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Richard Dowling**

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MIRACLE GOLD.

A Novel.

BY

RICHARD DOWLING,

AUTHOR OF

**"The Mystery of Killard," "The Weird Sisters,"
"Tempest Driven," "Under St. Paul's," &c.**

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	
XIV.--	<u>SPIRIT AND FLESH.</u>
XV.--	<u>A SUBSTITUTE FOR GOLD.</u>
XVI.--	<u>RED HERRINGS.</u>
XVII.--	<u>DINNER AT CURZON STREET.</u>
XVIII.--	<u>IN THE DARK.</u>
XIX.--	<u>MRS. HANBURY.</u>
XX.--	<u>JOHN HANBURY ALONE.</u>
XXI.--	<u>TIMMONS'S TEA AND LEIGH'S DINNER.</u>
XXII.--	<u>A QUARTER PAST TWELVE.</u>
XXIII.--	<u>AN EARLY VISITOR TO TIMMONS.</u>
XXIV.--	<u>GRACEDIEU, DERBYSHIRE.</u>
XXV.--	<u>TWO OF A RACE.</u>
XXVI.--	<u>THE END OF DAY.</u>

MIRACLE GOLD.

MIRACLE GOLD.

CHAPTER XIV.

SPIRIT AND FLESH.

The folding-doors between the back and front drawing-rooms at Mrs. Ashton's were thrown open, and both rooms were full that Thursday afternoon. Some of the visitors were standing, some sitting, and many ladies and gentlemen were moving about. A few had cups of tea, and all seemed to wish to appear pleased and pleasant. If serious matters were mentioned or discussed, it was in a light and desultory way. It was impossible to plan ground for the foundation of enduring structures in politics, or taste, or art, or science, or polemics, when a humourist might come up and regard what you were saying as the suggestion for a burlesque opera or harlequinade. All the talk was touch-and-go, and as bright and witty as the speakers could make it. There was an unceasing clatter of tongues and ripple of laughter, which had not time to gather volume. Most of the people were serious and earnest, but the great bulk of the dialogue was artificial, designedly and deliberately artificial, for the purpose of affording relief to the speakers. Mrs. Ashton held that the most foolish way to spend life is to be always wise. These At homes were for recreation, not for the solemnities of work. People took no liberties, but all were free. Even such sacred subjects as the franchise, drainage, compound interest, the rights of the subject, and oysters, were dealt with lightly on Thursdays in Curzon Street.

As Oscar Leigh followed John Hanbury slowly from the immediate vicinity of Mrs. Ashton, his ears were aware of many and various voices saying many and various things, but he paid no attention to voices or words. He was all eyes. Miss Ashton was moving away to her former place by the window. She was accompanied by a tall, grizzled, military-looking man, who, to judge by her quick glances and laughing replies, was amusing and interesting her very much.

"That was a wild prank of yours," said Hanbury, bending over the little man and laying admonitory emphasis on his words. "You ought not to play tricks like that in a place like this. Everyone who saw and heard, Mrs. Ashton of course among the number, must have noticed your manner and the effect your words had upon----" He paused. They were standing in the second window-place. He did not like to say "upon me," for that would be an admission he had felt alarmed or frightened; it would also imply a suspicion of Leigh's trustworthiness in keeping his word and the secret.

The clockmaker did not say anything for a moment. He had no intention of helping Hanbury over the pause. It was his design, on the contrary, to embarrass the other as much as he could. He looked up with an innocent expression of face, and asked, "The effect of my manner on what, or whom?"

"Well," said Hanbury, with hesitation, "upon anyone who heard. Tricks of that kind may be

amusing, but I am afraid you did not improve your credit for sense with Miss Ashton by what you said and your way of saying it. For a moment I felt afraid she might be surprised into an expression that would betray all."

"*You!*" cried Leigh in a low tone of wild amazement. "*You* were afraid Miss Ashton might have been surprised into an expression that would have betrayed all?"

"Yes. She was not prepared for your little sally and your subtlety," said Hanbury with a frown. It was intolerable to have to speak of Dora Ashton, his Dora, his wife that was to be, to this mechanic, or mechanist, or mechanician, or whatever he happened to be. "Miss Ashton might have been taken off her guard."

"Bah, sir! *You* might have been surprised and taken off *your* guard by what I said, but not *she!* Hah!" He said this with a secret mocking laugh. "I am fairly astonished at a man of your intelligence, Mr. Hanbury, mistaking me for a fool. I *never* make mistakes about people. I never make wrong estimates of the *men* or *women* I meet. I would trust Miss Ashton in any position of danger or difficulty, any situation requiring courage or tact."

"I am sure if she knew your high estimate of her she would be enormously flattered," said Hanbury, with a sneer.

"No, she would not. She is not the woman to be flattered by anything, and certainly not by any such trifle as my opinion of her good sense. *You* ought to know as much by this time. You and she are engaged?"

The cool assurance of the dwarf's manner, and the simple directness of the question with which he finished his speech, had the effect of numbing Hanbury's faculties, and confusing his purpose. "The relations between Miss Ashton and me are not a subject I care to speak of, and I beg of you to say no more of the matter," said he, with clumsiness, arising from disgust and annoyance, and the sense of helplessness.

"Hah! I thought so. Now if you were only as clever as Miss Ashton, you would not allow me to find out how matters stood between you and her, as you have plainly done by your answer. You are a young man, and in life many things are against a young man. In an encounter of this kind his bad temper is his chief foe. Hah!"

Hanbury's head was fiery hot, and his mind in a whirl. Things and people around him were blurred and dim to his eyes. "I have performed my part of the contract," he said, with impotent fury, "had we not better go now? This is no place for scenes or lectures, for lectures by even the most able and best qualified."

This conversation had been conducted in suppressed voices, inaudible to all ears but those of the speakers, and most of it by the open window, Miss Ashton being at her former position in the other one looking into the street.

"Yes, you have done your part. You have introduced me to Miss Ashton, or rather Mrs. Ashton has done so, and that is the same thing. I am perfectly satisfied so far. I do not ask you to do any more. I am not a levier of blackmail. I, too, have performed my part of the contract. So far we are quits. We are as though we had never met. If you have any engagement or wish that draws you away from this place I do not see why you should remain. If you want to go, by all means go. I shall stay. Hah!"

"What! Mr. Leigh, you do not mean to say you intend using my introduction here, which I undertook in compliance with your whim, as the means of effecting a lodgment!"

Leigh sprinkled a few drops of eau-de-cologne from his little silver flask into the palms of his long brown-yellow hands and sniffed it up noisily. "You do not use eau-de-cologne? You are wrong. It is refreshing--most refreshing. If you had been poring over retorts and crucibles until your very marrow was turned to dust, burnt-up to powder, you'd appreciate eau-de-cologne. It's most refreshing. It is, indeed. I am not going away from this place yet; but do not let me detain you if business or pleasure is awaiting you anywhere else. Do not stand on ceremony with me, my dear sir."

Hanbury ground his teeth and groaned. Sinbad's Old Man of the Sea was pleasant company compared with this hideous monster. Go from this place leaving him behind! John Hanbury would sooner fling himself head-foremost from that window than walk down the stairs without this hateful incubus. He now knew Leigh too well to try and divert or win him from his purpose. The dwarf was one of those men who see the object they desire to the exclusion of all other objects, and never take their eyes off it until it is in their hands. Once having brought Leigh here, he must hold himself at his mercy until it pleased the creature to take himself off. How deplorably helpless and mean and degraded he felt! He had never been in so exasperating and humiliating a position before, and to feel as he felt now, and be so circumstanced in this house above all other houses in London! It was not to be borne.

Then he reflected on the events which had drawn him into the predicament. He had gone down that atrocious Chetwynd Street at Dora's request, and against his own wish, conviction, instinct. They had seen the hateful place, and the odious people who lived there. That accident

had befallen him, and while he was insensible Dora had given this man their names. He had come back to prevent their names getting into the newspapers, and found this man in the act of meditating a paragraph, with the "Post Office Directory" before him. He saw this man was not open to a money-bribe, but still he was open to a bribe, and the bribe was, to state it shortly, bringing him here, and introducing him to Dora. He introduced him to Mrs. Ashton, and, seeing that he brought Leigh to her house, she naturally thought he was a great friend of his! Good heavens, a great friend of his!

Only for Dora nothing of this would ever have happened. It all arose out of her foolish interest in the class of people of whom Leigh was a specimen. It was poetic justice on her that Leigh should insist upon coming here. Would it not be turning this visit into a useful lesson to her if she were allowed to see more of this specimen of the people? The kind of mind this man had? The kind of man he was? Yes, they should go to Dora.

During the progress of Leigh and Hanbury through the room to Mrs. Ashton, and on their way from her to the window, Hanbury had met a score of people he knew intimately, and several others with whom he was acquainted. He had nodded and spoken a few words of greeting right and left, and, when there was any likelihood of friends expecting more of him, had glanced at his companion to intimate that he was engaged and devoted to him. Whatever was to happen, it would not do to allow the clockmaker to break away from him, and mingle unaccompanied in the throng. While the two were at the window, Hanbury stood with his back to the room, in front of Leigh, so that he himself might not easily be accosted, and Leigh should be almost hidden from view.

He now made a violent effort to compose his mind and his features, and with an assumption of whimsical good humour turned round and faced the room. He had in a dismal and disagreeable way made up his mind to brazen out this affair. Let them both go to Dora, and when he was alone with her after dinner he could arrange that Leigh was not to come here again, for apart from Leigh's general objectionableness it would be like living in a powder magazine with a lunatic possessing flint and steel to be in Ashton's house with a man who held the secret of Chetwynd Street or Welbeck Place, or whatever the beastly region was called.

"I am not in the least hurry away from this, Mr. Leigh," said he, partly turning to the other. "It occurred to me that the place might be dull to you."

"On the contrary, the place and the people are most interesting to me. I am not, as you may fancy, much of a society man. I go out but little. I am not greatly sought after, Mr. Hanbury; and I do not think you can consider it unreasonable in me to wish to see this thing out." He was speaking suavely and pleasantly now, and when one was not looking at him there appeared nothing in his tone or manner to suggest disagreeableness, unless the heavy thick breathing, half wheeze, half gasp.

"But there is nothing to be seen out. There is no climax to these At homes. People come and chat and perhaps drink a cup of tea and go away. That is all. By the way, the servant has just set down some tea by Miss Ashton; perhaps you would like a cup."

"I have had no breakfast. I have eaten nothing to-day."

"I am sorry for that. I am greatly afraid they will not give you anything very substantial here; nothing but a cup of tea and a biscuit or wafery slice of bread. But let us get some. Half a loaf is better than no bread." He forced a smile, as pleasant a one as he could command.

"I shall be most grateful for a cup of tea from Miss Ashton's hands," said the dwarf graciously.

"He can," thought Hanbury, as they moved towards the other window, where Miss Ashton was now standing over a tiny inlaid table on which rested the tea equipage, "be quite human when he likes." Aloud he said, "I hope you will be more guarded this time?"

"I am always guarded--and armed. I shall be glad to take the useful olive from Pallas-Athena."

"And the olive bough too, I hope," said Hanbury under an impulse of generosity.

"It was a dove not a goddess brought the olive bough."

"But the dove was only a messenger."

"The olive bough was only a symbol; the olive itself was substantive good."

"But is not the symbol of peace better than an earthly meal?"

"Answer your own case out of your own mouth. I have never eaten to-day. I have never eaten yet in all my life. You are filled with divine luxuries. Go you your gait, I go mine. Tell me, Mr. Hanbury, would you rather have the spirit of my promise to you or the flesh of my promise?"

"I do not know exactly what you mean."

"Would you rather trust my word or see my dead body? If I were dead I could not speak."

"Trust your word beyond all doubt," said Hanbury with a perplexed and uneasy smile.

"Hah! I believe you believe what you say. But I am afraid your shoulders are not broad enough, your back is not strong enough for the faith you profess in me. I don't suppose you'd go to the extremity of murdering me, but at this moment you would not be sorry if I fell dead at your feet. Hah!"

"Pray do not say such a horrible thing. I assure you it is not true. Indeed you wrong me. I do not want the miserable thing talked about---"

"Sir, are you referring to me? I am the only miserable thing here."

"You are incorrigible."

"You are mistaken, sir. I am as plastic as wax; but like wax, if the fingers that touch me are cold I become brittle."

"If you persist how are we to approach Miss Ashton?"

"Thus! Follow me!"

He threw back his head haughtily, and glancing with scorn from side to side, strode to the table over which bent the exquisite face and figure of Dora.

CHAPTER XV.

A SUBSTITUTE FOR GOLD.

The air of pleasant badinage which pervaded the room had no more effect on Oscar Leigh than on the gasalier. No one spoke to him, for no one knew him. Except what passed between Leigh and Hanbury all words were intended for any ears who might hear. Intensities of individuality were laid aside at the threshold. Those whose individuality pursued and tyrannized over them like a Frankenstein remained away. They did not put it to themselves in this way. They told themselves they found the place too mixed or too light or too frivolous or too distracting.

Oscar Leigh was in no degree influenced by the humour or manner of the people present. These chattering men and women were indifferent to him, so long as he did not see how to put them to any use or find them in his way. He was not accustomed to the society of ladies and gentlemen, and consequently he omitted little customary observances. But he was not inured to any society at all, and this saved him from vulgarities; and then he was much used to commune with himself, which gave him directness and simplicity of manner.

One of the things affording freshness and vitality to Leigh was that he did not feel the need of common-places. Common-places are the tribute which intelligence pays to stupidity. They are the inventions of a beneficent Satan in the interest of the self-respect of fools.

"Miss Ashton," said Leigh bowing without emphasis or a smile, "I have ventured to come to beg a cup of tea of you."

She looked at him with a smile and said, "You have chosen the right moment. I have just got a fresh supply."

"This is a very fortunate day for me. It may be the most fortunate day of my life."

"And what is the nature of the good fortune you have found to-day?" she asked, handing him a tiny cup, while the servant who still lingered near offered him some thin bread-and-butter. There were half-a-dozen films on an exquisite china dish. Leigh took one doubled it twice and ate it greedily.

"You will let me have all? I have tasted no food to-day."

"Oh, certainly. I am afraid all is very little. But James can get us more." A faint colour had come into Miss Ashton's face. James, the servant, who had been christened Wilfrid, passed his

disengaged hand over his mouth to conceal a smile. Hanbury flushed purple. For a moment there was a pause in the talk of those within hearing.

"What's the matter?" asked a very young man with a very fresh healthy-looking face of a chatty dowager who was looking through a gold-rimmed eye-glass at the dwarf.

