thought we had him then," said one of the men, after an occasion of this sort; "but it was only a piece of stone."

"It might have been his *heart*, for all that," muttered another, cynically; and a murmur of "Ay, that's true," went round them all.

"Has anybody been about the Home Spinney this morning?" inquired I of Oliver Bradford, who had just given up his place at the ropes to a fresh man.

"No, sir, nor last night either, as it turns out. It will be bad for somebody if Sir Massingberd does return, and finds out that the watcher who ought to have been there was wiled away elsewhere by what he thought was poachers holloing to one another—some owl's cry, as I should judge. And to-day, I doubt if a creature has been near the place, for none of my men seem to fancy going there alone."

"And who *was* the watcher there last night, Oliver?"

"Well, sir, we must not make mischief; he was a young chap new at the business, a sort of grand-nevvy of mine by the wife's side. He'll do better next time, will young Dick Westlock. He was over-eager, that's all. And when you hear a cry in these woods, unless you are thoroughly accustomed to them, it may lead you a pretty dance: it takes a practised ear to tell rightly where it comes from."

"You should know me better, Bradford," returned I, "than to suppose I would bring a lad to harm by mentioning such a matter; but I should like to ask him a question or two, if you will point him out."

"There he is then, sir," answered Oliver, pointing to a good-looking, honest lad enough, but one who perhaps would scarcely have been considered sufficiently old for so trustworthy a part as sentinel of the home preserves, had he not been grand-nephew to the head keeper.

"Why, Dick," said I, "your uncle telly me that you took an owl for a poacher last night, and followed his voice all over the Chase."

"It wasn't no owl," sir, quoth Dick, stoutly; "it were the voice of a man, whosoever it was."

"Don't thee be a fool," exclaimed his uncle, roughly. "I tell thee it was a bird, and called like this;" and the keeper gave a very excellent imitation of the cry of an owl.

This was not greatly unlike the sound which had so recently affrighted my own ears; but then owls rarely cry in the daytime.

"Dick," cried I, "never mind your uncle; listen to me. If you thought it was a human voice, what do you think it said?"

"Well, I can't rightly say as it said anything; it seemed to me to be a sort of wobbling in the throat; and I thought it might be a sound among some poaching fellars, made with a bird-call, or the like of that."

"Supposing it said any word at all, Dick, what word was it most like?"

Mr. Richard Westlock looked as nonplused and embarrassed as though I had propounded to him some extremely complicated riddle.

"Was it anything like 'Hel—p, hel—p?'" said I, imitating as well as I could those terrible tones.

"Bless my body," quoth Mr. Richard, slapping his legs with his hands, in admiration of my sagacity, "if them ain't the very words as it *did* say!"

"What think you of that, Oliver Bradford?" inquired I, gravely.

"As the bell tink, so the fool thinks," responded the head keeper, sententiously. "If you had asked Dick whether the word wasn't 'Jerusalem,' he would have said, 'Ay, that was the very word.'"

"Still," urged I, "since there may be something more than fancy in the thing, and the voice, if it was one, could not have come from under water, let the Park woods be thoroughly searched at once. There are men enough outside the gates to do that, without suspending the work that is going on here, and why should we lose time?"

The head keeper sulkily muttered something about not wanting a caddel of people poking their noses into every part of Fairburn Chase; then with earnest distinctness, as though the thought had only just struck him, "Besides, Mr. Meredith, let me tell you that they may get to know more than is good for them."

At these words, I cast an involuntary glance at the plantation within a few hundred feet of us, in the recesses of which dwelt Sinnamenta, Lady Heath.

"*You* may know, sir," continued the keeper, translating my thought, "but everybody don't know, and it's much better that they shouldn't."

Certainly the objection was a grave one, and I was glad enough to perceive Mr. Long coming down from the Hall towards us, an authority by whom the question could be decided.

"You had better ask him yourself, Oliver," said I; for as my tutor had never spoken to me of the existence of the unfortunate maniac, I did not like to address him upon the subject. Bradford therefore went forward to meet him; and after they had had some talk together, Mr. Long beckoned me to him.

"I think with you, Peter," said he, "that in any case, we should lose no time in searching the Chase. If we do not discover what we seek, we can scarcely fail to find some trace of a struggle, if struggle there has been, between such a man as Sir Massingberd and whoever may have assailed him. If he has been murdered, it is, of course, just possible that the assassins threw the body into the water, although not here, since the ice would scarcely have formed over it like this; otherwise, they could not have removed it without leaving some visible trace. Do you, Bradford, and a couple of your own men, examine that plantation yonder thoroughly, so that it need not be searched again; and in the meantime I will go and fetch more help."

I have taken part in my time in many a "quest" for game, both large and little: I have sought on foot in the rook-crannies of the north for the hill-fox; I have penetrated the tangled jungles of Hindustan for tiger; I have stood alone, gun in hand, on the skirts of a tropical forest, not knowing what bird or beast the beaters within might chance at any moment to drive forth; but I have never experienced such excitement as that which I felt when, one of forty men, I walked from end to end of Fairburn Chase in search of its lost master.

In one long line, and at the distance of about twenty yards from one another, we plodded on slowly and steadily; and with eyes that left no bush unexamined. This work, which in summer would have been toil indeed, was rendered comparatively easy by the bareness of the season; the frost, too, made the swamps in the hollows safe to the tread, and the tangled underwood brittle before us. Many a sunken spot we found hidden in brake and brier, and scarcely known to the keepers themselves, such as might easily have held, and we could not but think how fitly, the Thing we feared to find, and sometimes, when one man called to his neighbours, the whole line would halt, and each could scarcely restrain himself from running in, and seeing with his own eyes what trace of the missing man it was which had provoked the exclamation. We began at the outskirts of the Park, and worked towards the Hall, so that the Home Spinney, which was the likeliest spot of all, since he had been last seen going in that direction, was reserved for the end. As the men approached it, the excitement increased; they almost ran over the large open space in which stood the Wolsey Oak, extending its gnarled and naked arms aloft, as if in horror; but when they searched the coppice itself, and found the body of Grimjaw, stiffened into stone since I last saw it, many of them were not so eager to push on. I had omitted to tell them of the wretched animal's death, and the effect of the sight upon them was really considerable.

That "the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense," is in nothing more true than in the emotion produced by the sufferings or decease of animals upon gentle folks and upon labouring persons. Greater familiarity with such spectacles, and perhaps, too, a larger experience of hardship and sorrow among his own fellow-creatures—which naturally tends to weaken his sense of pity for mere animals—prevents the peasant from being moved at all by some sights at which his superiors would be really shocked: a dead horse lying in the road is, to the stonebreaker, a dead horse, and nothing more; whereas, to him who goes by on wheels, unless he is a veterinary surgeon, the sight is positively distressing. I am sure that the spectacle of half a dozen ordinary dead dogs would not have affected Oliver Bradford, for instance, in the least, while if they had been "lurchers," and given to poaching practices, such a funereal scene would have afforded him unmixed satisfaction. But when he saw Grimjaw lying dead, and frozen, he shook his head very gravely, and bade us mark his words, "That that ere dog didn't die for nothing, but for a sign. That he would never have died, not he, if his master and constant companion had still had breath in him, and more than that, we should find, we might take his word for it, that that there body, and that of Sir Massingberd Heath, were not very far from one another."

There were murmurs of hushed and awe-struck adhesion to these remarks, but not a dissentient voice in all the company, and in a frame of mind which would now undoubtedly be called "sensational," and not in a broken line of march, as heretofore, but almost shoulder to shoulder, we entered the Home Spinney.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT WAS IN THE COVERED CART.

If this true narrative of mine should chance to find its channel of publication in a hebdomadal periodical, and the end of the last chapter coincide with the end of the week, I am afraid I shall have unduly aroused the expectation of my readers, and kept them upon tenter-hooks during that

period upon false pretences, or rather what may seem to be so. They will doubtless have promised themselves some ghastly spectacle (and I give them my honour that if they will only have patience they shall have it) to be presented in the very next page or two. It may disappoint them temporarily, to hear that though we searched the coppice, tree by tree, and left not one heap of leaves unstirred by our feet, that we found nothing, nothing. And yet I will venture to say, that if we had come upon that sight which all were so prepared for, the stiffened limbs of murdered Sir Massingberd, with his cruel face set for ever in death, and his hard eyes scowling up at the sky, it would scarcely have filled us with greater awe. It would have been a terrible sight, doubtless, but with every minute the terror would have faded, until at last it might have even melted into pity. He could at least have hurt no man more, being dead. But now that he was only Lost—still Lost—we looked at one another with dumb surprise, and over our own shoulders with misgivings. He was not above ground in all Fairburn Chase, that was certain; nor under water, for the dragging-parties had discovered no more than we. Any idea of suicide was quite out of the question; Sir Massingberd Heath was the last man to leave life before he was summoned, even if he really felt, as he averred, that there was no sort of risk in doing so. Wicked men have a tolerably high opinion of this world, notwithstanding their low views of the people that inhabit it; and the French philosopher who put an end to his not invaluable existence upon the ground that he had had enough of everything, was an exceptional case.

At the same time, the probabilities were immensely against the baronet's having voluntarily undertaken any expedition, considering the circumstances under which he must have set out—on foot, fatigued, and at so late an hour. If secrecy had been his object, it would have been far more easily secured by his departure at a less extraordinary time. In the meanwhile, day after day passed by without any tidings, and the mystery of his disappearance deepened and spread. Mr. Long was rather reserved upon the matter at first, professing to entertain little doubt that the wilful Squire would presently return, malicious and grim as ever; but as time went on, he began to grow uneasy, and seemed to find relief in conversing upon the subject, and suggesting more or less impossible contingencies.

"Do you remember, Peter," said he one morning at breakfast-time, "reading out to me, some months ago, an account of the murder of a certain lieutenant of the coast-guard by smugglers on the east coast; how he oppressed them and treated them with unnecessary cruelty for many, many months, until at last they took him away out of his bed by force, and carried him no man knew whither, and put him to death with tortures?"

"Yes," returned I, "perfectly well. They buried the poor wretch up to his neck in the sea-sand, and bowled stones at his head."

"Well, Peter, that frightful scene is constantly representing itself whenever I shut my eyes; only the head is that of Sir Massingberd. You cannot imagine how distressing it is to me now to go to bed, with the expectation of this re-enacting itself before I can get to sleep."

"Dear me, how dreadful!" returned I. "But does not the fact of your only recognizing the victim, convince you of the unreality of the thing? If you knew the faces of the smugglers, then indeed ___"

"I do know them, Peter," interrupted my tutor gravely; "that is the worst of it; although it should, as you say, rather convince me of the imaginary character of the scene, since the actors in it have long been dead and gone, I believe. They are not smugglers, but gipsies. There is on Carew in particular, one unhappy man, into whose history I need not enter, but who once incurred the baronet's vengeance, and I am afraid it is but too likely perished in consequence. It is a sad story of deception on both sides; but it is certain that Sir Massingberd richly earned the hatred of the wandering people. I have no right, of course, to make any such charge, but Peter, I cannot help thinking that it is they who have made away with the Squire. I casually inquired in the village yesterday about the tribe that generally inhabit the fir-grove on the Crittenden Road, and it seems they left the place by night, on or about the very date of Sir Massingberd's disappearance."

My heart grew cold and heavy as a stone at these words, delivered though they were with vagueness, and without any threat of action to follow them, for the suspicion which my tutor now suggested had long ago taken firm root in my own mind. I would not, however, have given expression to it upon any account, and my present wish was to do away with this notion of the rector's as much as possible. I would not, perhaps, have assisted in the escape of the Cingari from punishment, if punishment they deserved, but neither would I have put out my hand to deliver them up. The law had taken its wicked will of them often enough already, and in connection with this very man.

"Those who know these people best," said I, "such as Bradford and the keepers, do not think it at all probable that they would have had the courage to face Sir Massingberd. Even if they possessed it, what could they have done but have slain him? and if slain, where have they put him to?"

"God alone knows," said my tutor solemnly; "but the man at the pike at Crittenden says, I believe, that they had a covered cart with them, which they have never been known to have before."

I murmured something to the effect that the winter was coming on, and that it was likely enough that they should have procured for themselves some peripatetic shelter of that kind; but a nameless horror took hold upon me, in spite of myself, when Mr. Long rejoined, that he should

think it his duty to have the gipsies followed, and a thorough examination of their effects to be made. I had not another word to say. I seemed already to see poor old Rachel Liversedge standing in the felon's dock, avowing and glorying in her guilt, and defiant of the sentence which would consign her and hers to the same fate that had overtaken, with no such justice, Stanley Carew. Any hope of escape for them, I knew, was out of the question. They had not the means for speedy travel, while, in those days of superstition and intolerance, the Cingari were an object of animadversion and alarm, whithersoever they moved. That very day—acting upon information received concerning their present whereabouts—Mr. Long set out on horseback, accompanied by the parish constable, and came up with the party whom he sought upon a certain common within twenty miles of Fairburn. The tribe, of whom I had only seen three grown-up members, were tolerably numerous, and the constable evinced his fitness for being a peace-officer by counselling the rector to do nothing rash, at least until reinforcements should permit of his doing so with safety. The sight, however, of the covered cart, placed, as it seemed, jealously in the very centre of the encampment, was too much for Mr. Long, who, to do him justice, was as bold as a lion, except where conventional "position," as in the case of Sir Massingberd, made him indisposed for action. He turned his horse straight for the desired object, in spite of the threatening looks of several men, who were tinkering about an immense fire, and was only stopped by the youngest of them starting up, and laying his hand imperatively upon his bridle-rein.

"Have you a warrant, Mr. Long," inquired the gipsy sternly, "that you ride through our camp, when all the rest of the common is open to you, and wish to pry into that poor place yonder, which is all we have of house and home?"

The rector had no sort of right for what he did, and was therefore proportionally indignant.

"Unhand my bridle, sirrah!" cried he. "What is your name, who seem to know mine so well, and yet who knows me so little, that you can imagine I am here in any other cause than that of Right and Justice?"

"My name is Walter Carew," replied the gipsy, still retaining his hold.

"Then that is warrant sufficient for what I do," cried my tutor excitedly, and raising his riding-whip as he spoke.

The swarthy face of the gipsy gleamed with passion, and his unoccupied right hand sought his side, as if for a weapon. Mischief would undoubtedly have ensued, but that at that moment the curtains of the covered cart were parted by a skinny hand, and the voice of Rachel Liversedge was heard bidding the young man let the bridle go, and not spill parson's blood, which was as bad as wasting milk and water. Then she added, with mock courtesy: "Pray, come hither, Mr. Long; our doors are always open, and there can be no intrusion where there are only females and sickness."

"If that be all," returned my tutor in a softened tone, for though somewhat arbitrary, as it would now be thought, towards his inferiors, he was ever gentle to the sex; "if that indeed be all, I shall not inflict my presence upon you long."^[1]

With those words, he threw himself from his horse, and climbed up into the cart; it was rather a roomy one, but all that was in it was clearly to be seen at the first glance. It was carpeted with rushes a foot thick, from which Rachel Liversedge was busily engaged in weaving chair-bottoms. Opposite to her sat another female, engaged with the same articles, but constructing out of them crowns and necklaces, which, though they did not very much resemble the ornaments for which they were intended, appeared to afford her exquisite satisfaction.

"Why don't you introduce me, Rachel?" exclaimed she testily, as Mr. Long looked in. "Don't you see the gentleman is bowing? Sinnamenta—Lady Heath." The secret of the gipsies' sudden removal, as well as of their use of the vehicle which had excited his suspicions, was at once apparent to the rector.