"Hanbury's friend, the dwarf, is *eating!*"

"Good Heavens!" cried the young man leaning against the wall at his back as in dismay.

Leigh went on eating.

"It is excellent bread-and-butter," said he when he had finished the last slice. "I have never tasted better."

Hanbury stooped to pick up nothing and whispered "This is not a restaurant," fiercely into Leigh's ear.

"Eh? No. I am well aware of that," said the other in an ordinary tone and quite audibly. "You would not find such good bread-and-butter as that in any restaurant I know of. Or it may be that I was very hungry."

"Shall I get some more?" asked Miss Ashton, who had by this time recovered from her surprise and was beaming with good-natured amusement.

"You are very kind, thank you. It was enough."

"I tell you what it is, Lady Forcar, that is a remarkable person," said the young man with the fresh complexion, to the dowager.

"If people hear of this it will become the fashion," said Lady Forcar, whose complexion never altered except in her dressing-room or when the weather was excessively hot.

"What?" asked the young man. "What will become the fashion?"

"Eating."

"How shocking!"

"If that man had only money and daring and a handsome young wife, he could do anything--anything. He could make pork sausages the rage. Have you ever eaten pork sausages, Sir Julius?"

"Thousands of times. They are often the only things I can eat for breakfast, but not in London. One should never eat anything they can make in London."

"Pork is a neglected animal," said Lady Forcar with a sigh. "It must be years since I tasted any."

"You know pork isn't exactly an animal?"

"No. Pork sausages are animalculæ of pork with bread and thyme and sweet marjoram and fennel and mint. Have you ever taken it into your mind, Sir Julius, to explain why it is that while a pig when alive is far from agreeable company, no sooner does he die than all the romantic herbs of the kitchen garden gather round him?"

"No doubt it comes under the head of natural selection."

"No doubt it does. Have you ever tried to account for the fact that there are no bones in pork sausages?"

"I fancy it may be explained by the same theory of natural selection. The bones select some other place."

"True. Very true. *That* never occurred to me before. Do you know I have often thought of giving up my intellect and devoting the remainder of my days to sensualism."

"Good gracious, Lady Forcar, that sounds appalling."

"It does. If I had as much genius as that humpbacked little man, I'd do it, but I feel my deficiency; I know I haven't the afflatus."

"The thing sounds very horrible as you put it. For what form of sensualism would you go in? climate? or soap? or chemical waters? or yachting?"

"None of them. Simply pork. You observe that the people who are nearest the sensible and uncorrupted beasts worship pork. If you hear anyone speak well of pork, that person is a sensualist at heart. I sigh continually for pork. The higher order of apes, including man, live in trees and on fruits that grow nearer to Heaven than any other thing. Cows and sheep and low types of man and brutes of moderate grossness eat things they find on the earth, such as grass

and corn, and hares and deer and goats, but it is only pigs and men of the lowest types that burrow into the ground for food. The lowest creature of all is the sensualist, who not only eats potatoes and turnips and carrots but the very pigs that root for things nature has had the decency to hide away from the sight of the eyes of angels and of men. Can you conceive anything lower in the scale of sensual joy or more delicious than pork and onions? I tell you, Sir Julius, if this humpbacked dwarf only had money, a handsome wife and courage, he could popularize sausages being served before the soup. He is the only man since Napoleon the Great who has the manner of power sufficient for such a reform."

"Let us devoutly hope, Lady Forcar, that he may bring about the blessed change, that is if you wish it."

"Wish it! Good Heavens, Sir Julius, you don't for a moment fancy me capable of trifling with such a subject! I say to you deliberately, it is the only thing which would now save Society from ennui and its present awful anxiety about the temperature of the soup."

The dowager Lady Forcar was well known for her persiflage, her devotion to her young and plain daughter-in-law, the head now of her son's house, her inch-thick paint, of which she spoke freely and explained on the grounds of keeping in the swim, and her intense interest in all that affected the welfare of the rural cottager.

Sir Julius Whinfield, in spite of his very fresh young face and affectation, was an excellent authority on Hebrew and the manufacture of silk, so that if he had only happened to live once upon a time he might have talked wisdom to Solomon and dresses with Solomon's wives. He was not a clever conversationalist, but when not under pressure could say sound things pithily. Of Lady Forcar he once declared that he never understood what a saint must have been like when living until he met her. This did not come to her ears and had nothing to do with her liking for the young man.

The tall, military-looking man who had been speaking to Miss Ashton, and who was not a soldier but a composer of music, now came up and said:

"I am in sore need of you, Lady Forcar. I am about to start a new crusade. I am going to try to depose the greatest tyrant of the time."

"And who is that? Wagner? Bismarck? The Russian Bear? The Higher Culture?"

"No. Soap. I am of opinion that this age can do no good so long as it is bound to the chariot wheels of soap. This is the age of science, and soap is its god. Old Q. once became impatient with the river Thames, and said he could see nothing in it----"

"He was born too soon. In his time they had not begun to spy into the slums of nature. For my part I think the microscope is the tyrant of this age. What did old Q. say about our father Tiber?"

"He said he could see nothing in it, that it always went flow--flow--flow, and that was all."

"One must not expect too much of a river. A river is no more than human, after all. But what has soap been doing?"

"Nothing; and in the fact that it has been doing nothing lies one of my chief counts against it. Of old you judged a man by the club to which he belonged, the number of his quarterings, the tailor who made his clothes, the income he had, the wife he married, the horses he backed, or the wine he drank. Now we classify men according to the soap they use. There are more soaps now than patent medicines."

"Soaps are patent medicine for external use only," said Lady Forcar, touching her white plump wrist.

"There may be some sense in a pill against the earthquake, or against an unlucky star, but how on earth can soap be of any use? First you smear a horrid compound over you, and then you wash it off as quickly as possible. Can anything be more childish? It is even more childish than the Thames. It can't even flow of itself. It is a relic of barbarism."

"But are not we ourselves relics of barbarism? Suppose you were to abolish all relics of barbarism in man, you would have no man at all. Heads, and arms, and bodies, are relics of barbaric man. Had not barbaric man heads, and arms, and bodies? Are you going to abolish heads, and arms, and bodies?"

"Well," said Mr. Anstruther, the composer, "I don't know. I think they might be reduced. Anyway," dropping his voice, and bending over her ladyship, "our little friend here, whom Mr. Hanbury brought in, manages to hold his own, and more than hold his own, with less of such relics of barbarism than most of us."

"I was just saying to Sir Julius when you, Mr. Anstruther, came up, that I consider the stranger the most remarkable man I ever met in this house, and quite capable of undertaking and carrying out any social revolution, even to the discrediting of soap. If you have been introduced bring him to me."

"I haven't, unfortunately, but I'll tell Hanbury, who looks as black as thunder, that you would like to speak to him."

"I have scarcely seen Miss Ashton to-day. Let us go to them. That is the simplest way," said Lady Forcar, rising and moving towards the place where Dora, Hanbury, and Leigh stood.

When Leigh finished eating the bread-and-butter and drinking the tiny cup of tea, he said: "You wish, Miss Ashton, to know in what way I have been lucky to-day?"

She looked in perplexity at Hanbury, and then at the dwarf. She had no doubt he had alluded to her when he spoke of having found a model for the Pallas-Athena. An average man accustomed to ordinary social observances would not pursue that kind of flattery any further, but could this man be depended on? He certainly was not an ordinary man, and as certainly he was not accustomed to ordinary social observances. If he pursued that subject it would be embarrassing. It was quite plain John was in very bad humour. He deserved to be punished for his pusillanimous selfishness to-day, but there were limits beyond which punishment ought not to be pressed. She would forgive John now and try to make the best of the situation. She felt convinced that John would not have brought this man here except under great pressure. Let him be absolved from further penalties.

She said pleasantly: "One always likes to hear of good fortune coming to those in whom one is interested." Nothing could be more bald, or commonplace, or trite, yet in the heart of Leigh the words made joyous riot. She had implied, even if she did not mean her implication, that she took an interest in *him*.

"I was speaking a moment ago about the figures of time in my clock. I had the honour of telling Mrs. Ashton that there would be thousands of them, and that they would be modelled, not chiefly or at all for the display of mechanism, but in the first place as works of art; to these works of art mechanism would be adapted later."

"Which will make your clock the only one of the kind in the world," said she, much relieved to find no pointed reference to herself.

"Precisely. But I did not do myself the honour of telling Mrs. Ashton of what material the figures were to be composed."

"No. I do not think you said what they would be made of. Wax, is it not?" With the loss of apprehension on her own account, she had gained interest in this wonderful clock.

"The models will of course be made of wax, but the figures themselves, the figures which I intend to bequeath to posterity, will be made of gold."

"Gold! All those figures made of gold! Why, your clock will cost you a fortune."

"It will not cost *me* as much as it would cost any other man living. I am going to make the gold too." He drew himself up, and looked proudly round.

At this moment Lady Forcar and Mr. Anstruther came up, and introductions took place. Leigh submitted to the introductions as though he had no interest in them beyond the interruption they caused in what he was saying.

Miss Ashton briefly placed Lady Forcar and Mr. Anstruther in possession of the subject, and then Leigh went on. He no longer leant upon his stick. He straightened himself, threw back his head haughtily, and kept it back. He shifted his stout gnarled stick into his left hand and thrust the long, thin, sallow, hairy fingers of his right hand into the breast of his coat, and looked around as though challenging denial.

"I have," he said, "invented a metal, a compound which is absolutely indistinguishable from gold, which is in fact gold, and of which I shall make my figures. Mystery gold was a clumsy juggle that one found out in the fire. My gold is *bonâ fide* a miracle, and I have called it Miracle Gold. My gold will resist the acid, and the blow-pipe, and the crucible. As I live, if they provoke me, I will sell them not metal miracle gold, but perchloride of miracle gold. No one can doubt me then!"

"And will you be able, Mr. Leigh, to make not only enough for your figures but some for sale also?" asked Mr. Anstruther.

"I may be able to spare a little, but my gold cannot be sold for a chapman's price. It will cost me much in money and health and risk, and even then the yield will be small."

"In health and risk?" said Miss Ashton, in a tone of concern and sympathy. "How in health and risk?" He seemed even now to have but little store of health.

He lowered his head and abated the arrogance of his manner. "The steam of fusing metals and fumes of acids are not for men who would live long, Miss Ashton. They paralyse the muscles and eat into the wholesome flesh of those whose flesh is wholesome, while with one who is not fashioned fair to the four winds of attack, the end comes with insidious speed. Then for the risk,

there are conjunctions of substances that, both in the dry and the wet, lead often to unexpected ebullitions and rancorous explosions of gas or mere forces that kill. There may spring out of experiments vapours more deadly than any known now, poisons that will slay like the sight of the angel of death."

"Then, Mr. Leigh," said the girl, with eyes fixed upon him, "why need you make these figures of time of such costly material?"

"Ah, there may be reasons too tedious to relate."

"And does the good fortune you speak of concern the manufacture of this miracle gold?" she asked with a faint flush, and eyes shining with anxiety.

"It does."

"A discovery which perhaps will make the manufacture less dangerous?"

"Which would make the manufacture unnecessary."

She clasped her hands before her with delight, and cried while her eyes shone joyously into his, "Oh, that would be lucky indeed. And how will you know if your augury of good fortune will come true?"

"You are interested?" He bent his head still lower, and his voice was neither so firm nor so harsh.

"Intensely. You tell us your life may be endangered if you go on. Tell us you think you can avoid the risk."

"I do not know yet."

"When can you know?"

"Would you care to hear as soon as I know?"

"Oh, yes."

"I shall, I think, be certain by this day week."

"Then come to us again next Thursday. We shall all be here as we are now?"

"Thank you, Miss Ashton, I will. Good day."

He backed a pace and bowed to her, and then turned round, and, with head erect and scornful eyes flashing right and left, but seeing nothing, strode out of the room.

"Dora," whispered Lady Forcar, "you have made another conquest. That little genius is in love with you."

The girl laughed, but did not look up for a moment. When she did so her eyes were full of tears.

CHAPTER XVI.

RED HERRINGS.

Dealers in marine stores generally select quiet by-ways, back-waters of traffic, for the scene of their trade. In the open high roads of business the current is too quick for them. They buy and sell substantial and weighty articles; their transactions are few and far between. Those who come to sell may be in haste; those who come to buy, never. No one ever yet rushed into a marine-store dealer's, and hammered with his money on a second-hand copper, in lieu of a counter, and shouted out that he could not wait a moment for a second-hand iron tripod. It is extremely doubtful if a marine-store dealer ever sells anything. Occasionally buying of ungainly, heavy, amorphous, valueless-looking bundles goes on, but a sale hardly ever. Who, for instance, could

want an object visible in the business establishment of John Timmons, Tunbridge Street, London Road? The most important-looking article was a donkey-engine without a funnel, or any of its taps, and with a large rusty hole bulged in its knobby boiler. Then there lay a little distance from the engine the broken beam of a large pair of scales and the huge iron scoop of another pair. After this, looking along the left-hand side out of the gloom towards the door, lay three cannon-shot, for guns of different calibres; then the funnel of a locomotive, flat, and making a very respectable pretence of having been the barrel from which the cannon-shot had dribbled, instead of flown, because of the barrel's senile decay. After the funnel came a broken anvil, around the blockless and deposed body of which gathered--no doubt for the sake of old lang syne--two sledge-hammer heads, without handles, and the nozzle of a prodigious forge-bellows. Next appeared a heap of chunks of leaden pipe. Next, a patch of mutilated cylindrical half-hundred weights, like iron mushrooms growing up out of the ferruginous floor. The axle-tree and boxes of a cart stood against the wall, like the gingham umbrella of an antediluvian giant, and keeping them company the pillars and trough of a shower-bath, plainly the stand into which the umbrella ought to have been placed, if the dead Titan had had any notion of tidiness. Then appeared the cistern of the shower-bath, like the Roundhead iron cap of the cyclopean owner of the umbrella. Then spread what one might fancy to be the mouth of a mine of coffee mills, followed by a huge chaotic pile of rusty and broken guns and swords, and blunderbusses and pistols. Beyond this chaotic patch, a ton of nuts and screws and bolts; and, later, a bank of washers, a wire screen, five dejected chimney-jacks, the stock of an anchor, broken from the flukes, several hundred fathoms of short chains of assorted lengths, half a bundle of nailrod iron, three glassless ship's lamps, a pile of brazen miscellanies, a pile of iron miscellanies, a pile of copper miscellanies, and then the doorless opening into Tunbridge Street, and standing on the iron-grooved threshold, into which the shutters fitted at night, Mr. John Timmons in person, the owner of this flourishing establishment.