"Is she better, happier in your custody?" inquired my tutor, in a whisper, of the chair-maker. "God knows I would not disturb her, if she be."

"My little sister is not beaten now," observed Rachel bitterly; "although, of course, we have not those luxuries with which her husband has always surrounded her."

"Only four times, Sister Rachel!" observed the afflicted one, in a tone of remonstrance, "one, two, three, four," checking them off on her poor fingers, covered with worthless gewgaws. "I don't consider Gilmore's beatings anything, only Sir Massingberd's."

"May God's curse have found him!" exclaimed Rachel Liversedge fervently; "may He have avenged her wrongs upon him at last! Don't look at me, sir, as though I were a witch wishing a good man ill. I wish I *were* a witch. How he should pine, and rave, and writhe, and suffer ten thousand deaths in one!"

She spoke with such hate and fury, that Mr. Long involuntarily cast once more a suspicious glance around him, as though in reality she possessed the means of vengeance which she so ardently desired. "Did you expect to find him here?" continued she. "That was it, was it? I wish you had. I would that I had his fleshless bones to show you. It is not *my* fault that I have them not, be sure. If there were any manliness left among my people—but there is not; they are curs all—if any memory of the persecuted and the murdered had dwelt within them, as with me, let alone this work of his," she pointed to her unconscious sister, "for which, had he done nought else, I

would have torn his heart out;—he would not have lived thus long by forty years. For aught we know, however, he lives yet; only hearing he was gone, we went and took my little sister from her wretchedness, and thus will keep her if you give us leave, you Christian gentlemen. Where he may be, we know not; we only hope that in some hateful spot—in hell, if such a place there be—he may be suffering unimagined pains."

The fervour and energy of her words, however reprehensible in a moral point of view, were such as left no doubt in the mind of Mr. Long that the gipsy woman spoke truth. Assuring her, therefore, that, so far as he was concerned, she should not be molested in the custody of her unfortunate sister, my tutor rode back to Fairburn, relieved from the dread burden of his late suspicion, but more at his wit's end for an elucidation of the disappearance of Sir Massingberd than ever. Right glad was I to hear that his errand among my dusky friends had been bootless; but by the next morning's post I had received bitter news from Harley Street. A copy of that menacing epistle which I had so unwittingly enclosed to Marmaduke from his uncle, reached me from Mr. Gerard. His words were kind, and intended to be comforting. He knew, of course, that I had been deceived; he well knew, and they all knew, he said, that my hand was the last to do Marmaduke hurt, to do aught but protect and uphold him. But I could see that some grievous harm had occurred, nevertheless, through me, as Sir Massingberd's catspaw. It was more apparent to me because there was not one accompanying word from my dear friend himself, whom I knew too well to imagine capable of blaming me. It was most apparent of all because of the postscript written in Lucy's own hand—so fair, so clear, so brave, so like her own sweet self, saying that I must not reproach myself because I had been overreached by a base man. "Marmaduke will write soon," she said; "he does not love you less because he is silent upon this matter, and must be kept so for a little while." He was ill, then, thanks to my dull wits; and out of pity she had written "Marmaduke." Ah me, would I not have been ill! Would I not have welcomed kinship with a score of wicked uncles for such pity! "He does not love you less because he is silent;" was that a quotation culled from her own heart's whisperings?

"A most unfortunate business," said Mr. Long reflectively, when he had possessed himself of this intelligence. "That letter of Sir Massingberd's will undo all the good of the last twelve months. With what a devilish ingenuity for torment has he framed every phrase. '*My arm will reach you wheresoever you are; at the time you least expect it, and from the quarter to which you have least looked. However Well it may seem to be with you, it will not be Well.*' How thoroughly he knew his nephew! This will make Marmaduke Heath a wretched man for life."

"Not if Sir Massingberd be dead," said I, "and can be proved to be so."

"That is true," responded my tutor, drily; then added, without, I think, intending me to hear it, "But what will be worse than anything, is this doubt as to whether he be dead or not."

I felt convinced of this too, and bowed my head in sorrow and silence. There was a long pause. Then my tutor suddenly started up, and exclaimed, with animation, "Peter, will you go with me to London? I certainly shall be doing more good there, just now, than here; and I think that your presence will be welcome, nay, needful, in Harley Street."

"I shall be ready to start this very evening," returned I, thinking of the mail which passed at night.

"We will be off within an hour," replied my tutor; "I will order post-chaises from the inn at once. Too much time has been lost already; we should have started when Sir Massingberd himself did."

"Do you think he is gone to town, then, with any evil purpose?" inquired I, aghast.

"If he has gone at all, it is certain it is for no good," rejoined the rector, gravely. "It is more than likely that this disappearance may be nothing but a ruse to throw us off our guard. The cat that despaired of attaining her end by other means, pretended to be dead."

[1] In those days, it was not thought incumbent upon ministers of the Gospel to look after gipsy-folk, whose souls, in case they had any, were not opined to be much worth saying.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PROCESSION.

At the time of which I write, a dweller in the midlands who wanted to go to town, did not drive down to the nearest railway station, to be transported from thence by the fiery dragon to his destination. Railways had been long heard of, and indeed there was one within twenty miles of Fairburn, which we should now call a tramway only, for engine it had none. Locomotives were the subject of debate in scientific circles, and of scorn among the rest of the community. A journey such as that my tutor and myself were about to undertake, is scarcely to be understood by readers of the present generation. Not only did it consume an amount of time which would now suffice for six times the distance, but it was surrounded by difficulties and dangers that have now no existence whatever—"extinct Satans," as a writer calls them, who is now scarcely held to be "modern," but who at that time had never written a line. The coach for which Mr. Long had thought it advisable not to wait, had met in its time with a thousand-and-one strange casualties, and the guard was a very Scheherazade at relating them. The "Highflyer" had come to dreadful

grief in racing with an empty stomach, but many "outsides," against its rival, the "Rapid," which traversed a portion of the same road. It had often to open both its doors, to let the water through, in crossing Crittenden Ford, by neglect of which precaution upon one occasion, four "insides" had the misfortune to be suffocated. It had been dug out of snow-drifts a hundred times, and now and then it had *not* been dug out, and the passengers had been frost-bitten. In winter it was usual enough for them to spend a day or two perforce at some country inn, because the roads were "not open." The "Highflyer" had once been attacked by a tiger (out of a travelling caravan), which killed the off-leader; but this was an exceptional adventure. It was attacked by highwaymen at least once a year, but in this respect was considered rather a fortunate coach. Only a few weeks previously, there had been found by the reapers, in one of Farmer Arabel's wheat-fields, mail-bags with letters containing many thousand pounds in drafts and bills, which had been taken by gentlemen of the road from the custody of the guard of the "Highflyer" in the early summer. These persons had gone into the standing wheat to divide their booty, and left there what was to them unavailable property, or too difficult to negotiate.

In the two trips I had already taken to the metropolis, I had gone by this curious conveyance, of which all Fairburn had something to say; but I was now to journey even more gloriously still: so thoroughly had Mr. Long got to be convinced that some immediate danger was imminent to Marmaduke at the hands of his uncle, that he could not bear the least unnecessary delay in giving him warning. We posted with four horses, and generally at full gallop. I agree with the Great Lexicographer in thinking that sensation very pleasurable indeed. The express-train, it is true, goes five times as fast, but you do not feel that there is any credit due to the steam-horse for that; you take it as a matter of course, and would do so, no matter what exertions it should make for you, short of bursting. But when you heard the ring of the sixteen hoofs upon the iron road, and the sharp crack of the whips in the frosty air, or leaned out of the window for a moment; and beheld the good steeds smoking in your behalf, you said to yourself, or to your companion, if you had one: "This is wonderful fine travelling." Perhaps you contrasted such great speed with that attained by the Exeter flying-coaches in your ancestors' time, and smiled with contemptuous pity at their five miles an hour, stoppages excluded.

The trees and hedges flew by you then, and gave an idea of the velocity, such as the telegraph-posts, seen vanishing thin out of the window of a railway-carriage, fail to convey; while, when you stopped for new cattle, the hurry and bustle attendant on the order, "Horses on," helped to strengthen the belief in your own fast travelling. Still, after the first few hours, even the enjoyments of a post-chaise-and-four begin to pall; and long before we had approached our destination, I was cramped, and chilled, and tired enough. It was growing dark, too, so that there was little to be seen without, and we had passed those dangerous parts of the road where expectations of possible highwaymen had afforded me some excitement. I was dozing dreamily, unconscious that the light of London was flaring like a dusky dawn in front of us, and that we had even already entered its then limits upon the north-east, when I was roughly roused by the sudden stoppage of the carriage, accompanied by wild cries, and a glare of lurid flame. Mr. Long had put down the window, and was leaning out of it. There was a dense fog, and gas had not yet been established in that part of London; but a vast assemblage of people were streaming slowly past us, and many of them had torches in their hands. They took no notice of us whatever, but yelled and shouted, and every now and then cast glances behind them at some approaching spectacle, which seemed to be about to overtake us. Presently, we beheld this ourselves. First came a great number of constables, marching twenty abreast, and clearing all before them with large staves; then a body of the mounted patrol—a corps then but newly formed, and which, although now well-nigh extinct, was destined in its time to do good service; then more constables; then a vast quantity of horsemen, armed and unarmed, and lastly this:—Extended on an inclined platform, built to a considerable height upon an open cart, was the body of a dead man; it was attired in blue trousers, and with a white and blue striped waistcoat, but without a coat. On the left side of him was a huge mallet, and on the right a ripping chisel.

"Great Heaven! what is this?" inquired Mr. Long of one of the mounted constables.

"Oh, it's him, sir, sure enough; we've got him at last," returned the officer.

"Him? Who?" cried I, half stupefied with fatigue and horror. "Have they found Sir Massingberd?"

No, it was not Sir Massingberd. The face which was now being slowly carried past us was wicked and stern enough, but it was not *his* face. The skin was black, the eyes were projecting; it was plain that the poor wretch had been strangled. The excitement of those who caught sight of it was hideous to witness; they cursed and hissed in hate and fury, and battled to get near the cart, that they might spit upon the corpse which it contained. The force of the advancing crowd was so tremendous that we were compelled to move for some distance side by side with this appalling sight, and presently immediately behind it; there we seemed to fall in as a part of the procession, and were no doubt considered by the majority of persons to officially belong to it. We were borne southwards quite out of our proper direction, and were unable to prevent it, for it was as much as the postillions could do to sit their horses, and avoid being shouldered out of their saddles. Our progress was of course at a foot's-pace only, and twice the procession halted, once opposite a draper's, and once opposite a public-house, when the yells and hooting of the crowd were terrible to hear. Not only were these two houses closely shuttered up (as they well might be), but the shop-fronts everywhere were closed, and the windows and the tops of the houses crowded with spectators. By this time, we had got to know in what dreadful proceedings we were thus taking an involuntary part. The body in the cart was that of the murderer Williams, who had committed suicide two days before, to escape, it was thought, not so much the scaffold, as the execrations of

his fellow-creatures. All London was filled with hate of him, as before his capture it had been filled with fear; and the government had caused this public exhibition of his corpse, to convince the minds of the public that the wholesale assassin was really no longer alive. The houses at which we had halted were those which had once been inhabited by his unhappy victims, the Marrs and the Williamsons. Subsequently, the corpse was conveyed to St. George's turn-pike, and there interred with a stake thrust through the middle of it; but before that frightful ceremony took place, the postillions had managed to extricate us, and we had driven westward to our destination. Still, I for my part had seen enough, and more than enough, to make that entry of ours into London a thing impossible to forget; and I think it rendered, by association, the mystery concerning which we had come up to Harley Street, more menacing and sombre than before.

CHAPTER IX.

AMONG FRIENDS.

We found Marmaduke Heath in a less morbid state of mind than we had expected. The die having been cast—the time given him by Sir Massingberd for his return and so-called reconciliation with that worthy having already elapsed without any action on the part of his uncle, the effect of that "Captain Swing"-like epistle was slowly wearing off. No one ever revived the matter in his presence, nor, as we have seen, was he permitted even to write upon the subject. Still, he knew that I had been lately communicated with concerning it—for at first the blow had fallen on its object with such force and fulness that those about him had really not liked to let me know the extent of the mischief I might have committed—and he imagined that I had now come up in mere friendly sorrow to cheer and comfort him. As he came out into the dark street on that December evening to give me loving welcome, fresh from that awful procession-scene, I positively looked with terror to left and right, lest some cloaked figure, whom yet we both should recognize, might reach forth an iron arm, and tear him away. It was I who was morbid and unstrung, and not my friend; he strove, I knew, to appear to the best advantage, in good humour and high spirits, in order that I might have less to reproach myself with.

"My dear old Peter" cried he, laughing, "how glad I am to see your honest face. Have you brought me any verbal message from my charming uncle, or are you only his deputy-postman? *How* is he—*how* is he?"

I could see, in spite of his light way, that he was curious to have this interrogation answered; but what was I to say? "I don't know whether he's well or ill," returned I, carelessly, as I stepped into the hall. "But how is Mr. Gerard and Miss——"

"Here is 'Miss,'" returned a sweet voice, blithe as a bird's; "she is excellently well, Peter, thank you. But what a white face *you* have got! If that is the gift of country air there is certainly no such cause for regretting our absence from the Dovecot, about which Marmaduke is always so solicitous."

"'Marmaduke' to his face, now!" thought I. I could not prevent my heart from sinking a little, in spite of the lifebuoy of friendship. But I answered gallantly, "There is no air that can wither *your* roses, Miss Lucy, for the summer is never over where you are."

"Bravo, Peter," quoth Mr. Gerard, set in the warm glow of the dining-room, which gleamed forth from the open door behind him. "If he is so complimentary in a thorough draught, what a mirror of courtesy will he be when he gets thawed! Come in, my dear Mr. Long; come in to the warm. No east wind ever brought people more good, than this which brings you two to us. Lucy...—Ah, that's right; she has gone to order the dinner to be rechaufféd. Now, do you travellers answer no man one word, but go make yourselves comfortable—you have your old rooms, of course—and then come down at once to food and fire. Marmaduke, my dear boy, you keep me company here, please; otherwise, you will delay Peter, with your gossip, I know."

That was a sentence with a purpose in it. If, as Mr. Gerard at once guessed, we had come up to town on business connected with Sir Massingberd, it might be advisable that I should not be interrogated by Marmaduke privately. For my part, I was greatly relieved by it, since I had no desire to be the person to communicate bad tidings—for such I knew he would consider them—to my friend a second time. My spirits had risen somewhat with the warmth of our reception; it is not a little to have honest friends, and welcome unmistakable in hand and voice and eye. There is many a man who goes smoothly through the world by help of these alone, and only at times sighs for the love that but one could have given him, and which has been bestowed by her elsewhere. When I got down into the dining-room, a minute or two before my tutor, I was received by quite a chorus of kind voices—a very tumult of hospitable greeting.

"Warm your toes, Peter—warm your toes; you shall have a glass of sherry worth drinking directly," cried Mr. Gerard, all in a breath.

"Yes, Peter, you and I will have a glass together," exclaimed Marmaduke, eagerly.

"Stop for 'the particular'—stop for the green seal: it will be here in a minute," entreated the host.

"No, no," returned Marmaduke; "I must drink his health at once. Cowslip wine, if I drank it with

Peter, would be better to me than Johannisberg."