Mr. John Timmons was a tall and very thin man, of fifty years, or thereabouts. His face was dust-colour, with high, well-padded cheek bones, blue eyes and insignificant cocked nose. His hair was dark brown, touched here and there with grey, curly, short, thin. He wore a low-crowned brown felt hat and a suit of dark chocolate tweed, the trousers being half a span too short over his large shoes, and the waistcoat half a span too wide, half a span too long, and buttoned up to the deep-sunken hollow of his scraggy throat. His neck was extremely long and thin and wrinkled, and covered with sparse greyish hair. His ears were enormous, and stood out from his ill-shapen head like fins. They were iron-grey, the colour of the under surface of a bat's wing. The forehead was low, retreating, and creased with close parallel lines. The eyes were keen, furtive, suspicious. A hand's-breath below the sharp, large apple of his throat, and hanging loose upon the waistcoat, was the knot of a washed-out blue cotton neckerchief. He wore long mutton-chop whiskers. The rest of the face was covered with a short, grizzled stubble. When he was not using his hands, he carried them thrust down to the utmost in his trousers' pockets, showing a wide strip of red sinewy arm between the sleeve of his coat and the pocket of the trousers. No shirt was visible, and the neckerchief touched the long, lank neck, there being no collar or trace of linen. Excepting the blue patch of neckerchief on his chest, and his blue eyes, no positive colour appeared anywhere about the man. No part of the man himself or of his clothes was clean.

Mr. Timmons was taking the air on his own threshold late in the afternoon of that last Thursday in June. It was now some hours since the dwarf had called and had held that conversation with him in the cellar. Not a human being had entered the marine store since. Mr. Timmons was gazing out of his watchet blue eyes in a stony and abstracted way at the dead brick wall opposite. He had been standing in this position for a good while, now shifting the weight of his body to one foot, now to the other. Occasionally he cleared his throat, which, being a supererogation, showed that he was in deep thought, for no man, in his waking moments, could think of clearing so long a throat without ample reason. The sound he made was so deep and sepulchral it seemed as though he had left his voice behind him in the cellar, and it was becoming impatient there.

Although it had not yet struck six o'clock, he was thinking of closing his establishment. At this time of the day very few people passed through Tunbridge Street; often a quarter of an hour went by bringing no visitor. But after six the street became busier, for with the end of the working day came more carts and vans and barrows to rest for the night with their shafts thrust up in the air, after their particular manner of sleeping. This parking of the peaceful artillery of the streets Mr. Timmons looked on with dislike, for it brought many people about the place and no grist to his mill. He shared with poets and aristocrats the desire for repose and privacy.

As he was about to retire for the long shutters that by night defended and veiled his treasure from predatory hands or prying eyes, his enormous left ear became aware that feet were approaching from the end of the street touching London Road. He turned his pale blue eyes in the direction of the sound and saw coming along close to the wall the figure of a low sized stout woman, wearing a black bonnet far off her forehead. She was apparently about his own age, but except in the matter of age there was no likeness in the appearance of the two. She was dressed in shabby black stuff which had long ago forgotten to what kind of material it belonged. Her appearance was what merciful newspaper reporters describe as "decent," that is, she was not old or in tatters, or young and attractive and gaudy in apparel; her clothes were black and whole, and she was sober. She looked like an humble monthly nurse or an ideal charwoman. She carried a fish-basket in her hand. Out of this basket projected the tails of half-a-dozen red herrings. She

had, apparently, once been good-looking, and was now well-favoured. She had that smooth, cheesy, oily, colourless rounded face peculiar to well-fed women of the humbler class indigenous in London.

Mr. Timmons' forehead wrinkled upwards as he recognised the visitor to Tunbridge Street. He smiled, displaying an imperfect line of long discoloured teeth.

"Good afternoon," said John Timmons in a deep vibrating voice that sounded as though it had effected its escape from the cellar through a drum.

"Afternoon," said the woman entering the store without pausing. Then nodding her head back in the direction whence she had come she asked: "Anyone?"

"No," answered Timmons, after a long and careful scrutiny of the eastern half of Tunbridge Street. "Not a soul."

"I thought I'd never get here. It's mortal hot. Are you sure there is no one after me?" said the woman, sitting down on a broken fire-grate, in the rear of the pile of shutters standing up against the wall on the left. She began rubbing her perspiring glistening face with a handkerchief of a dun colour rolled up in a damp ball. Still she held her fish-bag in her hand.

"Certain. Which shows what bad taste the men have. Now, only for Tom I know you'd have one follower you could never shake off," said Timmons, with a gallant laugh that sounded alarmingly deeper than his speaking voice. Timmons was at his ease and leisure, and he made it a point to be always polite to ladies.

"Tom's at home," said the woman, thrusting the handkerchief into her pocket and smiling briefly and mechanically in acknowledgment of the man's compliment to her charms. "I've brought you some fish for your tea."

"Herrings," he said, bending to examine the protruding tails. "Fresh herrings, or red?" he asked in a hushed significant voice. He did not follow the woman into the store, but still stood at the threshold, so that he could see up and down the street.

"Red," she whispered hoarsely, "and as fine as ever you saw. I thought you might like them for your tea."

By this time a man with a cart turned into the street, and, it just then striking six, the door of a factory poured out a living turbid stream of bedraggled, frowsy girls, some of whom went up and some down the street, noisily talking and laughing.

"Yes, There is nothing I am so fond of for my tea as red herrings," he said, with his face half turned to the store, half to the street. "And I shall like them particularly to-night."

"Eh! Particularly to-night? Are you alone? Are you going to have company at tea, Mr. Timmons?" asked the woman in a tone and manner of newly-awakened interest. She now held her fish basket with both hands in front of her fat body and resting on her shallow lap.

Timmons was standing half-a-dozen yards from her on the threshold. She could hear his voice quite plainly, notwithstanding the noise in the street and the fact that he spoke in a muffled tone. While he answered he kept his mouth partly open, and, because of so doing, spoke with some indistinctness. It was apparent he did not want people within sight or hearing to know he was speaking. "No; I am not expecting anyone to tea, and there is no one here. I am going to have my tea all by myself. I am very busy just now. I have had a visitor to-day--a few hours ago----"

"Well," whispered the woman eagerly.

"And *I have the kettle on the boil*, and I am going to put those red herrings in it for my tea." He was looking with vacant blue eyes down the street as he spoke. He did not lay stress upon the words, "I have the kettle on the boil." He uttered them in a lower tone and more slowly than any others. The emphasis thus given them was very great. It seemed to startle the woman. She rose partly as if to go to him. She was fluttered and agreeably fluttered.

"Stay where you are," he said. He seemed to know she had attempted to rise without turning his eyes upon her. She was half hidden in the gloom of the store. No casual observer passing by would have noticed her. She was simply a black shapeless mass on the old fire-grate against a dingy dark wall in a half light. She might easily be taken for some of Timmons's stock.

"And," she said, "he'll do it!"

"He will. He's been to Birmingham and has arranged all. They'll take every bit they can get and pay a good price--twice as much as could be got otherwise--from anyone else."

"Fine! Tine! You know, Mr. Timmons, how hard it is to find a bit now, and to get so little for it as we have been handling is very bad--heartbreaking. It takes all the spirit out of Tom."

"Where did you buy the six herrings?"

"Well," said the woman, with a smile, "I didn't exactly buy them herrings, though they are as good ones as ever you saw. You see, my little boys went to the meeting about the votes, or the Niggers, or the Gospel, or something or other, and they found the herrings growing on the trees there, ha-ha-ha."

"I know. It was a meeting for trying to get some notion of Christianity into the heads of the African Blacks. I read about it in the newspaper this morning. The missionaries and ourselves are much beholden to the Blacks."

"It was something now I remember about the Blacks. Anyway, they're six beauties. And can you let me have a little money, Mr. Timmons, for I must hurry back to Tom with the good news."

"How is Tom? Is he on the drink?"

"No, he isn't."

"That's a bad sign. What's the matter?"

"I don't know, if it isn't going to them Christian meetings about the Blacks. It's my belief that he'll turn Christian in the end, and you know, Mr. Timmons, that won't pay *him*."

"Not at Tom's time of life. You must begin that kind of thing young. There are lots of converted--well sinners, but they don't often make bishops of even the best of them."

"Well, am I to go? What are you going to give me, Mr. Timmons? When Tom isn't in a reasonable state of drink there's no standing him. Make it as much as you can. Say a fiver for luck on the new-found-out."

"I'll give you an order on the Bank of England for a million if you like, but I can't give you more than ten thousand pounds in sovereigns, or even half sovereigns, just at this moment, even for the good of the unfortunate heathen Blacks. But here, anyway, take this just to keep you going. I haven't landed any fish myself yet."

The woman rose and he handed to her money. Then followed a long, good-humoured dialogue in which she begged for more, and he firmly, but playfully, refused her. Then she went away, and Mr. John Timmons was left once more alone.

He had taken the fish basket from the woman when giving her the money, and now carried it to the back of the store and descended with it to the cellar. He did not remain long below, but soon came trotting up the ladder, humming a dull air in a deep growl. Then he set himself briskly to work putting up the shutters, taking them out of the pile in front of the old fire-grate on which the woman had sat, carrying each one separately to the front and running it home through the slot. When all were up, he opened the lower part of one, which hung on hinges serving as a wicket, and stepped out into the street full from end to end of the bright, warm evening sunlight.

He rubbed his forehead with the sleeve of his coat and took a leisurely survey of the street. The noisy girls from the factory had all disappeared, and the silence of evening was falling upon the place. A few men busied themselves among the carts and vans and a dull muffled sound told of the traffic in London Road. The hum of machinery had ceased, and, contrasted with the noise of an hour ago, the place was soundless.

John Timmons seemed satisfied with his inspection. He closed the wicket and retired into the deep gloom of the store. The only light now in this place entered through holes up high in two shutters. The holes were no more than a foot square, and were protected by perforated iron plates. They were intended for ventilating not lighting the store.

Even in the thick dark air John Timmons was quite independent of light. He could have found any article in his stock blindfold. He was no sun-worshipper, nor did he pay divine honours to the moon. A good thick blinding London fog was his notion of reasonable weather. One could then do one's business, whatever it might be, without fear of bright and curious eyes.

He had told his late visitor that he had the kettle on the fire. She had brought him half-a dozen red herrings and left them with him in a fish-basket. Now red herrings, differing in this respect from other kinds of fish, are seldom or never cooked in a kettle, and although the front of the door was closed and the only visible source of heat the two ventilators high up in the shutters, the air of the store was growing already warmer and drier, and although there was no smell of cooking there was an unmistakable smell of fire.

The owner did not seem in any great hurry to cook and taste his savoury victuals. He might have meant that the kettle was for tea merely, and had nothing to do directly with the red herrings. He fastened the wicket-door very carefully, and then slowly examined the rear of the shutters one by one, and, holding his eye close to them here and there, tried if he could spy out, in order to ascertain if any one could spy in. Then he rested his shoulder against the middle shutter, leant his head against the panel and, having thrust his hands deeper than ever into his trousers' pockets, gave up his soul to listening.

In the meantime the fish basket, with the tails of the six red herrings sticking out, was lying on

the top of the old fire-grate which had served his visitor as a seat. It had been placed here by Timmons when he took it from the woman.

A quarter of an hour the man remained thus without moving. Apparently he was satisfied at last. He stood upright upon his feet, shook himself, gazed confidently round the store and then walked to the old fire-grate. He was going to get his tea at last.

He took up the basket, drew out the wooden skewer by which it was closed, caught the herrings in a bundle and threw them behind him on the gritty earthen floor.

He opened the bag wide and peered into it. Holding it in his left hand upon his upraised thigh he thrust his right hand into it and fumbled about, bending his head down to look the better.

He was on the point of drawing something out when he suddenly paused and listened motionless.

There was the sound of approaching steps. Timmons stood as still as death.

Three soft knocks sounded upon the wicket and then, after an interval of a few seconds, two more knocks still softer.

"It's Stamer himself," cried Timmons, with an imprecation, in a muffled voice. Then he added: "What does he want? More money? Anyway, I suppose I must let him in."

He turned round, caught up the scattered red herrings, thrust them into the bag, fixed it with the skewer, and then threw it carelessly on the hob of the old grate. Then he went to the wicket, opened it without speaking, and admitted his second visitor of that evening.

When the new comer was inside the door and the bolt drawn once more, Timmons said, in a slow angry tone, "Well, Stamer, what do you want? Is a bargain a bargain? You were not to come here in daylight, and only in the dark when something of great consequence brought you. I gave your wife all I will give just now, if we are to go on working on the co-operative principle. What do you want?"

The low sized, round shouldered man, dressed in fustian and wearing two gold rings on the little finger of his left hand, said in a whisper: "The ole 'oman gev me the coin, gov'nor. I don't want no more till all's right. What I did come about is of consequence, is of the greatest consequence, gov'nor." He glanced round with furtive eyes, looking apprehensively in the dim light at everything large enough to conceal a man.

"What is it? Out with it!" said Timmons impatiently.

"You're going to see this cove to-night?"

"Yes."

"At what o'clock?"

"That's my affair," said Timmons savagely.

"I know it is, Mr. Timmons, but still I'm a bit interested too, if I understand right the co-operative principle."

"You! What are you interested in so long as you get the coin?"

"In you. I'm powerful interested in you."

"What do you mean?" asked Timmons, frowning.

"Tell me when you're going and I'll tell you."

"Midnight."

"Ah! It will be dark then!"

"What news you tell us. It generally is dark at midnight."

"Are you going to take much of the stuff with you--much of the red stuff--of the red herrings?"

Timmons drew back a pace with a start and looked at Stamer suspiciously. "Have you come to save me the trouble? Eh? Would you like to take it yourself? Eh? Did you come here to rob me? I mean to share fair. Do you want to throw up the great co-operative principle and bag all?"

Stamer's eyes winked quickly, and he answered in a tone of sorrow and reproach: "Don't talk like that, gov'nor. You know I'm a square un, I am. I'd die for you. Did I ever peach on you when I was in trouble, gov'nor? It hurts my feelings for you to talk like that! I say, don't do it, gov'nor. You know I'm square. Tell me how much stuff are you going to take with you to-night?"

The words and manner of the man indicated extreme sincerity, and seemed to reassure

Timmons. "About two pounds," he answered.

"Oh!" groaned Stamer, shaking his close-cropped head dismally.

"What is the matter with the man? Are you mad? You're not drunk. Your wife tells me you're not on the drink."

"No. I'm reforming. Drink interferes dreadful with business. It spoils a man's nerve too. Two pounds is an awful lot."

"What are you driving at, Stamer? You say you're a square man. Well, as far as I have had to do with you I have found you a square man----"

"And honest?" said Stamer pathetically.

"With me. Yes."

"No man is honest in the way of business."

"Well, well! What is the matter?" said Timmons impatiently; "I've got the kettle on and must run down. I haven't put in those herrings your old woman brought yet."

"I know. I'm sorry, gov'nor, for bothering you. I'd give my life for you. Look here, gov'nor, suppose *he* is not an honest man, like me. He isn't in our co-operative plan, you know. Suppose *he* isn't particular about how he gets hold of a bit of stuff?"

"And tried to rob me?"

"That's not what I'd mind." He put his hand to the back of his waistband. "You know what I carry here. Suppose he carries one too?"

"You mean that he may murder me first and rob me after?"

Stamer nodded.

"Well, I'm very much obliged to you, Stamer, indeed I am; but I'm not a bit afraid, not a bit. Why, he's not much over four feet, and he's a hunchback as well."

"But hunchbacks can buy tools like this, and a man's inches don't matter then," moving his hand under his coat.

"I'm not a bit afraid. Not a bit. If that's what you came about it's all right, and now I *must* go down. The fire is low by this time, and I may as well run these out of likeness at once."

He opened the door for Stamer, who, with a doubtful shake of the head, stepped over the raised threshold and went out. As Stamer sauntered down Tunbridge Street he muttered to himself, "I'll keep my eye on this affair anyway."

When the wicket-door was closed Timmons took up the fish-basket, flung away the red herrings a second time, and descended to the cellar.

CHAPTER XVII.

DINNER AT CURZON STREET.

When Oscar Leigh left Mrs. Ashton's drawing-room abruptly that afternoon, Hanbury was too much annoyed and perplexed to trust himself to speak to Dora. It was getting late. He had promised to dine in Curzon Street that evening, and would have ample opportunity after dinner of saying to Dora anything he liked. Therefore he made an excuse and a hasty exit as if to overtake Leigh. He had had however enough of the clockmaker for that day, for all his life; so when he found himself on the landing and stairs and in the hall he walked slowly, allowing time for Leigh to get out of sight before emerging from the house.

He took his way south and crossed Piccadilly at Hyde Park Corner. He had to get to his

mother's house in Chester Square, to dress for dinner, and there was not much time to lose. His mother did not expect him to dine at home that day. She knew he had promised to go to Curzon Street, and was not in the house when he arrived.

He went straight to his own room in no very amiable humour. He was not at all pleased with the day. He did not think Dora had acted with prudence in persisting on going slumming in Chelsea, he was quite certain she had not done prudently in giving Leigh their names. He considered Leigh had behaved--well, not much better than a man of his class might be expected to behave, and, worst of all and hardest of all to bear, he did not consider his own conduct had been anything like what it ought.

If he made up his mind to go in for a popular platform, he must overcome, beat down this squeamishness which caused him to give way at unpleasant sights. Whether he did or did not adopt the popular platform he ought to do this. It was grotesque that his effectiveness in an emergency should be at the mercy of a failing which most school-girls would laugh at! It was too bad that Dora should be able to help where he became a mere encumbrance. Poor girl---but there, he must not allow himself to run off on a sentimental lead just now. He must keep his mind firm, for he must be firm with Dora this evening.

What a wonderful likeness there was between that strange girl and Dora. Yes, Miss Grace was, if possible, lovelier in face than Dora. More quiet and still mannered. She absolutely looked more of an aristocrat than Dora. It would be curious to see if her mind was like Dora's too; if, for example, she had active, vivid, democratic sympathies.

Every one who knew him told him he had a brilliant future before him. Before he got married (about which there was no great hurry as they were both young) it would be necessary for him to take up a definite position in politics. He felt he had the stuff in him out of which to make an orator, and an orator meant a statesman, and a statesman meant power, what he pleased, a coronet later in life if he and Dora cared for one. But he must select his career before marriage.

It would be very interesting to see if those two girls, so marvellously alike in appearance, were similar in aspirations. How extraordinarily alike they were. The likeness was as that man had said, stranger than his own fabulous miracle gold.

Ashton and his wife got on very well together, although they did not take the same view of public affairs. But then in this case things were different from what they would be in his. Mrs. Ashton was an ardent politician, her husband none at all. For a politician to enter upon his public career with a young wife opposed to him would be most unwise, the beginning of disagreement at home. At first, when he met Dora, he was attracted towards her by the enthusiasm of her spirit. He had never before met so young a woman, a mere girl, with such settled faith. At that time he was not very sure how he himself thought on many of the questions which divided men. She knew no doubt or hesitancy, and she was very lovely and bright and fresh. He had thought--What a helpmate for a busy man! And then, before he had time to think much more, he had made up his mind he could not get on without Dora.

There were many cases in which wives had been the best aids and friends of illustrious politicians. It would never do for a man to have a wife who would continually throw cold water on her husband's public ardours; or, worse still, who would be actively opposed to him. Such a state could not be borne.

Dora had clearer views and more resolute convictions than he. Women always saw more quickly and sharply than men. If he threw himself into the arms of the people she would be with him heart and soul, and he should attain a wide popularity at all events.

How on earth did that man Leigh become acquainted with that exquisite creature, Miss Grace? No wonder he called her miracle gold.

Well, it was time for him to be getting back to Curzon Street. There was to be no one at dinner but the family and himself. There would, therefore, neither before nor after be any politics. What a relief it was to forget the worry, and heat and dust of politics now and then for a while, for a little while even!

Grimsby Street was an awful place for a girl like Miss Grace to live in. Why did she live in such horrible street? Poverty, no doubt. Poverty. What a shame! She looked as if it would suit her better to live in a better place. By heavens, what a lovely, exquisite girl she was. Could that poor misshapen clockmaker be in love with her? He in love? Monstrous!

Ten minutes past eight! Not a moment to be lost.

"Hansom! Curzon Street."

John Hanbury reached Ashton's as dinner was announced. The host greeted him with effusion. He was always glad to have some guest, and he particularly liked Hanbury. He was by no means hen-pecked, but there was between him and his wife when alone the consciousness of a truce, not the assurance of peace. Each felt the other was armed, she with many convictions, he with only one, namely, that all convictions were troublesome and more or less fraudulent. They lived together in the greatest amity. They did not agree to disagree, but they agreed not to disagree,

which is a much better thing. Ashton of course guessed there was something between Dora and Hanbury, but he had no official cognizance of it yet, and therefore treated Hanbury merely as a very acceptable visitor. He liked the young man, and his position and prospects were satisfactory.

Towards the end of dinner, he said: "They tell me, Hanbury, that you brought a very remarkable character with you to-day, a sorcerer, or an astrologer, or alchemist. I thought men of that class had all turned into farriers by this time."

"I don't think Leigh has anything to do with hooves, unless hooves of the cloven kind," said Hanbury with a laugh. "If a ravenous appetite for bread confirms the graminivorous characteristic of the hoof I am afraid it is all up with poor Leigh in Mrs. Ashton's opinion."

"I found him very interesting I am sure," said Mrs. Ashton, "and I am only sorry I had not more opportunity of hearing about his wonderful clock."

"Clock? Oh, he is a clockmaker, is he," said the host, "Then I did not make such a bad shot after all. He has something to do with metal?"

"I told you, Jerry, he makes *gold*, miracle gold," said Mrs. Ashton vivaciously.

"So you did, my dear. So you did. My penetration then in taking him for an alchemist does not seem to have been very great. I should be a first-rate man to discover America now. But I fancy if I had been born before Columbus I should not have taken the bread out of his mouth."

"Mr. Leigh told us he was not sure he would go on making this miracle gold," said Dora.

"Not go on making gold!" cried the father in astonishment, "was there ever yet a man who of his own free will gave up making gold? Why is he thinking of abandoning the mine, Dora?"

"There is so much difficulty and danger, he says, father."

"Difficulty and danger! Of course there is always difficulty in making gold; but danger--what is the danger?"

"He is liable to be blown up."

"Good heavens! for making gold? Why, what are you talking of, child? Ah! I see," with a heavy, affected sigh, "he is a bachelor. If he were a married man he would stand in danger of being blown up for *not* making gold. Well, Josephine, my dear," to his wife, "you do get some very original people around you. I must say I should like to see this timid alchemist."

"If Mr. Ashton will honour his own house with his presence this day week, he will have an excellent opportunity of meeting Mr. Leigh," said Mrs. Ashton with a bow.

"My dearest Josephine, your friend, Mr. Ashton, will do nothing of the kind. He will not add another to your collection of monsters."

"That's a very heartless and rude speech, father."

"And I look on it as distinctly personal," said Hanbury, "for I attend regularly."

"I have really very little to do with the matter," said Mrs. Ashton. "Mr. Leigh is Dora's thrall."

The girl coloured and looked reproachfully at her mother, and uneasily at Hanbury. It would be much more pleasant if the conversation shifted away from Leigh.

"He is going to model her for Pallas-Athena."

"Mother, the poor man did not say that."

"No; he did not *say* it, but he meant it, Dora."

"Oh, he is a sculptor, too!" cried Mr. Ashton with a laugh. "Is there any end to this prodigy's perfections and accomplishments? But, I say, Dora, seriously, I won't have any folly of that kind. I won't have you give sittings to any one."

"Oh, father! indeed, you must not mind mother. She is joking. Mr. Leigh never said or meant anything of the kind." She had grown red and very uncomfortable.

Her father sat back in his chair and said in a bantering tone, under which the note of seriousness could be heard:

"You know I am not a bigot. But I will have no professional-beauty nonsense, for three reasons: First, because professional beauties are played out; they are no longer the rage--that reason would be sufficient with average people. Second, and more important, it isn't, and wasn't, and never can be good form to be a professional beauty; and third," he hesitated and looked fondly at his daughter, "and third--confound it, my girl is too good-looking to be mentioned in the same breath as any of these popular beauties."

"Bravo, sir," said Hanbury, as he got up to open the door for Mrs. Ashton and Dora, who had risen to leave the room.

When the two men were left alone, Mr. Ashton said:

"This Leigh is, I assume, one of the people?"

"Yes," said Hanbury, who wished Leigh and all about him at the bottom of the Red Sea. "But, he is not, you know, one of the horny-handed sons of toil. He is a man of some reading, and intelligence, and education, but rather vulgar all the same."

"All right. I'm sure if he is your friend he must be an excellent fellow, my dear Hanbury; and if you put him up for this constituency, I'll vote for him, no matter what his principles are. That is," he added thoughtfully, "if I have a vote. But, for the present, my dear fellow, I'll tell you what we'll do with him--we'll let him alone--that is, if you don't mind doing so."

"I shall do so with great pleasure. I have had quite enough of him for to-day," said the other, greatly relieved.

"All right. Hanbury, I shall let you into a secret. I don't care for people who aren't nice. I prefer nice people. I like people like my wife and Dora, and your mother and yourself."

"I am sure, sir, you are very good to include me in your list."

"And I don't care at all for people who aren't nice, you know. I don't care at all for the poor. When they aren't objectionable they are an awful bore. For the life of me I can't make out what reasonable men and women see in the people. I don't object to them. I suppose they are necessary, and have their uses and functions, and all that; but if they have, why interfere with them? Lots of fellows I know go in for the poor partly out of fun, and for a change, and partly to catch votes. All right. But these fellows don't emigrate from the West and live in the East End. If they did, they'd go mad, my boy--they'd go mad. Anyway, I should. You know, I hate politics, and never talk politics. If I were a very rich man, I'd buy the whole of the Isle of Wight and banish all the poor from it, and live there the whole of my life, and drown any of the poor that dared to land on it. I wouldn't tell this to any soul in the world except you. I know I can trust you to keep my secret. Mind, I don't object to my wife and Dora doing what they like in such affairs; in fact, I rather like it, for it keeps matters smooth for me. This is, I know, a horribly wicked profession of faith; but I make it to you alone. I know that, according to poetic justice, I ought to be killed on my way to the club by a coster's run-away ass or the horse in a pauper's hearse, but I don't think I shall oblige poetic justice by falling into or under such a scheme--*I am always very careful at crossings*. If you are *very* careful at crossings, I don't see how poetic justice is to get at you. There, let us drop this ghastly subject now."

The conversation then wandered off into general ways, and lost its particular and personal character.

Hanbury had never heard from any other man so cynical a speech as Ashton's, and he was considerably shocked and pained by it. His own convictions were few. He was himself in that condition of aimless aspiring enthusiasm proper to ardent youth, when youth has just begun to think conscientiously with a view to action. He could see nothing very clearly, but everything he did see shone fiercely in splendid clouds. This low view of life, this mere animal craving for peace and comfort, for nice things and nice people, was abhorrent to him. If in the early part of that day he had spoken slightly of the people, it was out of no cynical indifference, but from the pain and worry caused to himself in his own mind by his opinions not being ascertained and fixed.

If he hesitated to throw his fortunes into the scale with the more advanced politicians, it was from no mean or sordid motive. He could not decide within himself which class had the more worthy moral sanction. If the present rate of progress was too slow, then those who sought to retard it were villains; if too quick, those who tried to accelerate it were fools. Whatever else he might be, he was not corrupt.

What Mr. Ashton said had a great influence on young Hanbury. It aroused his suspicions. Could it be that most of those who sought to check the car of progress harboured such vile and unmanly sentiments as his host had uttered in confidence? Could it be that Ashton was more courageous because he had nothing tangible to lose by candour? Could it be that if he himself espoused the side of the slower movers, it would be assumed he harboured opinions such as those Ashton had just uttered? The mere supposition was an outrage. It was a suspicion under which he would not willingly consent to rest one hour. This cold-blooded declaration of Ashton's had done more towards the making up of his mind than all he had heard and read since he turned his attention to public affairs.

Yes, he would decide to throw himself body and soul among the more progressive party. He would espouse the principles of the extreme Liberals. Then there would be no more wavering or doubt, and no question of discord in politics would arise between Dora and himself. They would have but the one creed in public affairs. Their opinions would not merely resemble the principles of one another--they would be identical.

Mr. Ashton and his guest did not remain long in the dining-room. Hanbury was not treated

with ceremony in that house, so Mr. Ashton merely looked into the drawing-room for a few minutes, and then went off to his club. Mrs. Ashton had letters to write, and retired shortly after him to the study, leaving Dora alone with John Hanbury.

He thought that in order to keep a good understanding there was nothing like establishing a clear understanding. In order to ensure complete pleasantness in the future, all things that might lead to unpleasantness ought to be removed from the past and present. The best way of treating a nettle, when you have to touch it, is to seize it boldly.