He had his hand upon her arm, as I entered the room; I was sure of that, although she had gently but swiftly withdrawn it from his touch, as the door opened. How happy she looked; how passing fair with that faint flush! How handsome and bright-faced was dear Marmaduke! How placidly content, like one who draws his happiness from that of others, was the countenance of Harvey Gerard! A picture of domestic pleasure and content indeed, and with three noble figures in it. It was impossible to doubt that two lovers stood before me, and a father who had found a prospective son-in-law, whom he could love as a son. This new relationship had been only established within a very few days, and upon that account, perhaps, it was the more patent. My mischance in the matter of Sir Massingberd's letter, had been the immediate cause of Marmaduke's declaration. She had compassionated him in his troubles, and he had told her in what alone his hope of comfort lay. He had not been sanguine of securing her—who could have been, with such a priceless prize in view?—for not only had he a diffidence in his own powers of pleasing, great and winning as they were, beyond those of any man I ever knew, but he feared to find an obstacle to his wishes in her father.

"Dear Mr. Gerard," he had said, with his usual frankness, "I have won your daughter's heart, and love her better than all the world. Still, it is you alone who have her hand to dispose of. She loves and respects you as never yet was father loved and respected, and this only makes her dearer to me. I feel as much bound in this matter by your decision—Oh, sir, God grant your heart may turn towards me—as she does herself. I dare not tell you what I think of you to your face. The very greatness of my respect for you makes me fear your rejection of *me*. I am, in one respect at least, a weak and morbid man, while your mind is vigorous and strong upon all points. You are in armour of proof from head to heel; whereas, there is a joint in my harness open to every blow. I am afraid, sir, that you despise me."

"I do not despise you, Marmaduke," Mr. Gerard had replied, in his kind grave voice.

"Ah, sir, I know what you would say," returned the young man with vehemence; "you pity me, and pity and contempt are twin-sisters. Besides, I am a Heath; you do not wish that blood of yours should mix with that of an evil and accursed race; and, moreover—though that, with a man like you, has, I know, but little weight—I may live and die a pauper."

"My dear Marmaduke," Mr. Gerard had answered, "I cannot conceal from you that there are grave objections to your marriage with my daughter, and more especially at present. We need not revert to the last matter you have spoken of, for wealth is not what I should seek for in my son-in-law; even if it were, your alliance would reasonably promise it, and might be sought by many on that account. As for your being a Heath, that you cannot help; and, with respect to 'blood,' there is more rubbish spoken upon that subject by otherwise sensible folk than upon all others put together. Bad example and evil training are sufficient to account for the bad courses of any family without impeaching their circulating fluids. If your uncle had not happened to be likewise your guardian, in you, my dear young friend, I frankly tell you, I should see no fault, or rather no misfortune; but, since he has unhappily had the opportunity of weakening and intimidating—"

"Sir, sir, pray spare me," broke in Marmaduke, passionately; "are you going to say that I am a coward?"

"Heaven forbid, my boy," replied Mr. Gerard, earnestly; "you are as brave as I am, I do not doubt. If I thought you to be what you suggest, I would not parley with you about my darling daughter for one moment. I would say 'No' at once. My Lucy wooed by a poltroon!—no, that is not possible. I do not say 'No' to *you*, Marmaduke."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, sir," exclaimed the young man, with emotion; then added solemnly, "and I thank God."

"What I do say, however," returned Mr. Gerard, "is 'Wait.' While your uncle lives, I cannot, under existing circumstances, permit you to be my Lucy's husband. At present, you are only boy and girl, and can well afford to be patient."

"And when we do marry," returned Marmaduke, gratefully, "you shall not lose your daughter, sir, but rather gain a son. My home, if I ever have one, shall be yours also. Pray, believe me when I say that you are my second father, for you have given me a new life."

It really seemed so to him who looked at the sparkling eyes and heightened colour of the speaker, and listened to his tones, so rich with hope and love.

"There is certainly no one so civil as a would-be son-in-law," replied Mr. Gerard, good-naturedly. "I wonder that old gentlemen in my position ever permit them to marry at all."

And thus it had been settled—as I saw that it had been—only a very little while before our arrival in Harley Street.

"And what brings you good people up to town?" asked Mr. Gerard gaily, "without sending a line in advance, which, even in mercy to the housekeeper, you would surely have done, had not the business been urgent? As to your travelling with four horses," added our host slyly, "I know so well the pride and ostentation of the clergy that I am not the least astonished at your doing *that*,

Mr. Rector."

"Truly, sir, now that I find all safe and well," replied my tutor, "I begin to think we might have travelled in a less magnificent way; but the fact is, that I felt foolishly apprehensive and curious to tell you our tidings. Sir Massingberd Heath has been Lost since Thursday fortnight, November sixteenth."

"Lost!" exclaimed Mr. Gerard, in amazement.

"Lost!" echoed Lucy, compassionately.

"Lost!" murmured Marmaduke, turning deadly pale. "That is terrible, indeed."

"Yes, poor wretched man," said Lucy, quickly; "terrible to think that some judgment may have overtaken him in the midst of his wickedness—unrepentant, revengeful, cruel."

"That is truly what should move us most, Miss Gerard," observed my tutor; "it is but too probable that he has been suddenly cut off, and that by violence." Then he narrated all that had happened at Fairburn since the night of Sir Massingberd's disappearance, uninterrupted save once, when Mr. Gerard left the room for a few minutes, and returned with another bottle of "the particular," which, it seemed, he would not even suffer the butler to handle. Marmaduke sat silent and awe-struck, drinking in every word, and now and then, when a sort of shudder passed over him, I saw a little hand creep forth and slide into his, when he would smile faintly, but not take his eyes off Mr. Long—no, not even to reply to hers.

"I think," added my tutor, when the narrative was quite concluded, "that under these circumstances I was justified in coming up to town, Mr. Gerard, since it is just possible that Sir Massingberd may, may——"

"That he may not be dead," interrupted our host, gravely; "there is, of course, that chance, and we must set to work at once to settle the question."

There was a violent ringing at the front-door bell. Mr. Long started up with a "What's that?" Marmaduke's very lips grew white, and trembled. For my part, I confess I congratulated myself that I was on that side of the table which was furthest from any person who might enter the room. Lucy alone maintained a calm demeanour, and looked towards her father confidently.

"That is Mr. Clint, I have no doubt," observed Mr. Gerard, quietly. "I sent word to him an hour ago to come directly, and, if possible, to bring Townshend with him. Whether Sir Massingberd be alive or not, we shall soon discover, for the great Bow Street runner will be certain to find either his body or his bones."

CHAPTER X.

A DETECTIVE OF HALF A CENTURY AGO.

Mr. Gerard had hardly finished speaking, when the butler announced Mr. Clint and "another gentleman," for even among friends the famous Bow Street officer, exercised his usual caution; and yet there was scarcely a more public character than Townshend, or better known both to the classes whom he protected, and to that against which he waged such constant war. His personal appearance was itself sufficiently remarkable. A short squab man, in a light wig, kerseymere breeches, and a blue Quaker-cut coat, he was not, to look at, a very formidable object. But he possessed the courage of a lion, and the cunning of a fox. The ruffians who kept society in terror, themselves quailed before *him*. They knew that he was hard to kill, and valued not his own life one rush, when duty called upon him to hazard it; that he was faithful as a watch-dog to the government which employed him, and hated by nature a transgressor of the law, as a watch-dog hates a wolf. When Townshend fairly settled himself down upon the track of an offender, the poor wretch felt like the hare whose fleeing footsteps the stoat relentlessly pursues; he might escape for the day, or even the morrow, but sooner or later his untiring foe was certain to be up with him. In those early days, when the telegraph could not overtake the murderer speeding for his life, and set Justice upon her guard five hundred miles away, to intercept him, and when the sun was not the slave of the Law, to photograph the features of the doomed criminal, so that he can be recognized as easily as Cain, thief-catching was a much more protracted business than it is now; nevertheless, it was at least as certain.

If the facilities for capture were not so great, neither were the opportunities of escape for the offender so many and various. London was not the labyrinth that it has since become, and if any criminal of note forsook it for the provinces, his fate was almost certain. Travellers did not then rush hither and thither, in throngs of a hundred strong, impossible to be individually identified by the railway porter to whom they surrender their tickets; but each man was entered in a way-bill, or scanned with curiosity by innkeeper and post-boy, wherever his chaise changed horses. When any considerable sum was sent by mail-coach, whether by the government or by London bankers, to their provincial agents, it was not unusual to employ Mr. Townshend as an escort. Nor was it altogether unexampled for him to be sent for, as in the present instance, to unravel some domestic mystery; although he was perhaps the first police-officer who had been so employed, the father of all the Fields and Pollakies of the present day. He was on intimate terms, therefore,

with many great people, and an especial favourite with the court, his professional services being engaged at all drawing-rooms and state occasions. This, combined with the natural assurance and sense of power in the man, caused Mr. Townshend to hold his head pretty high, and to treat with persons vastly superior in social station to himself upon at least an equal footing. His easy nod, with which the great Bow Street runner favoured us in Harley Street that evening, upon his first introduction, was not very much unlike the salutation which Mr. Brummel, at the same period, was wont to bestow upon British marquises and dukes. Having taken his seat at the dessert-table, at the host's desire, he at once began to compliment Mr. Gerard upon the contents of the bottle with the yellow seal, and, in short, behaved himself in all respects as any other guest would have done who was an intimate friend of the family, and had dropped in after dinner upon his own invitation. No sooner, however, did Mr. Clint introduce the subject which had called us up to town, and Mr. Long begin to recapitulate the story of Sir Massingberd's disappearance, than this singular person dropped at once all social pretension, and showed himself the really great man he was. One glass of wine was sufficient for him during the whole narration, and that he seemed to sip mechanically, and rather as an assistance to thought, than because he really enjoyed it, which, however there is no doubt he did. He only interrupted my tutor twice or thrice, in order to make some pertinent interrogation, and when all had been described (including a slight sketch of Marmaduke's position), he sat for a little silent and noiseless, tapping his wine-glass with his forefinger, and staring into the fire.

"Well, Mr. Townshend, and what is your opinion?" inquired Mr. Gerard a little impatiently. "Do you think that this Lost Sir Massingberd is alive or dead?"

"That is a question which a fool would answer at once, sir, but a wise man would take some time to reply to," returned the Bow Street runner coolly, "But one thing you may depend upon, that he will not be 'Lost' long. I have blotted that word out of my dictionary. I know Sir Massingberd Heath well, or, at least, I did know him, and that is a great advantage to start with; he was not a man, I should think, to change with age. Tall figure and strong; large piercing eyes; much beard; a mouth that tells he likes to have his own way; and on his forehead a mark as if the devil had kicked him."

"That is excellent," cried Mr. Gerard; "you could not mistake him for any other man in London."

"He is *not* in London, sir," observed the runner dogmatically. "If he were mixing with the lot that he used to be amongst, I should surely have heard of it; and if he is with people much beneath him in station, I should have learned it still more certainly. As for that, however, he is not one—if I remember him right—to hide himself, or work much underground."

"If you mean that he would not stoop to deception, Mr. Townshend," remarked my tutor gravely, "I am afraid you are mistaken; the very money which, as I have said, he obtained from me upon the day of his disappearance, was dishonourably come by. His pretext of the Methodists having bidden for a piece of ground upon which to build a chapel within the Park, and almost opposite the Rectory, was, I have since discovered, entirely false; and I cannot but fear that some judgment has overtaken this unhappy man."

Here, I am sorry to say, that Mr. Clint and Mr. Gerard looked at one another in rather a comic manner, and the Bow Street runner helped himself to a glass of the particular with an open chuckle.

"Well, sir," responded that gentleman, "you see Judgments isn't much in my way. When I catches a chap, he generally knows its judgment and execution too; but barring that, I doubt whether there is much of a special Providence for rascals—even when they rob a Church minister. Not, of course, that I am saying Sir Massingberd Heath, baronet, is a rascal, or anything like it; I never had anything to do with him in all my life before this, and that's a good sign, look you. When I said he was not a man to work underground, however, I did not mean that he would not employ every ingenious device—and the one you mention was one of the neatest I ever heard of—to procure money, but that he is of too domineering and masterful a nature to lurk and spy about. The young gentleman here need not be in much alarm, I think, of his relative's turning up in Harley Street; notwithstanding which, he is a very ticklish customer, no doubt, and one as I should not have been in the least surprised to find myself under orders to fit with a pair of bracelets, for such a thing, for instance, as murder."

I think each of us started and looked at one another in hushed amazement at this statement; and the wine-glass which Marmaduke was twisting nervously in his fingers, rattled against the table in spite of his efforts to remain calm.

"I mean," observed Mr. Townshend, in explanation, "as the baronet, when I knew him at least, was venomous, yet likewise hasty; and though cunning enough, if his temper got the better of him, would do imprudent things, I remember him well-nigh killing his jockey on the course at Doncaster—it was the second year as ever the Leger was ran for—and all for no fault of his, but just because he didn't win when his master expected it. I remember how the crowd hissed the gentleman, and the ugly look which he gave them in reply. There was no fuss made about the matter afterwards; but Sir Massingberd had to supply a deal of Golden Ointment to the poor lad's bruises: he was very free-handed with his money at that time. I suppose, by the pace he was then going, that he has not much left."

"He has almost literally not a shilling," replied Mr. Long. "I am quite certain that he had no ready-money in his possession besides the twenty one-pound notes which he obtained from me

upon that evening."

"And no means of raising any?" inquired Mr. Townshend.

"None whatever," replied my tutor positively.

"That simplifies the business a good deal," remarked the Bow Street runner, drawing out his pocket-book. "Now, I suppose you kept the numbers of those notes?"

"Yes, I did. Peter, did you not write them down for me?"

"The notes ran from 82961 to 82980 inclusive," said I.

"A very concise and sensible statement, young gentleman,"^[1] remarked the police-officer, approvingly; "I should like, however, to see the figures in black and white." When these had been found among certain memorandums of my tutor, Mr. Townshend copied them, and thus continued: "Now, the first thing as has to be done, gentleman all—by which no offence is meant to the young lady—is this: we must go to the Bank of England, and find out if any of these here notes have been paid in since November 16th. If they have been, one of two things is certain—Sir Massingberd is spending them, or somebody else is spending them for him. If the latter, it is probable that it is not with his consent; that is, that he can't help it; that is, that he's dead as a ten-penny nail;" and with that the speaker brought down his fist upon the mahogany, as though he were hammering one in.

"We shall leave the case, Mr. Townshend, entirely in your hands," observed Mr. Gerard; "and please to look to me for any expenses you may require."

"Very good, sir," replied the runner, rising as if to take his leave; "but since two or three heads are always better than one, in cases of this sort, and the present company has their wits about them—which is by no means the case with many as I have to do with—I should be glad of a little assistance from yourselves."

"Don't you think we ought to advertise the baronet as missing, and offer a reward?" suggested Mr. Clint.

"There will be no harm in that, of course," replied Mr. Townshend carelessly; "although I can't say as I have much confidence in advertisements; my own experience is, that parties who put them in derive some satisfaction from reading them over to themselves, but the advantage don't go much beyond that—except that it sometimes puts people upon their guard as one wants to be off it. I have got a little pressing business on hand to-morrow—in the forging line—and must now be off; but if one or two of you will be at the Bank to-morrow afternoon, at, let us say three o'clock, I shall be sure to be there to meet you."

[1] Every lad in my position, not yet turned twenty-one, was a "young gentleman" in these times; we were not so tenacious of our dignity as the young men of to-day.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BANK-NOTES.

It was arranged, to my infinite joy, before retiring to rest that night, that I was to make one of the Bank party. Marmaduke insisted on accompanying us, being above measure curious about the matter, and eager to know the worst (or the best) regarding it. Mr. Long had to return to Fairburn for his Sunday's duty, and Mr. Clint could not spare the time from his parchments; so Mr. Harvey Gerard and we two young men went forth upon the trail together. As the paper-chase is the most glorious pursuit undertaken by boys, as fox-hunting is the sport of sports for men, so man-hunting is the avocation fitted for heroes. I know nothing like it for interest and excitement—nothing. If I could only imbue my readers with one-tenth of the absorbing concern with which we, the subordinate actors in this drama of mystery, now began to be devoured, they would be sorry indeed when this narrative comes to a conclusion. We three were at the appointed spot some minutes before the hour which had been agreed upon for meeting the Bow Street runner; but before the chimes of the Old Exchange clock had ceased their "*Life let us cherish*"—the tune which they always played on Fridays—the Bow Street runner appeared.

Passing through a great room within the Bank, in which, to my unaccustomed eye, were displayed the riches of Croesus, and where the golden showers seemed unceasingly to rain, we were conducted into a private apartment, where sat some grey-headed official, uncommunicative, calm, like one who has had his glut even of wealth, and to whom money, whether in bullion or paper, was no longer any object.

"Well, Mr. Townshend, what can I do for you?" inquired he, sedately. "I trust you are not come about any fresh wrongs against the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street. I never see your face but I think of an imitation bank-note, and diminution of the stock in our cellar."

"Thank you, sir," responded the runner, cheerfully; "I am afraid that I shall have to see you in a day or two respecting a matter of that very kind, but to-day I am come on a different business. A gentleman of high rank has been missing for three weeks, or more; and his absence has given the

greatest anxiety to these, his friends. He was known to have in his possession certain one-pound Bank of England notes, twenty in all, of which the numbers are known. We wish to know whether they have been paid in hither in the meantime, and if so, by whom."

"Have you any order from the deputy-governor?"

"Why, no, sir," responded the runner, insinuatingly. "I thought that would not be necessary between you and me."

"Well, well, I suppose you must have your own way, Townshend. You're a dangerous man to cross." And the old gentleman wagged his head in a blandly humorous manner, and made a little golden music with his bunch of seals. "The numbers of the notes are here, are they? From 82961 to 80. Very good." Here he rang a silver bell, which presently produced an official personage, something between a gentleman-usher and a pew-opener. "You may show this party over the cancelled department, James; and let Mr. Townshend investigate anything he pleases."

With a not over-courteous nod, the old gentleman resumed his study of a certain enormous volume, that looked, said Marmaduke, like the quarto edition of Chaucer, but which, it is reasonable to conclude, was something else. We were straightway conducted through several vast and echoing chambers, into a spacious fire-proof vault, where the notes that had been paid into the Bank awaited the periodical cremation.

"A week later, and we might not have been in time," remarked the Bow Street runner, "since every bank-note is burned within a month of its having found its way home again. If Sir Massingberd has come to a violent end, and been robbed of his money, we shall probably find it all here, as those who despoiled him would be anxious to get the notes changed at once." Our guide led the way to a certain department of the chamber, with the same accuracy which a student would evince with respect to a shelf in his own library, and took up in his hand a bundle of one-pound notes; they were for the most part very dirty and greasy, but he separated one from the other with a surprising ease and celerity, reading out the numbers as he did so. "82900, 1, 2, 3—now we are getting near it," observed the official. "Let us see, 951, is it not?"

"82961," gasped I, "and the next nineteen." I could scarcely frame the words, so great was my excitement. Marmaduke's eyes gleamed with anxiety and impatience; and even Mr. Gerard held his breath, while the clerk continued, in a dry, mechanical tone:

"51, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 wanting—7, 8, 9 all wanting. 82960—here you have it; 61 wanting; 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. There are none of them here. Stop a bit. 82977—that's one, isn't it?"

"Yes," cried I, "that's one. Pray, let me look at it."

"Certainly not, sir," responded the official, severely. "With regard to Mr. Townshend, I have my orders, but as respects him only."

"Perfectly right," remarked the Bow Street runner, approvingly. "Then please to give it to me, my man. Are there any more?"

"Yes, there are—78, 79, 80."

"Good. That is four in all, then." The detective took them up, and showed them to me: of course, I could not identify them; but still I felt some awe to think what hands—hands imbued with blood, perchance—those notes might have passed through since I had seen Sir Massingberd thrust them into his pocket.

"I cannot carry these away with me, my good friend, I suppose?" inquired Mr. Townshend, persuasively.

"By no manner of means, Mr. Runner," replied the guardian of these unctuous treasures, with dignity. "His Majesty himself would never be so mad as to ask such a thing. A written order from the governor himself would not permit you to do it."

"Very good, sir; then we won't trouble the governor to write one," returned the detective, dryly. "What I must know, however—permission or no permission—is this: by whose hand were these sweet-smelling and precious articles paid into the Bank of England?"

It would have been amusing, under less anxious circumstances, to have watched the demeanour of these two personages, each jealous of the dignity of those by whom he was employed, and neither in the least disposed to surrender one tittle of his delegated authority.

"That information will, no doubt, be supplied to you," replied the official, stiffly, "if it is thought right—and not otherwise. Follow me, gentlemen, if you please, and I will direct you to the office where such an application may be made."

This we did; and I am bound to say, met with very great civility from the superintendent of the department in question. In spite of the admirable and systematic manner in which the huge establishment was carried on, it was not easy, and in many cases would have been impossible, to discover what individual had paid in any particular note; but every pains and trouble were taken in our behalf, to effect this. Out of the four notes, only one, No. 82979, could be identified as having been received from any particular person—one Mr. Worrall, a silk-merchant in the City. Having expressed our warmest thanks to the authorities, we immediately called a coach, and started off to this gentleman's warehouse. We were so fortunate as to find him in, although he

was just upon the point of setting forth to his private residence. Upon an examination of his books, we discovered no record of the bank-note about which we were concerned; still, he frankly owned to us that such memoranda were not kept with excessive accuracy. "It is possible yet that the people at the Bank may have been correct," observed he. "You had better return there; and since the matter is one of life and death, I do not mind confiding to you, that if that note has passed through our hands at all, it will have the letter W, in red, upon the back of it; it is very small, but still can be deciphered without a magnifying-glass."

"There was no mark," observed I, "upon any of the notes I saw."

"There *was* a mark," remarked the Bow Street runner, reflectively; and I am pretty sure it was upon this very note.—"It is no wonder that you did not see it, young gentleman, since your livelihood does not depend, as mine does, upon keeping my eyes about me. The mark in question was also almost obliterated by the red "Cancelled" which the Bank had placed upon the note; but as far as I could make it out, it was the letter O."

"That is the private mark of the Metropolitan Oil Company," exclaimed Mr. Worrall, without hesitation. "Although, indeed, because I have told my own secrets, I am not sure that I am justified in revealing those of other people. Their offices are in the very next street to this."

Off we started like hounds, who, after, a check, have once more struck the scent. Business in the City had by this time greatly diminished, and many of the shops were closed; but the Oil Company's emporium, as behoved it, was lighted up from cellar to garret, to give assurance to the world that what they sold could turn night, and even London fog, into day. Notwithstanding the extreme luminosity of the premises, we found the accounts of the establishment, however, rather opaque and complicated; and although nothing could exceed the pains which the clerks put themselves to upon our account, it was several hours before No. 82979 could be identified, both as respected its incoming and outgoing. Finally, however, we gleaned the certain information that the note in question had been received only a day or two previously by the Oil Company from a Mr. Vanderseld, the skipper of a foreign vessel, then lying in the port of London, but which, he had informed them, was to sail immediately. He had bought a small quantity of oil for his cabin lamps, and taken it with him, but had ordered a large supply to be sent to his address in Hamburg, and with this address we were made acquainted.

"Well, Mr. Townshend," quoth Mr. Harvey Gerard, as we rolled homewards in a hackney-coach, after seven hours of this man-hunting, "what think you that this news portends? Is the game still afoot, or is it only dead game—quarry?"

"I can speak with no sort of certainty yet," replied the Bow Street runner; "but next to all the notes having been paid into the Bank on the 17th or so—which, as I told you, would have almost indicated Sir Massingberd's murder and robbery, without any doubt—I know of no worse tidings than this, of their having come from Hamburg. There's a regular agency abroad, and particularly in that town, for the sale of Bank of England notes dishonestly come by. If a thief cannot get to the Bank immediately, to turn his plunder into gold, he sends it across the water; and then it comes back to us at home, through honest hands enough. We must communicate, of course, with Vanderseld; but the probability is that he will be unable to give us any information. These sea-fellows take account of nothing except what concerns their own trade. He may remember the quarter that the wind was blowing from upon the day he had the note, to a nicety; but he won't have a notion, bless you, as to who paid it him. No—it's the worst sign yet, to my mind, that that 'ere note has come through foreign hands. But don't you be down-hearted, my young gentleman," added the Bow Street runner, addressing himself to Marmaduke, who looked very fagged and anxious; "I'll find your respected uncle, mind you, let him be where he will; and if he's dead, why, you shall see his corpse, though I have to dig it up with my finger-nails." With which comforting statement we had, for that evening, to be content.

CHAPTER XII.

A BENEVOLENT STRANGER.

Having written to Mr. Vanderseld of Hamburg, there was nothing, pending the reception of his reply, for even Mr. Townshend to do beyond his favourite occupation of keeping his eyes open. We advertised, however, in the "Morning Chronicle" (a print that at that time was far from looking forward, to death from want of circulation, and the having its eyes closed by a penny piece), in the "Times," and in the "Sun," and offered a reward of one hundred guineas for tidings of the missing baronet; nor, in spite of the Bow Street Runner's depreciating remarks upon this point, were our efforts in that direction wholly thrown away. A full description of Sir Massingberd had appeared in the above newspapers for ten successive days, and on the eleventh, the following information came of it. We were all breakfasting in Harley Street, Mr. Long having come up from Fairburn the previous day, when the butler informed us that there was a man waiting in the hall, who wished to see "H.G.," who had put a certain advertisement into the "Sun" newspaper. "Show him in here at once, George," quoth Mr. Gerard, rubbing his hands. "How pleased I shall be if we learn what we wish to know, after all, without any help from Bow Street. I beg you will take a chair, sir." These last words were addressed to a very respectable-looking person, whom the servant had ushered in, and who bowed to us in a very decorous and

unassuming fashion. He was attired in half-mourning, and carried a little black leather bag and an umbrella—the latter a less common companion in these days than a cane is now—as though he had just come off a journey.

"I have called, gentlemen," said he, "simply in consequence of seeing a notice respecting the disappearance of a certain individual of whose whereabouts I am in a position to inform you."

"Is Sir Massingberd Heath alive, sir?" gasped Marmaduke.

"Heaven be praised, he *is*, sir," responded the stranger, fervently.

"Umph," ejaculated Mr. Gerard, with less piety.

Mr. Long coughed behind his fingers, but otherwise kept a discreet silence.

"You know him, do you, sir?" inquired our host.

"I know him well enough by sight, if, at least, your advertised description of his personal appearance is accurate," resumed our visitor. "His height, his beard, the curious indentation upon his forehead, are all characteristic of the man whom I saw last night, and whom I have seen every day for weeks. He is living under the name of Daneton, at Nutgall, a village in Cambridgeshire, near which I reside. I have not the slightest doubt whatever of his identity. As for knowing him, except by sight, however, I cannot say that I do. Without meaning offence, or wishing to hurt the feelings of relations, I may observe that his mode of life is scarcely one to make acquaintance with him advantageous. If I may speak without reserve upon the matter, I should state that he drank considerably, to the extent, indeed, the landlord of the inn has informed me, of, at least, a bottle and a half of French brandy *per diem*."

"That *must* be my uncle," observed Marmaduke, naïvely.

"He is so, sir, without a doubt," continued the stranger. "I do not seek for any pecuniary reward; but having seen your advertisement, I thought it my duty to come up hither, and relieve the feelings of anxious relatives."

Here the door opened, and Mr. Townshend walked in unannounced, as it was his custom to do. Merely nodding to us all, as though he was an inmate of the house, he sat down at the table with his back to the visitor, and helped himself to a roll and butter.

Mr. Gerard explained briefly the stranger's errand to the officer of justice, and then observed, "Are we to understand, then, that you have been so good as to come all the way from Nutgall hither, expressly to give us this information?"

"No, sir," responded the man with frankness; "I should deceive you if I were to say that much. I have business in the City to-day, and arrived so far by coach; I came on hither, merely a few miles beyond my mark; that is all for which you are indebted to me."

"That is a great deal," observed Mr. Long, warmly. "We take it very kindly that you should have done so much."

"I thought it only my duty, sir," replied the visitor, modestly. "The trouble I do not take into account."

"What a pity the gentleman did not think of writing by the post," observed Mr. Townshend, still proceeding with his breakfast; "that would have saved him this long expedition, and us many days of anxiety."

"That is very true," returned the stranger; "but the fact is, one does not always like to answer advertisements in that way. How did I know who 'H.G.' was? I thought also that a personal interview would be more satisfactory. I am a poor man, but I did not grudge the chance of losing an hour or two on an errand of charity."

"You are very good," answered Marmaduke, gloomily.

"And you must, please, permit us," added Mr. Long, taking out his purse, "to at least reimburse you for that loss of time."

"It seems to me," observed Mr. Townshend, speaking with his mouth full, "that this gentleman is about to be rather hardly dealt by. It is true that a guinea, or even half a one, may repay him for his lost time; but if his intelligence respecting Sir Massingberd Heath turns out to be such as he represents it, he will be entitled to the hundred guineas reward."

"I never thought of that," observed Mr. Long, returning his purse to his pocket not without a blush. "I hope, sir, that you will acquit me of any sordid design in what I proposed to do."

"Most certainly, sir," returned the stranger, with animation; "and indeed your views, as you just expressed them, are quite in accordance with my own. I have no wish whatever for the reward in question; to have done my duty is, I hope, a sufficient recompense for me. On the other hand, I cannot well afford to lose these two or three hours which have been expended in your service. A couple of guineas would quite repay me for this, and even leave the obligation upon my side."

There was a silence for a little, during which Mr. Long gazed inquiringly at Mr. Gerard, and he, in his turn, looked towards Mr. Townshend; then, as though the back of that gentleman's head had been cognizant that counsel was demanded of it, the Bow Street runner spoke as follows:

"It would be nothing less than a fraud, in my opinion, if this good gentleman's generosity is taken advantage of in the way he suggests. If the management of this business is to be in my hands, I should say let us behave with rectitude at least, if not with liberality. The hundred guineas are fairly his, if he is correct in what he has told us; whereas, if he is *not* correct—since no mistake can have occurred in the matter, by his own showing—why, this is merely an attempt to extort money under false pretences."

"Really, Mr. Townshend," cried my tutor, starting to his feet, "I think your profession of thief-catching makes you very unscrupulous in your imputations."

For my own part, I felt excessively indignant too; and so, I think, would Marmaduke have done, had he not been preoccupied with his own thoughts. Lucy blushed, and cast down her eyes. Her father quietly observed, "Mr. Townshend may have been somewhat plain-spoken, but what he has said is common sense. If you will be good enough to leave your address at Nutgall with us, sir, we shall communicate with you as soon as we have convinced ourselves of the truth of your suspicions; and then we shall not only have compensation but apologies to offer you."

"Very good, sir," rejoined the visitor coolly. "My address is upon that card. If I had known the sort of reception that awaited me here, I should not perhaps have been so anxious to do my duty. Gentlemen, I wish you good-day. I am sorry to have interrupted your repast."

"Don't mention it, my good sir," observed the Bow Street runner, as he disposed of his third slice of ham. "I have treated you as no stranger, I assure you."