He was in love with Dora, and he was resolved to marry her. That very evening he was going to ask her if she did not think the best thing they could do would be to get married soon, at once. He had made up his mind to adopt the popular platform, and then, of course, his way would be clear. Up to this he had been regarded as almost committed to the more cautious side, to the Conservative party, the Democratic Conservative party. By declaring himself now for the advanced party, he should be greeted by it as a convert, and no doubt he could find a willing constituency at the next general election.

That was all settled, all plain sailing. He was a young man, and in love; but it must be observed he was not also a fool. He would show all who knew him he was no fool. The life he now saw before him was simple, straightforward, pleasant. Dora was beautiful, and good, and clever, and in his part of popular politician would be an ornament by his side, and, perhaps, a help to him in his career. She was a dear girl, and would adorn any position to which he might aspire, to which he might climb.

Yes, he was a young man, he was in love, but he was no fool, and he knew that Dora would think less of him, would think nothing at all of him, if she believed him to be a fool. Between lovers there ought to be confidence, freedom of speech. She would esteem him all the more for being candid and plain with her. What was this he had to say to her? Oh, yes, he recollected----

Dora and he were sitting close to one another in the window-place where Leigh and he had found her earlier. The long June day had faded into luminous night; the blinds had not been lowered, or the lamps in the room lit. The long, soft, cool, blue midsummer twilight was still and delicious for any people, but especially for lovers.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE DARK.

"Well, Dora," he began, "this has been an exciting day."

"Yes," she said softly, and added with tender anxiety, "I hope you have quite recovered? I hope you do not feel any bad effects of--of--of--what happened to you, Jack?" She did not know how he would take even this solicitous reference to his fainting.

"I feel quite well, dearest. Do not let us talk of that affair again. That cabman brought you quite safe?"

"Oh, quite safe," she said gently. "Tell me what happened after you left me?" It gratified her that he thought of her. She had accused him of selfishness, now he was showing that his first thought was of her. With the self-sacrificing spirit of her sex she was satisfied with a little sympathy on her own account. She wanted to give him all her sympathy now. "Of course, I know you found Mr. Leigh. What an extraordinary man. Is he a little mad, do you think?"

"A good deal mad, I fancy, with conceit," he said impatiently. Leigh, personally, had been a misfortune, and now the memory of him was exasperating and a bore.

The ungentleness of the answer jarred upon the girl's heart. Leigh had suffered such miserable wrongs at the hand of fate, that surely he was deserving of all consideration and compassion. His bodily disabilities made him more helpless and piteous than a lonely, deserted child. "Tell me all," she said. "It was so good of you to bring him here. I felt quite proud of you when I saw you coming with him. Many men would have been afraid to trust so uncouth a man with so unpleasant a secret into this room of a Thursday." She spoke to encourage Hanbury, by

anticipating in part his account of the generous thing she fancied he had done.

He twisted and turned uneasily on his chair. Whatever Dora or anyone else might think of him, he was not going to pose in plumes that were not his by right. It was very gratifying in one sense that she should give him credit for such extravagant, such Quixotic good nature; but she must not be allowed to run away with the story.

"The fact is, Dora," said he in a tone of deliberation and dissatisfaction, "I did not bring him here of my own free will. Indeed, I do not know how you could imagine I would invite such a man. I found him contemplating a paragraph for the papers, and he promised he would say nothing about what had occurred if I would introduce him to you. He seems to have conceived a romantic interest in you, because of your likeness to some one he knows." Later this evening he should tell her all about this "some one."

"I see," she said, her spirits declining. It was not out of good nature or generosity, but cowardice, moral cowardice, Jack had brought Leigh. The principle which had made Jack flee from Welbeck Place after sending Leigh for the cab, and then made him fly back there again when he learned that the little man knew their names, had forced him against his will to bring Leigh to her mother's At home. She was in the most indulgent and forgiving of humours, but-but-but-"Oh, Jack, I am so sorry!" was all she could think of saying. She was sorry for him, for John Hanbury, who either was not, or would not be, too big to be troubled by such paltry fears, and irritated by such paltry annoyances.

"Sorry! Sorry for what?" he cried. He gathered from her tone and manner that she was not speaking out fully. He could not guess what was in her mind. He had a little lecture or exhortation prepared to deliver her, and in addition to the unpleasantness of not knowing exactly what she meant when she said she was sorry, he had the confusing and exasperating sense of repression, of not being able to get on the ground he intended occupying.

She did not speak for a while. She was looking out into the dark blue air of the street. She had formed a high ideal of what he, her hero, ought to be, nearly was. But now and then, often, he did not reach the standard she had raised. Her ideal was the man of noble thought certainly, but he should still more be the man of noble action. She would have laid down her life freely in what she believed to be a good cause, and to her mind the noblest cause in which a woman could die would be for a noble man whom she loved. She believed the place of woman was by the side of man, not independent of man. She held that in all matters man and wife should be, to use words that had been employed in acts, to think of which rent her heart with agony, one and undivisible. She regarded strong-minded women as wrong-minded women. Strength and magnanimity were the attributes of men; love and gentleness of women. She wanted this man beside her to shine bright in the eyes of men by reason of his great and rare gifts. No one doubted his abilities as a man; she wanted him to treat his abilities as only the foundation of his character. She wanted not only to know that he possessed great gifts and precious powers, but to feel as well that he was fit to be a god. She yearned to pass her life by the side of a man who could force the world to listen to his words, and fill the one pedestal in her earthly temple. She wanted him to be a hero and a conqueror in the face of the world, and she wanted to give him the whole loyal worship of her woman's heart, that she might live always in the only attitude which rests a woman's spirit, the attitude of giving service of the hand and largess of the heart, and homage of the soul. She wanted to give this man all her heart and soul unceasingly. To give him everything that was hers to give, under Heaven.

It was necessary to make some reply, and she had none ready. In the pause she had not been thinking. She had been seeing visions, dreaming dreams, from which occupations thought is always absent.

He became still more uneasy. Her hand was in his. He pressed it slightly, to recall her attention to him, "What are you sorry for, Dora? What are you thinking of, dear? Are you angry with me still?"

She started without turning her eyes away from the blue duskness of the street, and in a tone of wonderful tenderness and sadness, said:

"I don't know exactly what I was thinking of, Jack. The evening is so fresh and still it is not necessary for one to think. Angry with you, dear! Oh, no! Oh, no! Angry with you for what?"

"About the harsh words I said of Leigh. It seems to me your manner changed the moment I mentioned his name. Let us not speak of him any more this evening."

He pressed her hand, and stole his arm round her waist. She returned the pressure of his hand, but did not turn her eyes inward from the still street.

"But why should we not speak of him, Jack?"

"Because, dear, we are here together, and we are much more interesting to one another than he can be to either."

"Yes, dear, in a way more interesting to one another than all the world besides; but in another way not nearly so interesting as this poor clockmaker," she said slowly, in a dreamy voice.

"I own," he said testily, "I do not see the matter as you put it. How can he, a mere stranger, and a mere stranger who might have done us harm, be more interesting in any light than we are to one another?" He was a man, and thought as the average man thinks, of getting not giving. He was here alone with this beautiful girl who was to be his wife one day, and his chief concern was to get the most pleasure out of her presence by his side, the sound of her voice, the assurance of her love, the contemplation of their future happiness, the sense that she was his very own, that she would be bound to render him obedience which would, of course, never be exacted, and that he was about to lay before her his views of what her conduct ought to be, of where she had declined to accept his advice with regard to their walk of that day, and above all of his determination as to his future course, and the desirableness of their early marriage. He wanted in fact to get her disapproval of the expedition which had led to the unpleasantness of that day, her disapproval of her venturesome overruling of his judgment and her approval of all his plans for the future. He did not state his position thus. He simply wanted certain things, and never thought of referring his wants to any principle.

"In this way," she answered softly, "all about us is happy and assured. For ourselves we have everything that is necessary not only for mere life, but for enjoyment. The things we lack are only luxuries----"

"Luxuries!" he cried. "Do you consider the ardours of a public life luxuries? Do you not yet know me better than to believe I would lead an existence of idle pleasure? Why, a public man now-a-days works harder than a blacksmith, and generally without necessity or reward!" He spoke indignantly. She had attacked his class, she was showing indifference to the usefulness and disinterestedness of his order.

Neither his words nor his manner roused her. "I am not at all forgetting what you speak of. I am thinking, Jack dear, of things more common and essential than fame or the reputation of a benefactor to man. You know I hold that the first sphere of woman is her home. People like us are rarely grateful for food or shelter, or even health, and no people of any kind are grateful for the air they breathe." She paused and sighed. She did not finish her thought in words.

"Well," said he, withdrawing his arm from her waist and taking a chair opposite her in the window-place, "how does this apply? Of course, when you realize the fact that you could not live without air, you are grateful for it. I don't see what you are driving at."

"I cannot help thinking of the man and pitying him. He will go into his grave having missed nearly everything in the world."

"Why, the man has enough conceit to make a battalion of Guards happy. He is a greater man in his own opinion than the Premier, the Lord Chancellor and the Commander-in-Chief rolled into one."

"But even if he is, Jack, that is not all. The Premier and the Lord Chancellor and the Commander-in-Chief, over and above their great successes and fame, have the comforts ordinary men enjoy as well. They are not afflicted in their forms as he is. You say he is interested in me because I remind him of some one. How must it be with an ordinary human heart beating in such a body? Would it not be better for such a man to be born blind than to find his Pallas-Athena, as he calls her?"

The eyes of the girl could not be seen in the darkness of the room; they were full of tears and there were tears in her voice.

Hanbury started, he could not tell why. He exclaimed: "Good Heavens, Dora! you do not mean to tell me that you feel seriously concerned in the love affairs, if there are such things, of this man?"

"No, dear, but I am saddened when I think of them. However absurd it may seem, I cannot help believing this finding of his ideal must be a dreadful misfortune to him."

"Even if you yourself were the ideal, Dora?"

"Even so. But you tell me he had found it before he came here. Of course, dear, my mind is influenced only for the moment by the thought of him and his affairs; but ever since I heard him speak, grotesque as it may seem, my heart has been feeling for him with his poor deformed body and his elaborate gallantry of manner and his Pallas-Athena."

Now was the time to tell Dora of this Miss Grace, but it seemed to him the story was too long for so late an hour, and that it could be told with pleasanter effect when Dora was less exercised about the dwarf. The conversation was too sentimental for him. He had matters of practical moment to speak about, and this subject obstinately blocked the way. The best thing for him to do was to give the matter an every-day aspect at once. "Well, Dora, in any case, Leigh isn't in the first glory of youth, and if he ever does fall in love and marry, it will, I am sure, be no Pallas-Athena, but a barmaid, with practical views, and a notion of keeping an hotel, or something of that kind."

"But how do you think a man with his imagination, his Pallas-Athena, and his incomparable clock and his miracle gold----?"

"Which is nonsense, of course. You don't mean that you believe in transmutation in this end of the nineteenth century?" he said impatiently.

"I do not know. I am not scientific. I suppose more wonderful things have been done. If there ever was a time for making gold it is now. All the wonders that poets dreamed of long ago are coming true in prose to-day. Why not the great dream of the alchemists too? At all events, the fancies are bad for him. Suppose there is to be no Pallas-Athena or wonderful clock or miracle gold in his life, what is there left to him? It seems to me he is all the poorer for his delusions. Jack, I will not try to disguise it. I am intensely interested in this poor clockmaker, this mad visionary, if you prefer to call him that."

This was not at all the kind of preface Hanbury wanted to the communications he had to make to her. He felt disconcerted, clumsy, petulant. "I have been so unfortunate as to introduce the cause of all this anxiety to you. It would have been much better for every sake I had not gone back and met the man the second time, much better I should cut a ridiculous figure before all the town to-morrow!" He was growing angry as his speech went on. His own words were inflaming his mind by the implication of his wrongs.

She placed her hand gently on his, and said in a reproachful voice, a voice quite different from the meditative tones in which she had been speaking, "Jack, I did not mean that. You know I did not mean that. Why do you reproach me with thoughts you ought to know I could not harbour?" She had turned in from the window, and was looking at him opposite her in the dim darkness. She was now fully alive to his presence and everything around her.

"No doubt," he said bitterly, "I am ungenerous to you. I am unjust. I am afraid, Dora, I am but an ill-conditioned beast----"

"Jack, that is the most unjust thing you could possibly say to me. In saying it you seem to use words you fancy I would like to use, only I am not brave enough."

"I know you are brave enough for anything. I know it is I who am the coward."

"Jack! Oh, Jack!"

"You told me so yourself to-day. You cannot say I am putting that word into your mouth." He was taking fire.

"Have you no mercy for me, Jack; my Jack?"

"You told me with your own lips I had no thought but of my miserable self in the miserable thing that happened."

"Jack, have you no pity. My Jack, have you no pity for your own Dora." She seized his hands with both her own. There were no tears in her voice now, there was the blood of her heart.

"Ay, and when I, yielding to my cowardly heart----"

"Oh God!" She took her hands away from his and covered her face with them.

"--And brought that man here as the price of his silence, you--knowing the chicken-livered creature I am--absolutely asked him to come next week. To come here where his presence is to cure me of my cowardice or accustom me to the peril of ridicule which you know I hate worse than death!" He was blazing now.

"Good night."

"After this, how can I be sure that you may not consider it salutary to betray me yourself?" He was mad.

"Good bye, Jack. Oh God, my heart is broken!"

"I tell you----" He turned around. He was alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

MRS. HANBURY.

John Hanbury had reached the end of the street before he knew where he was. He had no memory of how he got out of the house. No doubt he had behaved like a madman, and he had been temporarily insane. He must have snatched his hat in the hall, but he was without his overcoat.

His heart was beating violently, and his head was burning hot. He must have run down the street. There was no one in view. He had only a whirling and flashing memory of the last few minutes with Dora. His temper had completely mastered him, and he must have spoken and behaved like a maniac. He must have behaved like a maniac in her presence--to her!

Now and then, in the heat of public speaking, he had been carried beyond himself, beyond the power of memory afterwards, but never in his life had impetuosity betrayed him in private life until now. What sort of a lunatic must he have been to sin for the first time before the only woman he ever cared for? The woman he had asked to be his wife?

The excitement of the day had been too much for him, and he had broken down in the end. He had taken only one glass of wine at dinner, and only coffee after. Something must have gone wrong with his brain. Could it be this fainting which had overtaken him to-day, and twice before, indicated some flaw or weakness in the brain? It would have been better he had died in that accursed slum than come back to consciousness and done this. Then he had fainted like a woman, and behaved like a coward. Now he had acted like a cad! He had abused, reviled the woman he professed to love, and who he knew loved him! He dared say he had not struck her! It was, perhaps, a pity he had not struck her, for if he had he should be either now in the hands of the police, or shot by her father! It was a good job the girl had a father to shoot him. If he was called out he should fire in the air, and if Ashton demanded another shot and missed him, he should reserve his fire and blow his own brains out. When a man did a thing like this, there was only one reflection that could ease his intolerable agony of reproach--he could blow out his brains and rid the world of a cowardly cad.