To this sarcasm the visitor made no reply, but bowing to the rest of the company, was about to withdraw with polite severity, when Mr. Long stepped forward, and took him by the hand. "I believe you are a kindly-hearted man," cried he, "who has been grievously wronged by those whom you have attempted to benefit; but in any case, it cannot do you any harm to have shaken hands with an honest man, and one who is a humble minister of the gospel."

I could have jumped up and shaken hands with the stranger also, but a false shame prevented me. I thought that Townshend was only waiting for the poor fellow to go to become contemptuously cynical upon those who had shown any belief in him. The Bow Street runner, however, said never a word, but proceeded with his interminable breakfast.

Mr. Long was speechless with indignation. I saw Lucy Gerard cast an approving glance at my excellent tutor, and then an imploring one towards her father, who was biting his lips, as if to restrain his laughter.

At last, the rector broke silence. "I gather from what you have stated, Mr. Townshend, that you will scarcely consider it worth while to go down to Nutgall, or make any further inquiry into the circumstances of which you have just heard."

"It will certainly not be worth *my* while," returned the Bow Street runner curtly.

"Then I shall go down into Cambridgeshire myself," observed my tutor.

"Very good, sir. If time were less valuable to me, it would give me a great deal of pleasure to accompany you."

"My dear Peter," remarked my tutor, taking no notice of this wicked banter, "what do you say to coming with me?"

Even if I had been less disposed to do this than I was, I should still have readily consented to be the rector's travelling companion, for to refuse would have been to declare myself upon the enemy's side.

Accordingly, we set off upon this amateur detective expedition that very day; and on the following evening returned to Harley Street, having possessed ourselves of this important information: That benevolence is sometimes assumed for the base purpose of making a few shillings, and that advertisements are occasionally taken advantage of to the confusion of those who insert them. There was really a village called Nutgall; that was the one fact that the respectable person in half-mourning had brought along with his black leather bag and silk umbrella. There was not a public-house in the place where Sir Massingberd could have procured that bottle and a half of French brandy, had he been ever so disposed to dissipation, or even where we ourselves could get bread and cheese.

I verily believe, at the time of his disenchantment, my revered tutor would rather that the baronet had been really at Nutgall, and in the humour and condition to wage implacable war against poor Marmaduke, than have given such an opportunity of triumph to the man of Bow Street.

CHAPTER XIII.

BETTER THAN A BLUNDERBUSS.

It was the Runner's custom to call at Mr. Gerard's every evening, no matter how often he might

have been there during the day, in order to report progress, or that there was none; and when his knock at the front-door was heard, I perceived the rector wince upon his chair, like one who has been roasted a little already, and expects to be before the fire again immediately. Mr. Townshend, however, did not even so much as allude to our Will-o'-the-Wisp pursuit, cautioned, perhaps, not to do so by our host, or besought by his daughter, as I fancy. I do not think that the gravity of the intelligence he brought with him would, of itself, have blunted Mr. Townshend's appetite for acrimonious jesting, which was insatiable; and, indeed, the issues of Death or Life, and of Lost or Found, formed so much the ordinary business of his life, that any discovery, no matter of what nature, disturbed him as little as finding a gentleman with his head off disturbs the King of Dahomey.

"Well, Mr. Long, I am glad to see you back again," said he; "you are the very man I want. Does a farmer of the name of Arabel happen to reside in or near your parish?"

"He lives at Fairburn, within a stone's throw——"

"You will never make a Bow Street runner," interrupted Mr. Townshend, shaking his head.

"Well, then," continued my tutor good-humouredly, "if accuracy is so essential, I will say within half a mile and a few yards of my own Rectory."

"That is better, sir," returned the detective gravely. "And what sort of a character do you consider this man to bear?"

"Mr. Arabel is an honest man and a good churchman," replied the rector positively; "and but for a little occasional excess——"

"A drunkard, eh?" observed the Bow Street officer, briskly.

"No, certainly not, Mr. Townshend. He takes too much liquor now and then, I believe; but, I regret to say it, there are few more sober persons in my parish than Richard Arabel."

"Indeed," observed the other reflectively; "and yet he was the man who paid No. 82979 to Mr. Vanderseld, who trades in grain. I have heard from Hamburg, and have traced the note back again to Fairburn. I start for that place this evening by post-chaise; and if you or Mr. Meredith want a lift, I shall be happy to take one or both of you along with me."

This intelligence astonished us all immensely, and my tutor and myself, who knew the farmer, more than the rest. Such news would have been itself sufficient to have taken the rector home at once; besides, he was not only anxious, as usual, to get back to his own parish, but somewhat grudged our long-continued absence and intellectual holiday. There did not seem, too, to be any sort of necessity for my remaining longer with Marmaduke, who had found, it was impossible to doubt, a companion far more capable of upholding and encouraging him than I. The Bow Street runner's offer was therefore accepted by both of us; and in a few hours we took our seats in the same vehicle for Midshire. The chaise was as roomy a one as could be procured, but still, as there was but one seat, I had to assume the position of "bodkin" between my two companions. Their conversation was at first entirely confined to the subject of our expedition, namely, Farmer Arabel, concerning whom the detective expressed his suspicions the more darkly, the more extravagantly he was eulogized by Mr. Long. So vehement was their dispute, that I did not like to interrupt it for a considerable period, during which I endured great inconvenience from sitting upon a substance at once both sharp and hard, contained in one of Mr. Townshend's pockets. If he had been a lady of the present day, I should have known what it was, and perhaps have modestly suffered on without remonstrance; but since he was not of the softer sex, and certainly did not wear crinoline, I ventured to ask what it was which inflicted such torture.

"I beg your pardon, young gentleman," observed the Bow Street runner, removing the article objected to; "you was only sitting upon a pair of bracelets with which I may have perhaps to present Mr. Richard Arabel."

"You don't mean to say that you carry handcuffs in your pocket!" observed my tutor, with a shudder of disgust.

"I mean to say I do, and should as soon think of moving about without 'em, as without my hat and breeches," returned the runner, with a coolness that froze us both into a protracted silence.

The rain fell heavily, as the night drew on, and dashed against the streaming panes with fitful violence. The wind and wet poured in together whenever the window was put down to pay the postboys. I pitied the poor fellows, exposed to such weather, and was glad to see that Mr. Townshend paid them liberally. "There are no persons who are more open-handed travellers than your Bow Street runners," observed Mr. Long, when I remarked to him upon this circumstance in the absence of our friend, who had stepped out while we were changing horses somewhere, for brandy and water; "and the reason of their generosity is this, that other people have to pay for it." I had never heard my tutor utter so severe a speech, and I gathered from it that his indignation against our fellow-wayfarer was as poignant as ever; and yet within half an hour it was fated that all his resentment should be neutralized by gratitude, leaving a large margin of the latter sentiment over and above.

The next stage was over a desolate, treeless heath, where the elements had their own way against us more than ever, and our vehicle seemed actually to shrink and shudder from the force of their onslaught. All of a sudden, I was thrown forward against the opposite window by the

stoppage of the postchaise. At first I thought a horse had fallen; but immediately afterwards the window next to Mr. Long was violently pushed down from without, and a something black and small, which was a pistol, was protruded into the carriage.

"Your money or your life! Come, be quick, curse you, and don't keep gentlemen waiting in the wet," said a rough voice. "Be quick, I say." A volley of oaths accompanied this unpleasant request.

"I have only a couple of guineas with me," cried Mr. Long, quietly, "and you will not make it more by swearing."

"That's a lie!" remarked the voice very uncivilly, "for you're a parson, you are, and they've always money enough. Ain't he a parson, postboy? Didn't you say so, when I asked you who you'd got inside there? Come here, won't yer?"

At these words, one of the wretched postboys, shivering and dripping, came forward to the window, and stammered out, "Really, gentlemen, I couldn't help it; he swore as he'd blow out my brains, if I didn't tell; so I told him as one was a clergyman, I believed, but the other two——"

"My name is Townshend," interrupted the Bow Street runner, with great distinctness. "If you had happened to know that, boy, and had informed these gentlemen of the circumstance, I am sure they would never have stopped us, unless, indeed, it was to inquire after my health." At the same time he thrust his broad face out of the window into the light thrown by a lantern carried by one of the robbers; for there were several dim forms on horseback, as I could now perceive. If a blunderbuss had been exhibited instead, it could not have caused one-half of the panic which the sight of his features occasioned; each robber turned his back at once, as though to prevent the recognition being mutual, and spurred away into the darkness, leaving nothing but the dismounted postboy to evidence that they were not mere phantoms of the night.

"Get to your saddle, and make you up for lost time," said the Runner sternly; and when this mandate had been obeyed, and we were once more on our way, he added, "That postboy sold us; I saw him whispering to a man on horseback in the inn-yard while I was taking some drink in the back-parlour; he was never asked any question when the chaise was stopped. That was Jerry Atherton, too, who put his shooting-iron in at that window; I should know his voice though a mob were shouting with him. A man who wishes to do something of which the consequences are so very serious, should not only wear crape, but keep his mouth shut."

"We have to thank you very much, I am sure," said Mr. Long. "It was a great providence for us that you were with us."

"Very likely, sir," returned Mr. Townshend, grimly; "but not for Jerry, nor yet for the postboy."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FALSE SCENT.

I am now drawing near the end of this strange eventful narrative, and my readers will learn in a chapter or two what has in reality become of Lost Sir Massingberd: whether he lies dead in Fairburn Chase, notwithstanding that strict search of ours, or somewhere else, conveyed by foemen's hands; or if, alive, he keeps in hiding nigh, for some evil end, or has even left British soil for a time, to return, according to his threat, on a day when he is least expected. If his real whereabouts and true position have been guessed, then is he who hit upon it a wiser man, not only than I was at that time (which might easily be), but wiser than that genius of Bow Street, whose eye was reported to see further into very millstones than any man alive of his time. He arrived at Fairburn with his handcuffs and his suspicions, and would, I verily believe, have made me his stalking-horse whereby to come down upon the guileless Farmer Arabel, and extract what might be tantamount to a confession.

"You know him, Mr. Meredith," he had observed to me in his frankest tone, as we walked out together after breakfast, on the morning after our arrival; "and I look to you to make the matter easy. We will step over to the farm at once, if you please, and have a glass of home-brewed with the good man, when, I dare say, he will tell us what we want to know, and exculpate himself at the same time."

"Mr. Townshend," I replied, gravely, "I have been made a catspaw of already, within a few weeks, and until the remembrance of that event has worn off very considerably, I shall not act that part again."

"Very good, sir," responded the Runner, cheerfully. "I only thought, that being a well-wisher to the person in question, you might have made the thing less unpleasant for him. If you went with me, introducing me as a gentleman from London, anxious to see good farming, for instance—that 'ud tickle him—I could bring the subject of the note into conversation; then, if he explained to my satisfaction, as he will doubtless be able to do, how he got possession of it, it will not be necessary to inquire further. He need never know as a police-officer had been down here with darbies in his pocket, upon the chance of having to fit them on his wrists upon the charge of Wilful Murder."

"There is certainly something in that," said I, musingly.

"There is everything in it," returned Mr. Townshend, stepping carelessly over the stile, on the other side of which ran the pathway to Mr. Arabel's residence. "The idea of this man's guilt being, as you say, quite preposterous, it would only be a kindness on your part to spare his feelings. That's a fine stout old fellow looking at those men at work in yonder field, a sort of man that carries his years better than one sees people do in London: I should say, now, that might be the farmer himself."

"Really," said I, stopping short, "I think you had better do this business of yours alone, Mr. Townshend. I have eaten and drunk in Mr. Arabel's house, and to be concerned in any such errand as this seems but a poor return for his hospitality."

"Ah, it *is* him, is it? Very good, sir. Well, you may just please yourself as to accompanying me now. When I have once set eyes on my man it is not my habit to lose sight of him. Still, you might have made it easier—for *him*, that is. It is no matter to me whether the thing is done soft or hard." And the Bow Street runner stepped along as he spoke, like a diligent man who sees his work cut out before him.

After a moment's indecision, I followed upon Mr. Townshend's heels.

"That's right, young gentleman," observed he, approvingly, but without even turning his head. "Those is turnips, I suppose, and very good they are with capers and a leg of mutton; as to wheat, I am not acquainted with it, at least, so as to know it from oats and barley, unless when it's in ear. Agriculture is one of them things to which I have not yet given my attention; but I means to do so, and I have come here for wrinkles concerning it, remember that, if you please."

"Very well," said I, sheepishly, for I was obliged to confess to myself that Mr. Townshend had got the better of me; and in a few more strides we had got within earshot of the farmer. This was not indeed very near, but Mr. Arabel had excellent lungs, and bade me welcome as soon as he had recognized me.

"Glad to see you, as likewise any friend of yours, Master Meredith. So the rector is back, I hear; and the wise folks in London can tell no more what has become of Sir Massingberd than we poor folks."

"No, Mr. Arabel, they cannot; on the contrary," said I, determined that there should be no hypocrisy upon my part at least, "here is one of them, who is come down to Fairburn for information, and relies upon you to give it to him too."

"I should like to know when you saw Sir Massingberd last," observed the Bow Street runner quietly, "and under what circumstances?"

"That is soon told," returned the farmer simply; "but perhaps you would rather step in out of the cold, and take a drop of something while you hear it."

"No, I thank you," said I, firmly, determined that the laws of hospitality should not be thus infringed with my consent, "I must return to the Rectory at once."

"Then I will walk with you," observed the farmer civilly, "and tell you all I know in a few words. The fact is, the squire and I had not been on good terms for a length of time before his disappearance. He was a bad landlord, and did not know how to behave to a tenant as would have done his duty by him. He wanted his own rent paid to the day, and never had to ask it from me, for that matter; but when he owed a little money himself, it was dreadful hard to get it out of him. There happened to be something due from him to me—it was a small matter, made up of little things—corn for that horse he bought for Master Marmaduke, among others, but the thing had been owing for a year or more. I had not deducted it from the rent, and therefore he ought to have been the readier to pay it; but he was not; and at last I cut up rough about it, and went to the Hall myself on the 15th of last month, and then we rather fell out together, the Squire and me."

"You quarrelled, did you?" remarked Mr. Townshend, carelessly.

"Well, yes, we did quarrel; leastways, *I* did. Sir Massingberd always quarrelled with whoever asked him for payment, so that was nothing. I said that I would not leave the house without the money; but at last I did leave upon his solemn promise to pay me the next day, that was the very day of his disappearance, and he did pay me, with as many oaths as one-pound notes into the bargain."

"He paid you these on the 15th of November, then," observed the detective.

"On the 16th," replied the farmer. "I've got a memorandum of it in my pocket-book; here it is, and the number of the notes 82977 to 80; there was four in all."

"And those notes you sent to your London agent along with more, and you got some foreign stuff back from Hamburg in exchange for them."

"And how the deuce come you to know that?" exclaimed the farmer in extreme astonishment.

"Well, it is my business to know a good many things," returned the Bow Street runner, getting over the stile rather sulkily, for he was well aware by this time that there would be no employment for his favourite bracelets.

"Well, that may be your friend's business," quoth Mr. Arabel, looking after his retreating form, "but I'm gormed if he looks like it. I should have said he was an individual in the same line as myself, only fatter, and though I say it as shouldn't say it, a sight more foolish."

"Nay," said I, "he is not a foolish man, Mr. Arabel, far from it; although I think he has come down to Fairburn upon a fool's errand."

CHAPTER XV.

"LET IT BE PETER'S GODCHILD."