From the moment he found himself at the end of Curzon Street until he reached his mother's house in Chester Square, he walked rapidly, mechanically, and without design. When he saw the door before him he was staggered for a moment.

"How did I come here?" he asked himself, as he opened it with a latch-key. He could not answer the question. He saw in a dim way that it would be interesting to imagine how a man in possession of his faculties walked a whole mile without knowing why he walked or remembering anything by the way. But at present--Pooh! pooh!

"Mrs. Hanbury wishes to see you, sir, in her own room, if you please," said a servant, who had heard him come in and appeared while he was hanging up his hat.

"Very well. Tell her I shall be with her in a few minutes."

His mother's room adjoined her sleeping chamber, and was opposite his own bed-room on the second floor.

He turned into the long dining-room to his right. There was here a dim light burning, the windows were wide open, the place cool and still.

He shut the door behind him and began pacing quickly up and down. It was necessary in some way to collect his mind before meeting his mother.

He shut his fists hard against his chest and breathed hard as he walked. By his breathing he judged he must have run part of the way from Curzon Street.

The perspiration was trickling down his forehead. He held his head up high; he felt as though there was a tight hand round his throat. He thrust his fingers inside his collar and tried to ease his neck.

"This is absurd," he said aloud at last. But what it was that he felt to be absurd he did not know.

"The heat is suffocating one!" he said in a short time, and tore again at his shirt, loosing his necktie and rumpling his collar.

"I am choking for air!" he cried, and tried to fling the windows higher up, but they were both as high as they could go.

"My throat is cracking!" he cried huskily, and looking round with blazing eyes through the dim room saw a caraffa on the side-board. He poured out a glass of water and swallowed the water at a draught. "Oh, that is much better," he said with a smile, and resumed his walk up and down the long room at a lessened rate. "Let me think," he said; "let me think if I can."

He clasped his hands behind his back and leaned his head on one side, his attitude when

designing the plan of a speech or musing upon the parts of it.

The water he had swallowed and the slackened pace and the posture of reflection, tended to cool him and bring his mind into condition for harmonious working.

"Let me treat the matter," he whispered, "as though I were only a friend, and had come here to state my case and implore advice. How does the matter stand exactly? Let us look at the facts, the simple facts first."

His pace became slower and slower. His face ceased to work, and lost the flushed and wild appearance. Gradually his head rose erect and stood back upon his neck. His eyes lit up with the flashes of reason. They no longer blazed with the flame of chaotic despair. He unclasped his hands and began to gesticulate. He ceased to be the self-convicted culprit, and became the argumentative contender before the court. He had ceased to do his worst against the accused and was exercising all his faculties to compel an acquittal.

Presently his manner changed. He had adduced all his reasons and knit them together in his argument. Now he was beginning to appeal to the feelings of the man on the bench and the men in the box. His head was no longer erect, his gestures no longer combative. He was asking them to remember the circumstances of the case. He was painting a picture of himself. He appealed to their finer natures, and begged them not to condemn this young man, who by the nature of the great art, the noble art of oratory, to which he had devoted much study and in which he had had some successful practice, lived always in a state of exalted sentiment and sensations. This young man was more likely than others of his years to be overborne and carried away by emotions which would not disturb the equanimity of another man. His nature was excitable, and he had the ready, in this case the fatally ready, command of words belonging to men who had trained themselves for public speaking.

Here the scene became so real to his mind that unknown to himself he broke out into speech:

"Gentlemen, I know he, may not be excused wholly. I will not ask you to say he is not to blame. I will not dare to say I think he behaved as a considerate and thoughtful man. But, gentlemen, though you cannot approve his conduct, you will not, oh, I pray you, do not take away from him the reputation he holds dearer than life, the reputation of being a sincere man and a gentleman. Amerce him in any penalty you please short of denying him the reputation of being earnest and high-minded and----" He paused. Tears for the spectacle of himself were in his eyes. His voice was shaken by the intensity of his pity for himself.

"John," said a soft voice behind him.

He turned quickly round. A tall, slender woman, with calm, clear face and snow-white hair, was standing in the room.

"Mother! I did not hear you come in."

"I hope I did not break in disastrously. It is late. I wanted to see you for a few minutes before I went to bed. I did not like to speak until you stopped."

He had gone to her and put his arm round her waist and kissed her smooth white hair above her smooth, pure forehead. "Mother," he said, in a low, soft, musical and infinitely tender voice, "I am sorry I kept you waiting for me. I was going to you in a moment, dear."

There was none of the art of the orator in these words, or in the exquisitely tender flexions of the voice. But the heart of the man was in the tones of his voice for his mother.

She looked at him in the dim light and saw his disordered collar and tie, but put that down to excitement caused by his rehearsal.

He led her gently to a chair and took one in front of her by the side of the dining-table. He took her thin, white hand in both his own and looked into her calm, beautiful face, radiant with that tranquil light of maternal love justified and fulfilled.

"You have something to tell me, mother? Something pleasant, I hope, about yourself." He had never spoken in a voice of such unreckoning love to Dora in all their meetings and partings. It was the broad, rich, even sound of a river that is always flowing in one direction and always full, not the tinkle of a capricious fountain or the tempestuous rush of a torrent at the mercy of exhaustion or drought.

"I have, my son. It does not concern me, or if it does, but indirectly. Indeed, I do not know. It has to do with you, dear." They, like sweethearts, called one another "dear," because they were inexpressibly dear to one another.

"With me, mother? And how?" John Hanbury was not a handsome man, but when he smiled at his slender, grey-haired mother, and patted her delicate white thin hands with his own large and brown, there was more than physical beauty in his looks, there was a subjugating, an intoxicating radiance, and all-completed prostration of his soul before the mother he worshipped.

"I do not know exactly, John. Your father gave me in trust for you, as you know, a paper, which I was not to give to you except at some great crisis of your life. If no harm of any particular moment threatened you until you were thirty, you were never to see this paper."

"I know," he said. "I was only seventeen then--not launched in the world--and he thought I might, when I came of age, and got my two thousand a-year, plunge into dissipation, and take to racing or backing horses, or cards, or something of that kind. Well, mother, I hope you are not uneasy about me on those scores? This paper is no doubt one of extremely good advice from an excellent father to a young son. I am sure I will read the paper with all the respect I owe to any words he may have left for my guidance. You do not think, mother, I am now likely to give way to any of those temptations?"

She shook her small head gravely.

"I do not fear you will give way to the ordinary temptations of youth, John. I know you too well to dread anything of the kind. I don't think the paper your father left me for you refers to the ordinary danger in a young man's path."

"Then you must believe it has to do with unusual dangers, and you must believe I am now threatened by some unusual dangers?" said he with a start. He had been threatened by a very uncommon danger that day, the danger of being made a laughing stock for the whole town, but such a misfortune could never have been contemplated by his father. Compared with the importance of a message from his dead father, how poor and insignificant seemed his fears of the early part of this day.

"I do not know. I am not sure. Something out of the common must be in your case, my dear child." What a luxury of pride and delight to think the tall, powerful, stalwart, clever man, was her child, had been a little helpless baby lying in her lap, pressed close to her heart! "When your father died you were in his opinion too young, I dare say, to be taken into his confidence. He often told me he would leave a paper for you, and that I was not to give it to you until you were between twenty one and thirty (if I lived), and that I was only to give it to you in case you showed any very strong leaning towards politics or a public life."

The son smiled, and threw himself back in his chair. He felt greatly relieved. He knew his father had always shown a morbid horror of politics, and had always tried to impress upon him the emptiness of public honours and distinctions. Why, his father never said. The son distinctly remembered how tremulously excited the old and ailing man had been at every rumour of ambitious scheming abroad, particularly how he garrulously condemned the ceaseless scheming for the throne of France then perplexing the political world. He had often pointed out to his young son the folly of the Legitimists and the Orleanists and the Napoleons, until once John had said, "Why, sir, you are as emphatic to me in this matter as if I myself were a pretender!" Upon which his father had said, "Hush! Hush! my boy. You must not jest about such matters. Idle, the idlest, pretensions of the kind have often caused oceans of bloodshed." Upon which John had smiled in secret to note how his father's cherished horror had carried him so far as to caution him, John Hanbury, member of a simple English household, against aspiring to the kingly or imperial throne of the Tuileries!

"You do not think, mother," he said gaily, "that I am going to buy a tame eagle, and hire a fishing boat and take France?"

She smiled sadly, remembering her husband's dread of lofty aspirants. "No," she said, "I think, if your father were alive now, he would see as little need of cautioning you against becoming a pretender to the throne of France as of keeping out of dissipation. But he told me if ever you showed signs of plunging into politics I was to give you the paper. I left it in my room, thinking we might both sit there, not fancying we should have our chat here. I shall give it to you as you go to your room."

"And you have no clue to what the paper contains?" he asked pleasantly.

"No," she answered with hesitancy and a thoughtful lowering of her eyes. "You remember, at that time--I mean as a boy and lad--you were a fierce Radical."

"Oh, more than that! I was a Republican, a Socialist, a Nihilist, I think. A regular out-and-out Fire-eater, Iconoclast, Destructionist, I think," the young man laughed, throwing himself back in his chair and enjoying the memory of his youthful thoroughness.

"And your father took no part whatever in politics, seemed to dread the mention of them. He was at heart, I think, an aristocrat."

"And married the daughter of Sir Ralph Preston, whose family goes back centuries before the Plantagenets, and to whom a baronetcy is like a mere Brummagem medal on the breast of a Pharaoh."

Mrs. Hanbury shook her head deprecatingly and smiled. "I am afraid you are as ardent in your estimate of my family pretensions to lineage as you were long ago in your hatred of kings and princes."

"But I have always been true to you, mother!" he said in that wonderful, irresistible, meltingly affectionate voice; he took her hand and kissed it reverentially.

"Yes, my son. Always." As his head was bent over her hand she laid her hand on his thick dark curly hair.

"My mother," he murmured, when he felt her touch.

Her eyes filled and shone with tears. She made an effort, commanded herself, and as her son sat back on his chair, went on: "You know when your father went into business there was no necessity of a money kind for his doing so. The Hanburys have had plenty of money always, never lands, as far as I know, but money always. They were not a very old family as far as I have heard. This was a point on which your father was reticent. At all events he went into business in the City, as you are aware, and there made a second fortune."

"Well, mother, I am not at all ashamed of our connection with business or the City," said the young man pleasantly.

"Nor am I, John, as you know. When I married your father, none of my people said, at all events to me, that I disgraced my family or degraded my blood. Your father was in business in Fenchurch Street then. My family had known your father all his life. Our marriage was one purely of inclination, and was most happy. Your father was a simple, intelligent, kind-hearted gentleman, John, and as good a husband and father as ever breathed."

"Indeed, mother, I am quite sure of that. I still feel raw and cold without him," said the young man gravely.

"And I shall never get over his loss. I never forget it for one hour of any day. But I am growing talkative in my age like all old people," she said, drawing herself up and laughing faintly. "I am sure I have no reason for saying it, but I fancy the paper your father left with me for you, is in some way connected with the business, or the reason which made him go into business. He gave it to me a few days before he died, and when he knew he was dying. He gave it to me after saying a great deal to me about business, after arranging his other business affairs. He said he did not like you to take so much interest in politics, but that he supposed he must not try to foretell your future. That there was such a thing as going too far in any cause, and that if ever you showed any disposition to put your extreme views in practice, I was to give you this paper. 'In fact, Amy,' said he, 'if our dear boy goes into public life at the popular side, give him this paper; it may be the means of moderating his ardour; but do not give it to him until he is over twenty-one. He will have, I think, no need of it if he keeps quiet until he is thirty. If his mind takes the other bend and he shows any sympathy with any reactionary party in Europe, any party that wants to unsettle things as they now are, destroy this on your peril. If you think he is devoted only to English Radicalism, give him the paper; if he mixes himself up with any Republican party on the Continent, give him the paper. But if he shows sympathy with any pretender on the Continent, *burn the paper, Amy, as you love your boy, and bury the ashes of it too.*' Those were his very words. What they mean or refer to I do not know." Her face had grown paler.

"And you never read the paper?"

"No. Nor have I the least clue to its contents. I only know that your father was a sensible man, and attached great importance to it. If you come I will give it to you now."

They both rose and left the dining-room together. As they went up-stairs she said:

"I am aware for some time you have not been quite certain as to the side you would throw in your lot with. I don't think your father ever contemplated such a situation, and it seems to me that if this paper is to be of any use to you it must be of most use when you are wavering."

"But I am no longer wavering. I have decided to throw in my lot with the advanced party."

"When did you make up your mind?"

"To-day."

"Oh, you dined at Curzon Street. And have you arranged about your marriage with dear Dora? No new daughter was ever so welcome as she will be to me. Has the time been fixed?"

He started. "No, not exactly, mother." He had forgotten for the past quarter of an hour all about the quarrel or scene with Dora. He flushed crimson, and then grew dusky white. He seized the balustrade for a moment to steady himself. His mother was walking in front, and could not see the signs of his agitation.

He recovered himself instantly.

She judged by his tone that her question had not been well timed. With the intention of getting away as far as possible from the thought of Dora, or marriage, she said, turning round upon him with a smile as she opened her boudoir door, "By the way, who was that admirable paragon whose panegyric you were pronouncing in the dining-room when I came in?"

He laughed uneasily and did not meet her eyes. "An acquaintance of mine, a poor devil who has got himself into serious trouble."

"A friend of yours, John, in serious trouble."

"Not a friend, mother, an acquaintance of mine."

"Do I know him, John?"

"No, mother. Not in the least. I should be very sorry you did. I hope you may never know him."

For the second time in a minute Mrs. Hanbury felt that she had asked an ill-timed question.

She handed him the paper of which she had spoken. He said good-night to her, and as the clock on the lower lobby was striking midnight he entered his own room.

CHAPTER XX.

JOHN HANBURY ALONE.

When John Hanbury closed and locked the door of his own room and threw himself into an old easy chair, he felt first an overwhelming sense of relief. A day of many exciting and unpleasant events was over, and he was encompassed by the security of his home and environed closely by the privacy of his own sleeping chamber. No one uninvited would enter by the outer door of the house; no one could enter this room without his absolute permission. He was secure against the annoyance or intrusion of people. Here he could rest and be safe. Here he was protected against even himself, for he could not make himself ridiculous or commit himself when alone. All trials of great agony spring from what we conceive to be our relations with others. Beyond physical pains and pleasures, which are few and unimportant in life, we owe all our joys and sorrows to what others think or say of us. Even in the most abstracted spiritual natures the anger of Heaven is more intolerable to anticipate than the torture of Hell.

John Hanbury's room was in the back of the house. Here, as in the dining-room, the window was wide open. The stars were dull in the misty midsummer sky. Now and then came the muffled rattle of a distant cab, now and then the banging of doors, now and then the sounds of shooting locks and bolts as servants fastened up the rears of houses for the night. Beyond these sounds there was none, and these came so seldom and so dulled by distance, and with intervals so increasing in length that they seemed like the drowsy muttering of the vast city as it moved heavily seeking ease and sleep.

For a while Hanbury sat without stirring. He still held in his hand the paper his mother had given him. He knew he had not escaped the battle. He was merely reposing between the fights. He sat with his head drooped low upon his chest, his arms lying listlessly by his side, his legs stretched out. This was the first rest of body or mind he had had that day, but, as in a sleep obtained from narcotics, while it gave him physical relief his mind was gaining no freshness.

At length Hanbury shook himself, shuddered, and rose. The light was not fully up. He left his window open from the bottom all night. He went to it, pulled up the blind and sat down on the low window-frame. He put his hand on the stone window sill, and leaning forward looked below.

Here the silence was not so deep or monotonous as in the room with the blind down. There arose sounds, faint sounds of music from the backs of houses where entertainments were being given, now and then voices and laughter could be heard indistinctly. In many of the windows shone lights. No suggestion of tumult or trouble came from any side or from the sky above. On earth spread a peaceful heaven of man's making and man's keeping; above a peaceful heaven of God's will.

Here was the largest, and richest, and most powerful, and most civilized city of all time, lying round the feet of a stupendous goddess of liberty, whose statue had been reared by wisdom borrowed from all the ages of the history of man. This was the heart of the colossal nation whose vital blood flowed in every clime.

Here were powers capable of beneficent application lying ready to the hand of every strength.

To be here and able was to have the key-board of the most gigantic organ ever devised by human mind open to one's touch.

Here all creeds were free, all thoughts were free, all words were free, all men were free. There was no slavery of the soul or the person. Here, the leader of the people was the ruler of the state. The people made the laws, and the King saw that the laws were obeyed.

Each man of the people was a monarch who deputed his regal powers to the King.

An hereditary sovereign was the best, better a thousand times than elected King.

In this country were no plots and schemings about succession. Here the King's son came to the throne under the will of the people. This country was never disturbed by struggles to get a good ruler. This country always had a good ruler, that is the will of the people.

What a miserable spectacle France, great France, chivalric France presented now! How many pretenders were there to the throne?--to the presidential chair? There were the Legitimists, and the Orleanists, and the Napoleons, two branches of Napoleons, and a dozen aspirants to the presidency! How miserable! What waste of vigour and dignity.

Yes, he was glad he had made up his mind. He would devote himself, body and soul, to the sovereign people under the constitutional sovereign.

He would be as advanced as any man short of revolution, short of violence. His motto should be All things for the people under the people's King.

No doubt his mother's talk to him in the dining-room had set him off on such currents of thought. His mother's talk in the dining-room--by the way, he had not yet looked at the paper she had given him.

He pulled down the blind, turned up the lights over the mantel, and standing with his back to the chimney-piece, examined the packet in his hand.

It was a large envelope, tied in a very elaborate manner, and the string was sealed in three places at the back. On the front, under the string, he read his own name in his father's well-known large legible writing. He cut the string and the envelope, and drew out of the latter a long narrow parcel. This he opened, and found to consist of half-a-dozen sheets of brief-paper closely covered on both sides with the large legible writing of his father. The paper was secured at the left hand corner by a loop of red tape. He saw at a glance that the document took the form of a letter to him. It began, "My dear and only son, John," and finished with "Your most affectionate and anxious father, William Hanbury." The young man turned over the sheets slowly, glancing at each in turn. This long letter was not, from first to finish, broken in any way. There were no general heading, or divisions into sections, or even paragraphs. From beginning to end no break appeared. The wide margin bore not a single scratch. There was no mark from the address to the signature to attract attention.

He glanced at the opening words of this long letter. From them it was plain his father meant him to read them quietly and deliberately in the sequence in which they ran. The first sentence was this:

"It is of the greatest importance to the object I have in view that the facts I am about to disclose to you should reach your mind in the order I have here put them; otherwise the main fact in the revelation might have a pernicious effect upon you, my son."

The young man lowered the manuscript and mused a moment. It was obvious to him that no matter what he should think of the contents of this document his father had considered them of first-rate importance, and likely to influence his own mind and actions in no ordinary way. His father's sense and judgment! had never been called in question by any of his father's oldest and closest friends, and those who knew him most intimately never saw reason to account him liable to exaggerated estimates of the influence of ideas, except in his morbid sensitiveness to anything like popular revolutions or dynastic intrigues.

John Hanbury raised the document and recommenced where he had left off. That first sentence was cautionary: the second sentence took away the breath of the young man, by reason of the large field it opened to view, and the strange and intense personal interest it at once aroused. It ran thus:

"About the middle of the last century, when George the Second sat on the throne of England, and the usurper, Elizabeth, daughter of Peter the Great, on the throne of Russia, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams was appointed our ambassador to Russia. To Sir Charles Hanbury Williams you and I owe our name, although a drop of his blood does not flow in our veins, nor are we in any

way that I know of related to him or his."

Again the young man lowered the manuscript from before his eyes. His face suddenly flushed, his eyes contracted, he thrust his head forward as though listening intently. What could be coming? He strained his hearing to catch sounds and voices muttering and mumbling on the limits of his thoughts. He was at sea, gazing with wild eagerness into the haze ahead, trying to determine whether what he saw was sea-smoke or cloud or land. Why these great chords in the prelude? What meant these muffled trumpets, telling of ambassadors and courts and kingdoms and empires? What concords were these preluding? What stately themes and regal confluences of harmony? Were these words the first taps of the kettle drums in his march upon some soul-expanding knowledge? What should he now see with his eyes and hear with his ears and touch with his hands? Upon what marvellous scenes of the undisclosed past was the curtain about to rise? Were some mighty engines that had wrought in the world's history about to be exhibited to his eyes? What mysteries of councils and of courts was he destined to witness and understand? Who was he? Of whom was he? Whence was he? Hanbury and yet no Hanbury. How came it he owned the middle and not the final name of the diplomatist and poet of the days of George the Second?

God of Heaven, could it be there was the blood of a shameful woman in his veins?

His face suddenly blanched. The thick dark veins of his temples and forehead lay down flat and then sank hollow. His swarthy rough skin shrank and puckered. His lips drew backward thinned and livid. His clenched white teeth shone out, and his breath came through them with a hissing noise. He drew himself up to his full height, and for a moment looked round defiantly.

All at once the blood flew back to his cheeks, his forehead, his neck. He covered his face with his bent arm and sank into a chair, crying: "Not that! Oh God, not that! Anything but that!"

He remained for a long time motionless, with his face covered by his arm, and the hand of that arm holding the paper against his shoulder. At first no thoughts passed through his mind. He was no longer trying to see or hear or divine. He felt overwhelmed, and if he had the power to do it he would there and then have ceased to think, have annihilated the power of thought for ever. To his sensitive and highly-wrought mind, base blood of even four or five generations back would have forbidden him any part in public life, and, worse than that a thousand times, have destroyed his personal interest and pride in himself for ever.

"I would rather," he moaned, when his mind became more orderly, "carry the hump upon the withered, distorted legs of that man, Oscar Leigh, than a bend sinister. A noble woman may fall, but no noble woman who has fallen would take money for her sin. It is not the sin that would hurt me, but the hire of the sin, the notion that I had the blood of shame in my veins, and the price of shame in my pocket. Bah! I would die of fever if it were so. My blood, the blood in my veins would ferment and stew my flesh. I should rot from within."

He dropped his arm and looked around him. The sight of the familiar room and well-known objects allayed the agony of despair. He drew a deep breath and sat up.

"I have been terrifying myself with shadows, with less than shadows, with absolute blanks; nay, I have been terrifying myself with less than nothing! I have been trying to change the absolute and manifest, and vouched sunlight into gloom and the people of gloom, phantoms. The only evidence before me is evidence against my fears. Instead of an intangible horror, there is an affirmed and ponderable assurance that although my name is Hanbury, and I got that name from Sir Hanbury Williams, not a drop of his blood is in my veins! Why, I am more like a girl with her first love-letter, trying to guess its contents from the outside, than a man with a business document in his hand! Let me read this thing through now as I discussed another matter awhile ago, as if it were a brief put into my hands as a counsel. It is exactly, or almost exactly like a brief." He tossed the sheets carelessly in his hand. "Let us see what the case is."

He sat himself back deliberately in his chair, thrust out his legs before him, and holding the manuscript in both hands began it again.

With contracted brows and face of stern attention he read on. He betrayed no more excitement than if he held in his hand a bluebook which he desired to master for some routine speech. Now and then he cleared his throat softly, imperfectly, indifferent to the result; for all other sound he made he might have been fashioned of marble. Now and then he turned the leaves and moved slightly from side to side; for all other motion he made he might have been dead.

At last he came to the final line, to his father's signature. He read all and then allowing the manuscript to fall from his hands and his arms to drop to his side, sat in the chair motionless, staring into vacancy.

For an hour he remained thus. Beyond the heaving of his chest and his calm regular respiration, he was perfectly still. At length he sighed profoundly, not from sadness, but deep musing, shook himself, shuddered, looked round him as though he had just waked from sleeping in a strange place.

He rose slowly and going to the window drew up the blind.

No lights were now to be seen in the rear of any of the houses, and complete silence filled the windless air.

"How peaceful," he whispered, "how calm. All the loyal subjects of Her Majesty Queen Victoria are now sleeping in calm security. What a contrast! Here the person of the subject is as sacred as the person of the sovereign. Good heavens, what a contrast! Gracedieu in Derbyshire. I seem to have heard of that place before, but I cannot recollect, when or where. Gracedieu must be a very small place, for my father says it is near the village of Castleton. I don't know where Castleton is, beyond the fact that it is in Derbyshire. Gracedieu--Gracedieu--Gracedieu. The name seems familiar enough, but joined with what or whom I cannot think. It is a common name. There must be many places of the name in England. My memory of it must be connected with some circumstance or people, for I am sure I have never been in the place myself or in Castleton either; or in Derbyshire at all, for the matter of that, except passing through. I don't think I can be familiar with the name in connection with the Peak. My only knowledge of the Peak and its neighbourhood is from some written description, and my only memory of the name Gracedieu is one of the ear, not of the eye.

"I am sure my memory of it is of the ear, and that it is a pleasant memory too! but I can get no further now. To-morrow I shall go and see the place for myself. This whole history is astounding. I am too much stunned by it to think about it yet.

"There's two o'clock striking. I must not wake my mother to tell her. I feel as if my reason were a little disturbed. I feel choked and smothered up--as if I could not breathe. I am worn out and weak. The day has been too much for me. I will go to bed. I am sure I shall sleep. I am half asleep as it is."

He drew back from the window and stretched up his hand for the cord.

"The Queen of England sleeps secure, with all her subjects secure around her--and I----" He did not finish the sentence. He shook his head and pulled down the blind.

Suddenly he struck his thigh with his clenched fist, calling out in a whisper: "Of course, I now remember where I heard of Gracedieu. What a stupid fool I have been not to recall it at once! It's the place that beautiful girl the dwarf introduced me to comes from! My head must be dull not to remember that! His Pallas-Athena, and I----"

He turned out the lights, and began undressing in the dim twilight; there were already faint blue premonitions of dawn upon the blind.

"I wonder," he muttered in the twilight, "will his figures of time include Cophetua and the Beggar Maid! Ha--ha--ha. I am half asleep.

"That old story I read this night was not unlike Cophetua and the Beggar Maid, only--I must not think of it now, I am too dazed and stunned and stupid."

He was in bed, and in a few minutes was asleep. On a sudden he woke up at the sound of his own voice, crying out loud in the profound peace of the early dawn:--

"Thieves! Thieves! Kosciusko to the rescue. The king is on your side!"

He found himself standing up in the bed gesticulating wildly. The sweat was pouring down from his forehead and he was trembling violently in all his limbs.

He stood listening awhile to ascertain if his shout had wakened the household, but unbroken silence followed his cry. Then he lay down and soon fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XXI.

TIMMONS'S TEA AND LEIGH'S DINNER.

Mr. John Timmons's tea was a very long and unsociable meal. It took hours, and not even the

half-dozen red-herrings brought to him by Mrs. Stamer in the fish-basket were allowed to assist at it. They lay in dense obscurity on the floor of the marine-store. Tunbridge Street was now as silent as the grave.

It was after eleven o'clock and John Timmons had not yet emerged from his cellar. All the while he had been below a strong pungent smell of burning, the dry sulphurous smell of burning coke, had ascended from below, with now and then noise of a hand-bellows blowing a fire, but no steam or sound or savour of cooking. Now and again there was the noise of stirring a fire, and now and again the noise of a tongs gripping and loosing and slipping on what a listener might, in conjunction with other evidence, take to be pieces of coke. From time to time the man below might be heard to breathe heavily and sigh. Otherwise he uttered no sound. If the subterranean stoker desired secrecy he had his wish, for there was no one in or near the place listening.

But if no one was listening to the stoker some one was watching the exterior of the marine-store in Tunbridge Street. A short time before eleven o'clock a man dressed in seedy black cloth, with short iron-grey, whiskers and beard, and long iron-grey hair and wearing blue spectacles, turned into the street, and sat down in a crouching position on the axle-tree of a cart, whose shafts, like a pair of slender telescopes, pointed to the dim summer stars, or taken together the cart and man looked like a huge flying beetle, the body of the cart being the wings, the wheels the high elbowed legs, the man the body of the insect and the two long shafts the antennae thrust upwards in alarm.

When it was about a quarter past eleven John Timmons emerged from the cellar, carrying in one hand a dark lantern, with the slide closed. When he found himself in his upper, or ground-floor chamber, or shop, or store, he drew himself to his full height, and, with head advanced sideways, listened awhile.

There was no sound. He nodded his head with satisfaction. Then he went cautiously to the wicket, and with a trowel began digging up the earth of the floor, which was here dark and friable and dry. It was, old sand from a foundry, and could be moved and replaced without showing the least trace of disturbance. Timmons did not use the lamp. He had placed it beside him on the ground with the slide closed.