I have said that I am approaching the conclusion of this my story, and so in truth I am, so far as the readers thereof are concerned in it. They will soon be put in possession of its secret, and close this volume, not altogether without regret, as I hope. But for me, and those who played their parts in this drama of mystery, months and years went by without the least clue to its solution. Fairburn Hall remained without a master, although not untenanted. The same servants occupied it as before, and expected, although with less and less of certainty, that the Squire would presently return and claim his own again. The principal rooms, as was stated, had been locked up and sealed ever since his disappearance, and the very neighbourhood of their doors had begun to be avoided after dark. Noises were affirmed to have been heard in them, both canine and human—doubtless the ghostly talk held between Grimjaw and Sir Massingberd, who had now no longer any reason for silence concerning that evil deed in which they had been concerned together so long ago. The baronet's voice was also heard in the Park and Chase, especially upon windy nights, cursing and threatening in a very vehement and life-like manner, so that his preserves were almost as well protected by the terror of his absence as they had been by that of his presence. Reckless, indeed, must have been the poacher who wired hares or slaughtered pheasants in the Home Spinney, where the dread Sir Massingberd must have met with his end, or been spirited away, no man knew how or whither. Had it not been for this superstitious awe, Oliver Bradford would have found it difficult to guard his master's game, for the old keeper, crippled with age and rheumatism, could no longer watch o' nights himself, nor could he easily induce his subordinates to do so, unless in pairs. They, too, had little liking to be alone in the Home Spinney after dusk, nor near the Wolsey Oak, which of late years had had certain portentous tenants in the shape of the two ravens, which were for ever flying to and fro between it and their lodging in the church tower. The old ancestral saying—

"Ill for Heaths when raven's croak
Bodeful comes from Wolsey's Oak"—

was remembered and repeated by the old folks of Fairburn to the rising generation with many a solemn head-shake and significant pursing of the lips. Yet, oddly enough, the general opinion, even of these ancient gossips, was, that Sir Massingberd was yet alive. The misfortune prophesied by the ravens was held to concern the family, or, in other words, young Marmaduke, rather than his uncle. If the behaviour of these intelligent birds proclaimed that the Squire was dead, they deserved rather to be held as doves of good tidings than what they were. No; Sir Massingberd was alive, and would turn up some day or other, wickeder than ever. His return was as confidently looked for by many of his vassals, as that of Barbarossa was wont to be.

This was not, of course, the case with reasonable persons, like Mr. Long, and, I may add, myself. When a twelvemonth had elapsed since his disappearance, we both entreated Marmaduke to come down to Fairburn, and take possession of what might fairly be considered his own. Mr. Gerard and Mr. Clint were equally anxious that he should do this, but all persuasion was unavailing. The most that could be extracted from him was the promise that, when he came of age, a year and a half hence, he would do as we pleased. It seemed to us, indeed, the height of improbability that his uncle should still be in the land of the living; it seemed so to the money-lenders, who showed themselves anxious to accommodate the young man with enormous loans at a very trifling rate of interest; but to the heir himself it by no means appeared so certain. There was something characteristic, he thought, of his terrible uncle in this mysterious withdrawal from human ken, with the fiendish object of throwing everything out of gear for years, and thus striking terror by his sudden reappearance. If he did reappear and found another—and that one his hated nephew—in the enjoyment of his property, how diabolical would be his wrath! There was often quite a sublimity of passion evinced by the old baronet upon very slight occasions; but all such displays, compared to what would happen in the case supposed, would have been but as a cavalry inspection at the Curragh to the Balaklava charge. Such were the thoughts, I am convinced, which actuated Marmaduke, although he did not express them. He confined himself to stating that he did not consider he had a right to take possession of Fairburn until the time he mentioned had elapsed (nor, indeed, was he legally entitled to do so for seven years), and I doubt if he would have given even that promise, had he not felt sure that some revelation would be made in the meantime.

But no such revelation *was* made, and the day of Marmaduke Heath's majority came round at last. Whether he would even then have put his purpose of coming down to Fairburn into effect, had it depended solely upon himself, I cannot say, but he had by that time other interests to consult beside his own. Marmaduke Heath and Lucy Gerard were man and wife; nor, if you had sought all England through, would you have chanced upon a nobler-looking couple. At that

period, although it was not so afterwards, the dependence, the reliance, the looking up for comfort and for counsel, so natural and so endearing in wedded life, were upon the wrong side—upon Marmaduke's, not Lucy's. All that was done in respect to his affairs was done by her; he only thought about doing them, and resisted their being done until the very last, when, all other means having failed, her sweet voice was called in by the councillors for his good, and always succeeded. In one matter only had Marmaduke refused even to listen to her—he had insisted upon raising a very large sum upon his now excellent expectations, and settling it upon her before his marriage. In vain he had been assured that such a settlement was unnecessary, and the interest he would have to pay for the money borrowed, absolutely thrown away. The young man had his way in this; and on the day after the execution of the deed in question they were married. I had determined within myself not to be present at that wedding, in spite of a very pressing invitation, and although Mr. Long himself attended it.

"What, not go to see Marmaduke married?" cried my tutor, when I told him of this intention. I call him still by that name, although he was at this time merely my host, with whom I was stopping during one of my Oxford vacations. "Why, Meredith, you astonish me beyond measure. I am sure that neither of them will think I have rightly married them, unless you are there to be bridegroom's man. Why, Lucy Gerard loves you, Peter, almost as much as she does Marmaduke himself; while Mr. Gerard, between you and me, would, I think, have preferred—" Then I broke down all of a sudden, and laid my face between my hands upon the table, and sobbed like a child.

"Peter, Peter, my dear boy," exclaimed the Rector, laying his fingers—ah, so pitifully—upon my head; "I had not dreamed of this. Poor lad, poor lad, God comfort you and strengthen you; I feel for you as though you were my very own son. What blind worms must we have been not to have seen this before; or, rather, how bravely must you have hidden it from us all! She doesn't know it, does she? I trust not. Then let her never know it, Peter. I do not speak of others, for your feelings deserve to be considered as much, and more, dear lad. But, oh, think of hers. What bitterness will mingle with her cup of happiness upon that day, when she feels that you are absent from such a cause—for she will guess the cause at once, Peter."

"I will be ill," groaned I. "Heaven knows that I shall feel ill enough, and that shall be my excuse."

"And do you think Marmaduke would marry, knowing that his best friend lies ill and alone here? He would never do that. They would feel, I hope, too, that if it were so, I should not have left you. No, Peter; you have been very strong hitherto—be strong unto the end. Let her never know that you have suffered and are suffering now for her sweet sake."

"I will do what you think is best, dear old friend," said I; "but please to leave me by myself a little just now."

And he did so; and I battled with my own heart and subdued it, and when Marmaduke and Lucy were married I was present.

"My dear Peter, your hand is as cold as a stone!" exclaimed the bridegroom, when he wished me "Good-bye" that day. But Lucy said nothing, save "Good-bye, Peter;" and even to that I could not reply. They were very happy, those two, as indeed they deserved to be. Whatever was wanting at that time in him, her good sense supplied; while in her, neither then nor afterwards, was there anything wanting. She had sympathized as much as lay in her power in the tastes and opinions of her father; she had had a bringing-up which, in these days, would have at least resulted in what is called a strong-minded woman, rather as opposed to a gentle one. This could scarcely, indeed, have been the case with Lucy, but her marriage with Marmaduke made it impossible. Her mind had heretofore been, as it were, all orchard, bringing forth fine and vigorous fruit; a portion of it now became a garden, producing flowers dainty and rare. Her teacher being also her lover, it was no wonder that her progress was rapid; and it is probable that the young student had never found his studies so sweet as when communicating them to such a pupil. From her father, she had learned philosophy; from her husband, how to appreciate all that was beautiful in Nature and touching in Song. As for her politics, Marmaduke was infinitely more solicitous to imbue her with correct views respecting the poets, which, perhaps, was fortunate enough. She would never have admitted, even to please him, that her beloved, father was wrong, or even extreme in his views of government; and, in truth, those opinions of hers—so enthusiastic, so trustful, and founded upon the mistake of believing all her fellow-creatures as guileless as herself—gave her conversation, an added charm. To hear her talk of wrongs and rights, with heightened colour and earnest eyes—no matter how elevated the rank of the person addressed, nor how nearly connected with the very executive of whose acts she was complaining—was enough to make a bishop exchange his mitre for a white hat, and adopt the Thirty-nine Articles recommended by Mr. Hone.

"Judge Jeffreys himself could never have had the heart to condemn my Lucy for a rebel," Mr. Harvey Gerard was wont to say; "although," he would add, with a cynical twinkle in his eye, "I would not trust my Lord Ellenborough."

Mr. Long and myself were both in Harley Street upon the day when Marmaduke came of age; and after dinner, Mr. Clint made a little speech, not without connivance, I think, beforehand with others of the party. He observed, that gratifying as was the occasion in question in all respects, it was most satisfactory to himself, as concluding the period which Marmaduke had assigned as the limit of his abstaining from taking his rightful position in the world. He ventured to say this much upon his own part, as having been connected with the Heath family for a lengthened period; but he would also say for others—what he knew they would be backward to say for themselves—that his young friend owed it to them also not to delay the matter any longer.

Marmaduke's face expressed more painful agitation than I had seen it wear for months. "I suppose you are right, Mr. Clint," he returned; "and, at all events, I will be as good as my word, which I passed to Mrs. Heath," and he looked at his wife, as though he would have appealed to her to release him from that promise.

"Of course, I am right, sir," returned the lawyer quickly; "but you are wrong and very uncivil not to give your wife her proper title. Lady Heath, I beg to drink your very good health; Sir Marmaduke, here's to your better manners;" and the lawyer emptied his glass, and filled it up again, in case any other excuse should arise for the drinking of good liquor.

"Lady Heath's health; her husband's better manners," echoed laughingly round the table.

Marmaduke nerved himself by a strong effort, and replied to this toast with feeling and eloquence. He promised to accede to the request made by Mr. Clint, and to that end would return with us to Fairburn on the next day but one to make his arrangements personally for coming to reside at the Hall. As for his not having assumed the title, he protested, amidst merriment, that he had not hitherto done so, solely out of deference to the feelings of his father-in-law, whom he had once heard describe a baronet as a something only not quite so bad as a lord.

We were all delighted not only with the intentions Marmaduke thus expressed, but with the cheerfulness and gaiety of his manner in speaking of them; and when the rest had retired for the night, and my old friend and I were in my room having that last chat by the midnight fire which is perhaps the zenith of human converse, as the curtain lecture is undoubtedly the nadir, I could not help congratulating him on his change of spirits. "That you are a happy man, I know," said I; "you would be ungrateful indeed if you were otherwise. But I cannot say how pleased I am to find that the good Genius, who has so blessed you in other respects, has exorcised this phantom fear of yours; that you no longer dread that childish bugbear, Sir Massingberd."

"Hush!" cried he, looking involuntarily over his shoulder; "do not mention that name, Peter. I would gladly give up house and land this moment, never to go back to Fairburn; I have a presentiment that evil will come of it. She would absolve me from my promise even now—Heaven bless her, as it must do, for she is of the angels!—but that there will be another soon whose interests must be looked to as well as our own. You will be godfather, dear Peter, will you not? Lucy and I both wish it. 'Let it be Peter's godchild, Marmaduke,' she said to me only yesterday, although I should not divulge these secrets to an old bachelor like you."

Of course, I promised readily enough, but long after he had bidden me good-night, I sat over the paling embers, thinking, thinking; and when every coal was charred, and the black bars cold that held them, I sat thinking still. My hopes, for a few fleeting hours, long ago, had been as bright and warm as they, and were now as dark—and dead.

CHAPTER XVI.

TAKING THE SEALS OFF.

Marmaduke Heath came down to Fairburn according to his promise, but it cost him a great effort. With every stage his spirits seemed to fall and fail; and when Mrs. Myrtle at last clasped him in her arms—for Master Marmaduke was ever a great favourite of hers, and the fact of his having grown up and got married weighed with her not a feather—his wan face was paler than when she had seen it last, notwithstanding its three years of happiness and freedom. It was Christmas-time; the Rectory was a bower of ivy and holly-berries; and just within the threshold, the locality which the good housekeeper had chosen for her embrace, hung a huge bough of mistletoe, the finest that could be found in all the Chase. In the spotless kitchen, so exquisitely clean that you might, as the phrase goes, "have eaten your dinner off the floor," if it had not happened to have been a sanded one, there were preparations for sumptuous feasting; a delightful fragrance, suggestive of mince-pies with plenty of citron, pervaded Mrs. Myrtle's private parlour, where the divine mysteries of Apicius were being celebrated. The little larder, cold and immaculate as a dead sucking-pig ready for the spit, was victualled with noble meats as for a siege; while monstrous pasties and plum-puddings, too many for the broad stone slabs, reposed upon the Dutch tiles that formed its carpet. It was not intended that the inhabitants of the Rectory should eat all the good things themselves; but it was a custom of Mr. Long, aided and abetted by Mrs. Myrtle, to keep open house for about a fortnight at this festive period, and to entertain certain worthy persons, who were old and indigent, in the sanded kitchen daily. Attempts to edify the poor in those days were not made so often as they are at present, but it was held essential by all good Christian country folk to keep Christmas as a feast, and to see that others kept it. I suppose Fairburn Hall was the only house in the county where that blessed time was ignored and taken no account of; Sir Massingberd had never suffered the slightest honour to be paid to it; and his worthy deputy and *locum-tenens*, Richard Gilmore, treated it with the like contumely.

The change from the bright little Rectory, with all its hospitable preparations, to the gloomy grandeur of the masterless mansion, was very striking, when we three crossed the road next morning, to take the seals off, which Mr. Long had placed upon the principal rooms, and so, as it were, to break the blockade caused by the baronet's disappearance. The contrast began even

with things without. Half one of the globes had been sliced from its pedestal on one side of the great iron gates; and in the very centre of the avenue, the grass grew long and rank. The sun-dial was cracked and gaped in zigzag, an emblem of the uncertainty that overhung the place. The heraldic beasts at the foot of the entrance-steps were much more mutilated than when I had seen them last, and had indeed only one stone fore-paw or claw between them. Disuse is sister to Abuse, but still how comes it that mere absence should beget, as it always does, such absolute Ruin? Had the Squire been at home the last three years, the globe upon the pedestal would have been whole, the dial flawless, the griffins with at least their larger limbs intact; and yet no man was ever seen to work this mischief. When the great door swung reluctantly back to admit the new possessor, he took my hand, and bade me Welcome, but his tone was far from gay. Every glance he cast around him evoked, I could see, some unpleasant association, and even, perhaps, a vague terror.

There is something uncanny in exploring any dwelling the rooms of which have been locked up and unvisited for years—places that have been once consecrated to humanity, but have afterwards been given up to Solitude and slow decay. Memories of their ancient inmates seem to hang gloomily about them, like the cobweb in their corners; they are eloquent of desertion and of death. The shriek of the mouse, and the singing of the blue fly in the pane, have perhaps alone been heard there in the interim; but there seem to have been other and ghostlier noises, which cease at our approach. Who knows what eerie deeds our sudden intrusion may have interrupted!

"What faces glimmered through the doors,
What footsteps trod the upper floors,"

ere we broke in! The peculiar circumstances under which our search was made intensified these feelings in us three, and even Gilmore, who accompanied us, was affected by them.

"O'er all there hung the shadow of a fear;
A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,
And said, as plain as whisper in the ear,
This place is *worse* than haunted."

The library was the first room we entered, which, even in the palmiest days of Fairburn Hall had been a dreary room, because the least in use. Except Marmaduke himself, no one ever sat there; the wicked books, which were the only sort read and patronized by Sir Massingberd, were all in the Squire's private sitting-room, and the gaps in the shelves that lined the present apartment, revealed that the Heaths had laid in a considerable stock of them. Old Sir Wentworth, a miser in his old age, had been a dunce in his youth, and was once heard openly to regret that circumstance from the fact, that he was unable to peruse the loose continental literature which his ancestors had provided for his delectation, free of expense. In the rare cases when the Oak Parlour had not sufficient accommodation for the guests of the missing Squire, they had been wont to adjourn to the present apartment, to smoke and lounge through half the night; but it bore no trace of having been so used. Every chair and sofa were in their appointed place, as though they had grown up like trees through the dusty carpet. Upon the tables and mantelpieces, the dust had settled inches thick. The grate was laid ready for lighting; but over the coals and sticks hung a sort of mildew, that looked as if it would have defied a pine-torch to set light to it. These things we remarked gradually, one by one, for the butler had only opened the shutters of one window, and the extent of the apartment was prodigious. The shelves were filled almost entirely with quartos—books were not hand-books in those days—rich with plates, and "meadows of margin;" you could not have sent a child on an errand to bring one of them; if he had managed to extricate a tome at all by painfully loosening it at head and foot, it might have fallen out and brained him. A fourth of the entire stock was composed of books of Catholic theology. "Those," observed Mr. Long, "are the most valuable things in the library. Sir Nicholas is supposed to have won his bride by paying that costly tribute to her faith. The illuminations are most rare and splendid. Why, what is this, Gilmore? I can't get this volume down. It seems stuck to the others."

The butler grinned maliciously. "I think you will find them all like that, sir. There's nothing but the wood-backs left. The Squire disposed of these books soon after Mr. Marmaduke left, and got this imitation stuff put up instead."

Mr. Long broke out into wrathful indignation, but the young heir kept silence, only smiling bitterly.

"Perhaps he was afraid that their heterodoxy might do his nephew harm," remarked I, rather tickled, I confess, by this characteristic fraud.

"No, sir," replied Gilmore, drily; "he merely observed, that, being theological works, there was as much in them now as before."

"Impious wretch!" exclaimed the Rector. "See, he has bartered the Fathers of the Church for a set of empty backgammon boards, and lettered them with their venerable names."

"Here, however, is the Family Bible," said I; "he has not sold that."

The spider had spun his web across the sacred volume, but it opened readily enough at the only place, perhaps, into which its late owner had ever looked—the huge yellow fly-leaf, upon which were inscribed the names of the later generations of the Heaths; Sir Massingberd's birth in his father's own handwriting, and Sir Wentworth's death in that of his son's, and only too probably his murderer's. The autograph was bold and flaring, quite different from the crabbed hand of the

parent, is which the names of Gilbert Heath and Marmaduke's mother were also written, as likewise that of Marmaduke himself. There was a little space beneath the last; and the young heir, looking over my shoulder, pointed to it, significantly; doubtless, it had been hoped by the last possessor of the volume that this might one day have been filled up by the date of his nephew's, demise.

We were about to leave the room, when Mr. Long suddenly exclaimed, "Nay, let us try the secret way. You told me, I remember, that you did not know of Jacob's ladder, Marmaduke. The spring lies in the index of Josephus, a wooden volume, which perhaps put this notion of wholesale 'dumbies' into Sir Massingberd's head." This practical satire upon the unpopularity of the Jewish historian was presently discovered, hidden away upon one of those ground-floor shelves, which, if the enthusiastic student investigates at all, it must be upon his knees. After a little manipulation, the spring obeyed, and with a surly creak, as if in protest, the whole compartment of shelves above moved slowly outward on some hidden hinge, and disclosed the narrow stairs that ended in the shepherdess of the state chamber. The steps were worm-eaten, and the wall on both sides hung with moth-devoured and ragged tapestry. Marmaduke shrank back, and gazed upon the aperture with abhorrence and dismay. To what vile purposes might it not have been used, besides that of attempting to overthrow a poor child's reason; nay, was it not possible that what we had sought, yet feared to find for so long, might be in this very place, where no eye could have looked or thought of looking! Might it not have hidden there, and been imprisoned alive in righteous retribution, by the very spring which had ministered to hate and cruelty? "I went up here," said Mr. Long, divining the young man's thoughts, "when I searched the house with Gilmore, and put on the seals. I think we should climb Jacob's ladder, Marmaduke; as you will make the Hall your home, it is well to leave no spot in it associated with any unpleasantness, unfamiliar." So saying, the rector led the way, and we all followed: there was some delay while he opened the door above, and certainly it was not a cheerful position for us in the meantime, cooped up in the darkness, with the arras touching us with its ghostly folds on either side the narrow way; but I think that my tutor's advice was good, and that his old pupil experienced a feeling of satisfaction when the thing was done. Once more we stood together in that state bedroom where Marmaduke had suffered such ghastly terrors when a boy.

"Shall I ever forget those nights!" muttered he with a shudder. "Can this room ever be otherwise than hateful to me! It was here, as I sat weak and ill in that arm-chair, that my uncle struck me for losing— Stay, now I remember it all. Remove this skirting-board, Gilmore; take the poker; do not spare the rotting wood. Ay, there it is." A yellow something lay amid the dust and rubbish, which on inspection turned out to be a gold pencil-case. "That was lent me by my uncle, a dozen years ago," said Marmaduke musing, "and he chastised me for losing it. It had rolled under yonder skirting-board, but I was too terrified at the time to recollect the fact. I wish I could forget things now. Undo the other shutters, Richard. Light, more light."

And thus we let the blessed sunlight into all the shuttered rooms. It glanced in galleries on knights in all their panoply, and smote the steel upon their visors, as though the flame of battle once more darted from their eyes; it made their tattered pennons blush again, and tipped their rusted spears with sudden fire. It flashed upon the stern ancestral faces on the wall, and through their dust evoked a look of life. That winter sun had not the power to warm, however; all things struck cold. The dark oak-pannels chilled us from their waveless depths; the cumbrous organ, carved with fruit and flowers, kept frozen silence; while in the chapel, Sir Nicholas in stone and mildew struck to our marrow. His lady opposite, upon her knees in her "devout oratory," gave us cold looks, as though we had interrupted her devotions. In vain the painted windows, high and triple arched, cast down "warm gules" upon her marble breast, and filled the sacred place with glorious hues. In vain the gilded scroll, "Praie for hys Soule," appealed to us through dust and damp, and his memorial pane blushed scarlet in its endeavour to perpetuate his infamy. All things seemed cursed in that accursed house; the hallowed places desecrated, and those where hospitality and good fellowship were meant to reign, solitary and barren. There was one apartment still which had been left by common consent to be visited last of all—Sir Massingberd's oak parlour. There he might have been said to have lived, for it was the only sitting-room he used from early morning—and he was no great sleeper—until very late at night. There, as we have seen, he had held his audiences, and dined, and sometimes slept after any deep debauch. By all the household, except Gilmore, it was held as a Bluebeard's chamber, and would not have been entered upon any account, even had it not had the rector's seal upon it. It was here that the lost baronet had passed his last hours within the house, and thither he had intended to return—if he had meant to return at all—before he retired for the night. The butler entered it first, and let the light in; then Mr. Long, then I, then Marmaduke. Although I had been there once before, I scarcely recognized the place, for upon that occasion the squire himself had occupied it, and I had had no eyes except for him. It was doubtless a comfortable room enough when the fire was shining on its polished walls, and the red curtains snugly drawn over the windows; but with that thin December light—for it was afternoon by this time—creeping coldly in upon the three-year-old ashes of the burnt-out fire, and on the panels, smeared with spots and stains, it was very cheerless:

"There was no sign of life, save one:
The subtle spider, that from overhead
Hung like a spy on human guilt and error,
Suddenly turned, and up its slender thread,
Ran with a nimble terror."

This insect had woven its webs in every nook and cranny, in readiness for the prey that rarely came, and the slanting pillars of motes and light that streamed into the gloom seemed almost as palpable as they. A door led up by three or four steps into Sir Massingberd's bedroom—a bare unfurnished place, where skins of wild animals, instead of carpet, were spread for a banquet to the moth. His shooting-boots stood up still stiff and strong beside the empty grate, although they were white with mildew, and his night-gear lay folded upon the rotting pillow, in preparation for his rest. The sitting-room, however, bore the more striking vestiges of its late proprietor.

The huge arm-chair stood a little aside from the fender, where he had pushed it back as he rose to leave the room; and the book which he had been reading lay open with its face to the table, ready for him to resume its perusal upon his return. A spirit-case with the stoppers in, the couple of cigars which it had been Sir Massingberd's invariable custom to smoke before going to bed, and a few fly-blown lumps of sugar, were set out in hideous travesty of creature-comfort. The rector took up the volume, and with one involuntary glance towards the fire-place, tore the wrinkled and blue-spotted leaves to fragments. A scurrilous French novel had engaged the last hours of the wretched old man, ere he went forth—to his doom.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FAIRY'S WAND.

There are but few of us, I fear, who can say: "Though I should die suddenly, and at the most unlooked-for time, there will be nothing left behind me which I would have destroyed, even though I had had the opportunity." Of course there are none who can boast that they are at peace with all mankind; that they leave nothing unrepented of or unatoned for; that their human affairs and social relations are exactly where they would have wished them to be. But independent of these matters, neglected by the very best of us, how eagerly must many a man desire, between the warning and swift stroke of death, that he had had but a little time—a little strength to set, not, indeed, his house in order, but his desk and his note-book. What a cruel shock have many a family received, after they have lost the Head whom they have worshipped so many years, by discovering, where they looked for no such thing, *after his death*, that he had all along (as will be thought) been even such a one—not as themselves, but worse—as they whom they had been taught by his own self to look upon with contempt, or at least with pity; as they who, by contrast with himself, were persons base and vile. Is there no letter, reader, ragged and time-worn, perhaps, but still legible, lying among that heap of correspondence you intend to winnow some day—which it will be better to burn *now*? Is there no half-forgotten gift, meant for your own eyes alone, when they were brighter than at present, which it would be well to make an end of this very day? Can you say: "Even though I do not return home to night, or ever again, but am smashed by a railway locomotive, or driven over by a 'bus, or poisoned in a cab, yet there will be nothing of mine, nothing when my friends take stock of my personal effects, of which I need be ashamed." If so, thou art a good man indeed—or one of exceeding prudence. Above all things, my friends, be good, for that is best; but if not, at least be prudent. Let your memories be sullied with no stain, at all events in the thoughts of those you leave at home. The actions of the unjust blossom in their dust into flowers compared with which the deadly nightshade is as the violet or the rose. The satirist tells us that in a week, a month, a year at most, the memory of a dead man dies even from the hearts of those he held most dear. This is not true; but the satirist would have been severer yet, and have spoken truth as well, had he said that the memory of a dead man, so far as his vice and wickedness are concerned, dies not at all among his kin. It is spoken of in whispers by the purest, and renders them less pure; it is made light of by the vicious, but only to excuse their wrongful acts by a worse example. "Wild as I may be, I am not so wild as the governor was in his day," is a terrible legacy of comfort to leave behind one to one's son.

It is possible that even Sir Massingberd Heath may at some far-back time have deemed it necessary to lay to his soul some flattering unction of this kind. There were Sir Wentworth and Sir Nicholas, and many a Heath to extenuate his acts, if bad example might do it. But the time came to him, and very early in life, when he had no longer this slender justification, since he had outdone his worse progenitor in vice and folly. Mr. Clint had known, Mr. Long had guessed—we all of us had suspected more or less that the lost baronet's life had been evil beyond that of an ordinary man; but the dumb revelations which were made concerning it in the necessary examination of his papers, were simply shocking. After destroying these, the next approach to cleansing Fairburn Hall was to discharge all the indoor domestics. Mr. Richard Gilmore resented this conduct towards a faithful servant of the family, as he styled himself, very bitterly; but he departed with the rest, laden, there is little doubt with a very considerable plunder. Presently the upholsterers came down from town with a great following of workpeople, and a caravan of waggons, bearing costly furniture; then a host of servants, selected with as much care as was possible, replaced the exiles; and when all was ready within and without—the waste places of the grounds being reclaimed, and put upon the same footing with those which hitherto had alone been "kept up"—Sir Marmaduke Heath and his wife themselves took possession of Fairburn Hall.

Art had already done much to change that sombre house into a comfortable as well as splendid mansion; but the presence of its new mistress did more than all to rescue it from the long tyranny of decay and gloom. Beneath her smile, the shadows of the past could take no shape, but vanished, thin and pale. She would allow them nowhere resting-place. Where they had been wont

to gather thickest to her husband's eyes, she quelled them by her radiant presence, day and night. The Oak Parlour and its adjoining bedroom; she formed into a double boudoir for her own sweet self; and straightway all bat-winged, harpy-headed memories, the brood of evil deeds, flew from it as the skirts of Night before the dawn, and in their place an angel-throng came fluttering in, and made it their abode. No stage-fairy, wand in hand, ever effected transformation-scene more charming and complete. One fear, and one alone, now agitated Marmaduke's heart, for the safety of his priceless wife in her approaching trial. He would have gladly cancelled nature's gracious promise, and lived childless all his days, rather than any risk should befall Lucy. His friends, his servants, and the villagers, brimful of hope that there should be an heir to Fairburn, flowed over in earnest congratulations; but for his part, he felt apprehensive only. His heart experienced no yearning for the child who might endanger the mother.

In accordance with her plan of ignoring all that had gone before of shame and sorrow, and regenerating evil places with a baptism of joy, Lady Heath had chosen the state chamber itself as her sleeping apartment, and there in due time she safely brought forth a son. Upon his knees, Marmaduke thanked Heaven for the blessing which was thus vouchsafed to him, but above all, in that it had brought with it no curse. Verily had the house of mourning become the house of feasting, and the chamber of sorrow the chamber of mirth.

The unconscious father had been sitting by the library fire, endeavouring vainly to distract his mind from what was occurring upstairs, and turning his eyes restlessly ever and anon towards the door, when the voice of Dr. Sitwell suddenly broke the silence.

"Sir Marmaduke, I congratulate you; you have a son and heir."

"And my wife?" cried the husband impatiently.

"She is as well as can possibly be expected, I do assure you."

"You are very welcome," exclaimed the young baronet; "and would have been so, although you had chosen to burst your way in with a torpedo. But I confess you startled me a good deal."

"I am afraid I did," returned the doctor, in a voice like a stream of milk and honey, "although it was not my intention to do so. But the fact is, I did not come in by the door at all. Her ladyship desired that I should bring you the good news by way of Jacob's Ladder; and I may add, that you may come back with me that way and see her yourself for just one quarter of a minute."

So even Jacob's Ladder was made a pleasant thoroughfare to Marmaduke, and dearer from that hour than all staircases of wood or stone.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOUND.

Now, when Marmaduke junior, who was named also Peter, to mark the regard which both its parents had for my poor self, became of the ripe age of fourteen weeks or so, and the spring had so far advanced upon the summer as to admit of open-air rejoicings, it was determined that the advent of the heir of Fairburn should be celebrated with all due honour. This would have been done before, for Lady Heath had soon recovered her strength, and the child was reported to be a miracle of health and plumpness, had it not been for the backwardness of the season. The Hall had, of course, made merry upon the matter long ago, and if all the poor in the place had not done so, it was from no want of materials in the way of creature-comfort supplied by the young Squire. But what Marmaduke had waited for was settled fine weather, in order that the Chase might be filled by merrymakers, whose happiness should cleanse it from all memories of woe and wrong. Much of these, it is true, had been effaced already; a portion of the Park had been given up to the villagers for cricket and other sports, a grant common enough now, but one almost unexampled in those days, and the right of way which Sir Massingberd had spent so many hundreds in opposing, had been voluntarily surrendered. Oliver Bradford still retained his office, but being almost bedridden, inspired less terror than of yore among evil-doers; this was not so much to be regretted, however, since there was now little want, and therefore few poachers in Fairburn, while the general popularity of the young Squire lessened even those. I am afraid that if the new owner had heard a gun discharged at night in the Home Spinney itself, it is doubtful whether he would have laid down his book, or hesitated more than usual in his vain attempt to checkmate his wife at chess, in order to listen for the second barrel. The terror of the Lost Baronet had long been fading from his old domain; and upon this occasion, when old and young were all invited to make holiday in those once almost unknown retreats of hare and deer, there was no urchin but was determined—by no means single-handed, however—to explore them thoroughly. The very Wolsey Oak which the ravens had made their quarters was not shunned, but in the great space about it, races were run, and dances danced, and its vast trunk was made the very headquarters of childish merriment. These young folks did not affect the company of their elders, except when the gongs gave signal from the various marquees that there was food afoot, when they flocked to meet their parents at the heaped-up boards with a dutiful celerity. The higher class of tenantry were upon the lawn, and among them mixed with stately condescension a goodly number of the county aristocracy. I remember that some of the latter introduced upon this occasion the new dance called the quadrille, which had just arrived from Paris at that time. It

had come over in the bad company of the waltz; but that lively measure was held to be too indecorous to be imported to Fairburn under its new *régime*. Everybody, when out of earshot of the host and hostess, was talking about the change that had taken place in this respect.

"How odd this all seems," quoth Squire Broadacres to his neighbour, Mr. Flinthert, heir of the late lamented admiral. "None of *us*, I suppose, have been at the Hall here for this quarter of a century."

"Ay, that at least," quoth the other. "Of course, it is a great matter to see people in the Heaths' position properly conducted as to morals. But I doubt whether this young fellow may not go astray in another and even a still more dangerous direction. They say his politics are, dear me, shocking."

"Not a bit of it," replied Mr. Broadacres. "It isn't in the Heath blood to be radical. But his wife, she rules the roost, you see—and a devilish pretty woman too; I could find it in my heart to forgive her anything."

"But that fellow, Harvey Gerard, her father—why, he's a downright *sans-culotte*, sir."

"The Gerards are bound to be, my dear sir," returned the jolly squire. "All these things are a question of family; it's nothing but that. I am told there is some French blood in him."

"We want nothing of that sort down in Midshire," responded Mr. Flinthert, shaking his head.

"But we have got it, you see, my friend, and therefore we must make the best of it. It was all very well to ignore Gerard while he was a new-comer at the Dovecot, although, mind you, he was always a gentleman, every inch of him, notwithstanding his queer opinions; but now that he is become so nearly connected with Sir Marmaduke, and living at the Hall half his time, why, the county must make up its mind to receive him."

"I shall let him perceive, however, that it does so—so far at least as I am concerned—upon sufferance, and, as it were—what is the word?—ay, vicariously."

"Very good," observed Mr. Broadacres, dryly. "I am not quite clear as to your meaning; but if you intend to put Harvey Gerard down, I do not think you will meet with any very triumphant success. Why, Sir Massingberd here, who would have grappled with the devil, was tripped up and thrown by this man with the greatest ease."

"Nevertheless, I shall give him the cold shoulder," observed Mr. Flinthert, stiffly; "although I shall studiously avoid being rude."

"Faith, I would recommend your doing that, my friend," laughed the jolly Squire. "If you turned your back upon Harvey Gerard instead of your shoulder, my belief is that he'd kick you."

"That he'd do what?" exclaimed Mr. Barnardistone Flinthert, late high-sheriff and present magistrate and *custos rotulorum* of Midshire.

"That he'd take advantage of the opportunity, that's all," returned Mr. Broadacres, quietly. "No, no, sir, with a man like Gerard, all good Tories should keep on good terms. One can't hang him, you know, like a radical tailor, and therefore it's quite worth while to make ourselves appear to the best advantage. A stupid slight to a clever man has often done more harm to the cause of good government than a whole regiment of dragoons can remedy."

"Oh curse his cleverness!" responded Mr. Flinthert, savagely. "I'm for no such milk-and-water measures. I think it's the duty of somebody to tell young Marmaduke——"

"Well, say it *yourself*," interrupted Mr. Broadacres.

"It's a positive duty, I say, that somebody should go to the baronet, and tell him frankly that all this leniency to poaching fellows, and liberty to the rabble, cannot but lead to harm. 'You're a young man,' he should be told, 'and don't understand these things; but that is the opinion of the county, and it behoves you to know it.'"

"That would do more harm than good, Mr. Flinthert. You may depend upon it that Marmaduke Heath thinks for himself in these matters, notwithstanding that I dare say Gerard and his pretty daughter have had some influence. The young fellow naturally goes exactly counter to all that his uncle did before him. This holiday-making and mixture of high and low here, are themselves enough to make Sir Massingberd turn in his grave."

"Ay, if he *is* in his grave," responded Mr. Flinthert, darkly. "But who knows whether he may not turn up some day after all; tell me that."

"I can't tell you that," responded Mr. Broadacres; "but I'll bet you ten guineas to one that he never does."

"Ay, but if he did!" replied the other, gloomily. "If he was to appear this very day, for instance, what a scene it would be—what a revolution for some people!"

"Well, if he did, he'd find the property greatly improved—except that that right of way has been reopened through the Park; all his thieving servants dismissed; all his debts settled; and his mad gipsy wife amply provided for, and well content, I am told, among her vagabond friends."

Conversations somewhat similar to the above were being held all over the lawn, for its denizens

were not, like the lower classes, so bent upon mere physical enjoyment as to be dead to the delights of scandal. But when the great bell rang for their afternoon repast, which was to be partaken of in one enormous tent, and at one gigantic table, the upper part of which was reserved for the gentlefolks, such talk was hushed, of course, and congratulations of host and hostess and the infant heir was the only wear for every countenance. Not a word about the uncertainty of Sir Marmaduke's tenure of Fairburn was whispered over the good cheer, or a suggestion hazarded regarding the last proprietor's possible reappearance. Far less, we may be certain, was any hint at such matters let fall when the health of the future Sir Peter—two generations from Somebody, and not to be associated with him upon any account—was proposed by Mr. Broadacres, and drunk with a genuine enthusiasm that brought the tears into his mother's eyes, who with many a fair county dame graced the banquet as spectators. Then Mr. Long rose up and spoke of Marmaduke as one whom he had known and loved from his youth up, and the cheering rose tumultuous (but especially at the tenants' table, because they knew him best), and was heard afar by the peasantry who were dining likewise elsewhere, and who joined in it uproariously, although they had already paid due honours to their lord; so that all the Park was filled with clamour. To both these toasts, Sir Marmaduke, aglow with happiness and excitement, the handsomest man by far in that great company, with a grateful smile upon his student lips, gave eloquent response.

But when Lucy's health was proposed by Mr. Arabel, who dwelt, in homely but fitting terms, upon her total lack of pride, her kindness to all that needed help, her beauty, which was sunshine to them all, then the young Squire lost his self-command. He rose to speak with evident embarrassment; he saw herself before him, watching him with eyes that had plenty of pride for *him* in them, and listening for his words as though his tongue dropped jewels; he knew that he could not contradict one word of praise that had been showered upon her, he could not mitigate in modesty a single phrase of her eulogium, because it was all true, and none but he knew how much more she was deserving of. "While he stood there silent for a moment, but radiant with lips just parting for his opening sentence, there was a commotion at the far end of the tent. With that mysterious swiftness wherewith ill news pervades the minds of men, all knew at once some terrible occurrence had taken place. Several of the tenants rose, as if to intercept some person coming up towards the upper table, but others cried, "Go on, it must be told." For an instant, Lucy's glance flashed round to see that her child was safe in its nurse's arms, then made her way swiftly and silently to her husband's side. Before she reached it, before the man who bore the tidings could get nearly so far, the whisper had gone round, "Sir Massingberd is found."

I shall never forget Marmaduke's face when he heard those words: his colour fled, his eyes wandered timidly hither and thither, his lips moved, but no sound came from them. At the touch of his wife's hand upon his arm, however, a new life seemed to be instilled into him, and as a village boy came forward bearing a rusty something in his hand, he stretched his hand out for it, murmuring, "What is this? Why do you bring this to me?" The boy was bashful, and gave no answer; but Farmer Arabel stepped forward very gravely, and spoke as follows:—

"Why, Mr. Marmaduke, you see," he said, unconsciously reserving the title for the man he had in his mind, "that is the life-preserver Sir Massingberd always went about with in his woods at night; I know it by the iron ring by which a leathern strap fastened it round his wrist. Where did you find it, eh, boy?"

"Well, sir, we was a-playing at Hide—me and Bill Jervis, and Harry Jones, and a lot of us—and the Wolsey Oak was Home. So while it was the other side's turn to hide, and we was waiting for them to cry "Whoop," we began to knife the tree a bit, to pass the time; and digging away at the bottom of the trunk, we made a hole, and presently came upon the head of this thing here, and dragged it out. Then we made a bigger hole, and please, sir, there was great big bones, and we couldn't pull them through. Then we was frightened, and called to Jem Meyrick, the keeper, as was in the booth close by; and he climbed up to the fork of the tree, and cried out that the Wolsey Oak was hollow, and there was a skeleton in it, standing up; and they do say as it's Sir Massingberd."

While the boy was yet speaking, a knot of men came slowly up from the direction of the Oak, bearing something among them, and followed at a little distance by a vast crowd, all keeping an awful silence. When they got near the opening of the tent, they set their ghastly burden down upon the lawn; and we all went forth to look at it, including Marmaduke himself, with a face as pale as ashes, and clutching Lucy by the hand, as though he feared some power was about to tear her from him. I heard her whisper to him, "This may not be Lost Sir Massingberd after all."

Dr. Sitwell heard her also, and at once officiously replied: "Oh, but it is, my lady; there has no man died in Fairburn for these thirty years, except the late baronet, who could have owned those bones. I will pledge my professional reputation that yonder man, when clothed in flesh and blood, was six feet four. What a large skull, and what gigantic thigh-bones!"

"Ay," quoth Mr. Remnant, the general dealer, who was kneeling down beside the skeleton and examining it with minuteness, as though it had been offered to him for sale, "here is something hard and dry, with iron nails upon it, which was once a shooting-shoe, one of a pair, or I am much mistaken, which I sold to Sir Massingberd myself."

"And, here," quoth Jem Meyrick, stepping forward, "is summat as I think must have been the Squire's great gold chain, which I found at the bottom of the trunk. The Wolsey Oak is quite hollow, Sir Marmaduke, although none of us knew it. It is my belief that Sir Massingberd must have climbed up into the fork to look about him, for he seemed to be expecting poachers on that night, and that the rotten wood gave way beneath him, and let him down feet foremost into the

trunk."

Without doubt, this was the true explanation of the matter. The skeleton was found with the arms above the head, a position which had precluded self-extrication, although it was evident that the wretched man had made great efforts to escape from his living tomb, since what remained of the shoe of the right foot was much turned up, and retained deep marks of the pressure of the buckle. As I looked at these relics of humanity, the gipsy's curse recurred to my mind with dreadful distinctness: "*May he perish, inch by inch, within reach of the aid that shall never come, ere the God of the poor take him into his hand.*"

It was a singular feature in the case, and one which was of course made to point its moral among the villagers, that had Sir Massingberd not closed the Park, and refused the right of way, he could scarcely have thus miserably perished, since the footpath, as I have said, absolutely skirted the tree in question; and people would have passed close by it at all hours. It reminded me of the evil fate of James I. of Scotland, who might have escaped his murderers in the Blackfriar's Abbey at Perth, but for the simple fact that he had caused the mouth of a certain vault to be bricked up, because his tennis-balls were wont to roll through it. How long the wretched Squire had suffered before Death released him from his fangs, it was impossible to guess, or whether that terrible cry heard by Dick Westlock that same night, and by myself next morning, was indeed from the throat of Sir Massingberd in his agony.

We were the two persons who had been nearest to the Wolsey Oak between the period of his entombment and the search instituted throughout the Chase. He must have been dead before *that*, for the seekers passed close beside the tree without the least suspicion of the ghastly Thing it held; unless, indeed, he had heard our voices, but, choked by that time: by the falling dry-rot, was unable to reply. No wonder the ravens had sought the Wolsey Oak and croaked forth Doom therefrom so long!

CHAPTER XIX.

L'ENVOI.

Weeks elapsed before Marmaduke Heath recovered from the shock of this discovery; but when he once began to do so, he grew up to be quite another man in body and mind.

It was only by this change—when we saw him so strong and cheerful—that we got to estimate how powerful had been that sombre influence which had so long overshadowed him, and what great exertion it must have cost him to let it appear to us so little. The uncertainty of his tenure in Fairburn Hall had secretly affected him very deeply, in spite of the wand of the good fairy. He went to France for a little trip with his father-in-law, for a thorough change, and there it was he had that duel thrust upon him of which we have incidentally made mention; let us not judge him harshly in that matter, for men of his day were as wanting in moral courage as they were ignorant of physical fear. Yet what a risk—ay, and what a selfish risk—he ran therein, let alone the unchristian wickedness of that wicked adventure!

He never dared to reveal to Lucy what he had done; but he confessed it to Harvey Gerard, who rebuked him roundly for the crime; observing, however, to myself, not without some pride, that he had always averred Marmaduke was a fine fellow, and entertained a proper contempt for all bullies and scoundrels. The young baronet acted weakly, doubtless; but the duellist's blood was surely upon his own head. At all events, that was the view Marmaduke himself took of the matter, and there was now not a happier man in all Midshire than he; discharging the duties of his rank and position in a manner that won the applause of all his neighbours, sooner or later—although Mr. Flinthert's applause came very late indeed.

Year after year, I was a frequent guest at Fairburn Hall, and never set foot in a house with inmates more blessed in one another. Year by year, Lucy seemed to grow in goodness, and even, as it seemed to me, in beauty. I saw her last with silver hair crowning her still unwrinkled brow; and since that day no fairer sight has met these failing eyes.

Death has long released the noble soul of Harvey Gerard, but his name is borne not unworthily by a grandson as fearless as himself, and after it the hard-won letters V.C. In a sunny spot in the little church-yard at Fairburn lies my dear old tutor—far from the iron rails which enclose the bones of the long-missing baronet.

Sir Peter...—But why should I further speak of death, and make parade of loss and change?—an old man like me should, having told his tale, be silent, and not court stranger ears to "gain the praise that comes to constancy."

The last time I saw Fairburn, it lay in sunshine. There was no trace of that bad man whose deeds once overshadowed it, save that in one great space, close to the public footway through the park, there was a vast bare ring, where grass, it was said, had never grown, although the Wolsey Oak, which had once stood above it, had been cut down for forty years and more.

The place was cursed, so village gossip told, by Lost Sir Massingberd. This may be true or not. My tale itself may be open to suspicion of untruth, and this and that, which have been therein

narrated, have already been pronounced "improbable," "impossible," "absurd." To critics of this sort, I have only to express my regret that the mission of the author has in my case been reversed, and facts have fallen into such clumsy hands as to seem fiction.

Let me add one extract from the works of an author popular in my young days, but now much oftener quoted than perused. He is describing a picture sale attended by the *dilettanti*. A carking *connoisseur* is abusing some effort of an unhappy artist to portray nature. "This fellow," cries he, "has even had the audacity to attempt to paint a fly! *That* a fly, forsooth!" and he flips at it with contemptuous fingers.

The fly flew away. *It was a real one!*

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LOST SIR MASSINGBERD: A ROMANCE OF
REAL LIFE. V. 2/2 ***

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