After digging down about a foot he came upon a small, old, courier-bag, which he lifted out, and which contained something heavy. The bag had been all rubbed over with grease and to the grease the dark sand stuck thickly. Out of this bag he took a small, heavy, cylindrical bundle of chamois leather. Then he restored the bag to the hole, shovelled back the sand and smoothed the floor, rose and stood a minute hearkening, with the cylinder of chamois rolled-up leather in his hand.

This hiding-place had been selected and contrived with great acuteness. It was so close to the foot of the shutters that no one looking in through the ventilators at any angle could catch sight of it. The presence of the moulder's sand at the threshold was explained by the fact that no other substance was so good for canting heavy metal objects upon. Superficial disturbances were to be expected in such a floor, and it was impossible to tell superficial disturbances from deep ones. Once the sand was re-levelled with a broom-handle, used as a striker is used in measuring corn, it was impossible to guess whether any disturbance had recently taken place. In concealing and recovering anything here the operator's ear was within two inches of the street, and he could hear the faintest sound outside. The threshold was not a likely place to challenge examination in case of search.

Timmons now walked softly over his noiseless floor, carrying his lantern in one hand and the roll of leather in the other, until he got behind the old boiler of the donkey engine. Here he slid back the slide of the lantern and unrolled the leather. The latter proved to be a belt about a palm deep, and consisting of little bags or pockets of chamois leather, clumsily but securely sewn to a band of double chamois.

There were a dozen of those little pockets in all; six of them contained some heavy substance. Each one closed with a piece of string tied at the mouth. Timmons undid one and rolled out on his hand a thick lump of yellow metal about the size of the large buttons worn as ornaments on the coats of coachmen. It was not, however, flat, but slightly convex at one side and almost semi-spherical on the other.

He smiled a well-satisfied smile at the gold ingot, and weighed it affectionately in his black, grimy palm, where the gold shone like a yellow unchanging flame. Timmons gave the ingot a loving polish with his sleeve, dropped it back into its bag, and re-tied the string. Then out of each of his trousers' pockets he took a similar ingot or button, weighed each, and looked at each with affectionate approval, and secured each in one of the half-dozen vacant leather bags.

"Two pounds two ounces all together," he whispered. "I have never been able to get more than fifteen shillings an ounce for it, taking it all round at fifteen carats. His offer is as good as thirty shillings an ounce, which leaves a margin for a man to get a living out of it, if the dwarf is safe. If I had had only one deal with him, I'd feel he's safe, but he has done nothing but talk grand and nonsense up to this, and---" Timmons paused and shook his head ominously. He did not finish the sentence, but as he stood weighing the belt up and down in his hand, assumed suddenly a more pleasant look, and whispered with a smile exhibiting his long yellow teeth: "But after this deal to-

night he can't draw back or betray me. That's certain, anyhow."

He unbuttoned his waistcoat, strapped the belt round his lank, hollow waist, blew out the lantern, and walking briskly, crossed the store, opened the wicket and stepped into the deserted street. He closed and locked the door behind him, and turning to his left walked rapidly among the carts and vans to London Road.

Before he disappeared, the elderly man with grizzled hair and whiskers, dressed in seedy black cloth, emerged from the shadow of the cart and kept stealthily and noiselessly in the rear of the marine-store dealer. John Timmons was on his way to keep his important business appointment with Leigh in Chetwynd Street, Chelsea, and the low-sized man with blue spectacles was following, shadowing Timmons.

When Leigh left Curzon Street that evening, he made his way into Piccadilly first, and thence westward in a leisurely way, with his head held high and a look of arrogant impudence and exultation on his face. He turned to the left down Grosvenor Place. He was bound to Chetwynd Street, but he was in no humour for short cuts or dingy streets.

He was elated. He walked with his head among the stars. All the men he met were mud and dross compared with him. Whatever difficulty he set himself before melted into nothingness at his glance. If it had suited him to set his purpose to do what other men counted impossible, that thing should be done by him. No political party he led should ever be out-voted, no army he commanded defeated, no cause he advocated extinguished. These creatures around him were made of clay, he of pure spirit, that saw clearly where the eyes of mere men were filled with dust and rheum.

This clock upon which he was engaged would be the eighth wonder of the world when completed. He had not yet done all the things he spoke of, had not yet introduced all the movements and marvels he had described to the groundlings. But the clock was not finished. Why it was not well begun. By and by he would set about those figures of time. They would require a new and vastly complicated movement and great additional power, but to a man of genius what was all this but a bagatelle, a paltry thing he could devise in an hour and execute by and by?

Already the clock was enormously complicated, and although it seemed simple enough, as simple as playing cats-cradle when he was near it, when he could see the cause and application of all its parts and instantly put any defect to rights, still when he was away from it for a long time, part of it seemed to stop and sometimes the whole of it, and--this was distracting, maddening--the power seemed to originate at the escapements, and the whole machine would work backward against his will until the enormous weights in the chimney, out of which he got his power, were wound up tight against the beams, until the chains seemed bursting and the beams tearing and the wheels splitting and dashing asunder. And all the while the escapements went flying in reverse so fast as to dazzle him and make him giddy, and then, when all seemed lost and the end at hand, some merciful change would occur and the accursed reversed movement would die away and cease, and after a pause of unspeakable joy the machine would start in its natural and blessed way again and he would cry out and weep for happiness at the merciful deliverance.

Hah! He felt in thinking of these sufferings about the clock as though the movement were going to be reversed now.

Leigh paused for a moment, and looked around him to bring himself back to the actual world.

"Hah!" he whispered. "I know why I feel so queer. It's the want of food. I have had no food to-day--for the body any way--except what she gave me. What food she gave me for the soul! My soul was never full fed until to-day."

He resumed his course, and, without formulating his destination, directed his steps instinctively towards the restaurant where he usually dined.

"But this alchemy?" his thoughts went on, "this miracle gold? What of it?" He dropped his chin upon his chest and lapsed into deep thought. The boastful and confident air vanished from his eyes and manner. He was deep sunk in careful and elaborate thought.

The position looks simple if regarded in one way. Here this man Timmons calls on him and says:--

I am a marine store dealer, and all kinds of old metal come into my hands. I buy articles of iron and copper and lead and brass and tin and zinc. I buy old battered silver electro-plate and melt it down for the silver. Silver is not worth the attention of a great chemist like you. But sometimes I come across gold. It may reach my hands in one way or several ways. It may turn up in something I am melting. It may be gilding on old iron I buy. You are not to know all the secrets of my trade as a marine store dealer, which is a highly respectable if not an exalted trade. Now gold, no matter how or where it may be, is worth any man's consideration. The gold that comes my way is never pure. It averages half or little more than half alloy. You are a great chemist. I cannot afford time to separate the gold from the alloy. I cannot spare time to go about and sell it. Every man to his trade; I am a marine-store dealer, you are a great chemist. What will you give me for ingots fifteen carats fine?

The value of gold of fifteen carats to sell is two pounds thirteen shillings and a penny. Gold is the only thing that never changes its price. Any one who wants pure gold must give four pounds four shillings and eleven pence halfpenny for it. Fifteen twenty-fourths! The value of fifteen twenty-fourths of that sum is two pounds thirteen and a penny. The alloy counts as dross and fetches nothing---

"Hah! Yes," thought Leigh interrupting his retrospect with a start as he found himself at the door of the restaurant where he proposed dining, "I must have food for the body. Food for the soul, if taken too largely or alone, kills the body, no matter how strong and shapely and lithe it may be. I shall think this matter out when I have eaten. I shall think it out over a cigar and coffee."

He ordered a simple meal and ate it slowly, taking great comfort and refreshment out of the rest and meat. He had a little box all to himself. He was in no humour for company, and it was long past the dinner time in this place, so that the room was comparatively deserted.

When he had finished eating he ordered coffee and a cigar, and putting his legs up on the seat, rested his elbow on the table, lit his cigar and resumed his cogitations in a more vigorous and vocal manner, using words in his mind now instead of pictures.

"Let me see. Where was I? Oh, I recollect. Timmons can't spare time for chemistry or metallurgy and doesn't care to deal with so valuable a metal as gold, even if he had the time. I understand all about metals and chemistry and so on. I entertain the suggestion placed before me and turn it round in my mind to see what I can make of it. I get hold of a superb idea.

"Of course, after extracting the metal from the alloy, when I had the virgin gold in my hand I should have to find a market for it, to sell it. The time has not yet come for absolutely forming my figures of time in metal. Wax will do even after I begin the mere drudgery of the modelling.

"Well, if I were to offer considerable quantities of gold for sale in the ordinary way, I should have to mention all about John Timmons, and that would be troublesome and derogatory to my dignity, for then it would seem as though I were doing no more than performing cupelling work for this man Timmons.

"The whole volume of science is open to me. I am a profound chemist. I am theoretically and practically acquainted with the whole science from the earliest records of alchemy down to today. I agree with Lockyer, that according to the solar spectrum some of the substances we call elements have been decomposed in the enormous furnaces of the sun. I hold instead of their being seventy elements there is but one, in countless modifications, owing to countless contingencies. What we call different elements are only different arrangements of one individual element, the one element of nature, the irreducible unit of the creation, the primal atom. This is a well-known theory, but no one has proved it yet.

"I stand forth to prove it, and how better can I prove it than by realizing the dream of the old transmuters of metals. Alikser is not a substance. The philosopher's stone is not a thing you can carry in your pocket. It is no more than a re-arrangement of primal atoms. What we call gold is, let us say, nothing more than crystallized electricity, and I have found the secret of so bringing the atoms of electricity together that they fall into crystals of pure gold. Up to this the heat of the strongest furnaces have not been able to volatilize one grain of metallic gold: all you have to do to make metallic gold is to solidify it out of its vapourous condition, say electricity or hydrogen, what you please.

"How this is done is my great discovery, my inviolate secret. The process of manufacture is extremely expensive, I cannot share the secret with anyone, lest I should lose all the advantage and profit of my discovery, for no patent that all the government of earth could make with brass and steel would keep people from making gold if they could read how it may be done.

"Pure gold is value for a halfpenny less than four pounds five shillings an ounce Troy. I will sell you pure gold, none of your childish mystery gold with its copper, and silver, and platinum clumsiness that will not stand the fire, but pure gold that will defy any test wet or dry, or cupel, for four pounds the ounce. Come, will you buy my Miracle Gold at four pounds the ounce Troy?"

Leigh struck the table triumphantly with his hand, and uttered the question aloud. His excitement had carried him away from the table, and the restaurant. He was nowhere he could name. He was in the clouds challenging no one he could name to refuse so good an offer. He was simply in the lists of immortality, throwing down the gage to universal man.

No one was present to accept or decline his offer. No one caught the words he uttered. But the sound of the blow of his fist upon the table brought a waiter to the end of the box. Leigh ordered more coffee and another cigar. When they had been brought and he was once more alone, his mind ran on:--

"That is one view of it, that is the view I should offer to my customers and to the world of my position. But what kept me so from closing with this Timmons was the consideration that everyone who heard my version of the matter might not accept it.

"The clock is out-growing me, and often I feel giddy and in a maze with it. A clock cannot fill

all my life and satisfy all a man's heart. At the time I began it years ago I fancied it would suffice. I fancied it would keep my heart from preying on itself. But now the mechanism is often too much for me when it is not before my eyes. It wears, and wears, and wears the mind, as it wears, and wears, and wears itself.

"When this man Timmons came to me first, I thought of putting the clock to a use I never contemplated when I started making it. Since I began to think of making the clock of use in my dealings with this Miracle Gold, I have seen her; I have seen this Edith Grace, who staggered me in my pursuit of Miracle Gold and filled my veins with fire I never knew before. What fools we men are! And I who have not the proportions of a man, what a fool ten thousand times multiplied! She shrank from me as though I were a leper, I who am only a monster! I would give all the gold that ever blazed before the eye-balls of men to have a man's fair inches and straight back! I! I! I! What am I that I should have feelings? Why, I am worse than the vilest lepers that rotted without the city gate. *They*, even *they*, had had their days of wholesomeness and strength before the plague fell upon them. I was predestined from birth to stand in odious and grotesque blackness against the sun, to seem in the eyes of all women a goblin spewed out of the maw of hell!"

He paused. The clock struck. He sprang to his feet.

"Ten!" he said aloud. He said to himself: "Ten o'clock, and I have a good deal to do before Timmons comes at midnight."

Suddenly he paused on his way to the door of the restaurant, and stood in deep thought. Then he resumed his way to the door and when he got out into the street, said half aloud:

"Strange that I should have forgotten all about that. Have I much to do before midnight? I told her--the other, the more wonderful and more beautiful one of the same mould, the one with the heart, the lady of the two--that I should decide about the gold between the time I was speaking to her and the same time next week. She did not shrink from me as if I were a leper, this second one of the two. Stop, I have no time to think this matter out now. I have a week. I will take all steps as though I had not seen her in that room. What a pitiful, mean cad that Hanbury is! Why, he's lower than a leper! He's more contemptible than even I!"

He cleared his mind of all doubts and concentrated it upon what he had to do before meeting John Timmons. He hurried along and in a few minutes let himself into his house with his latch-key.

There was no voice or even light to greet him in his home. As he ascended the stairs he thought: "If tombs were only as roomy as this house I shouldn't mind being done with daylight and the world, and covered up. Now, I'd give all I own in this world to have a comfortable mind like Williams, my friend the publican, over the way. Ha-ha-ha!" His hideous laugh, now shrill like the squeal of grating metal, now soft and flabby and gelatinous like the flapping of a wet cloth, echoed in the impenetrable darkness around him.

"If Hanbury were only here now and had a knife--in ten minutes I'd know more than any living man. Ha-ha-ha!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A QUARTER PAST TWELVE.

Oscar Leigh sat in the dark on the last step but one of the stairs of his house, awaiting the arrival of John Timmons. It was close to the appointed hour. He had spent the interval in his workshop with the clock. He had one of his knees drawn up close to his body, his elbow rested on his knee, his long bearded chin in the palm of that hand. It was pitch dark. Nothing could be seen, absolutely nothing. For all the human eye could learn an inch from it might be a plate of iron or blind space.

"My mother cannot live for ever," whispered the dwarf-like many people who live much in the solitude of cities he had the habit of communing with himself aloud--"and then all will be blank, all will be dark as this place round me. Where shall I turn then? Whom shall I speak my heart to? I designed my clock to be a companion, a friend, a confidant, a solace, a triumph; it is becoming a

tyrant and a scourge. It is cruel that my mother should grow old. Why should not things stop as they are now? But we are all on our way to death. We are all on our way out of the world to make room for those who are coming in. No sooner do we grow to full years and strive to form our hearts than we discover we are only lodgers in this world and that those we like are leaving our neighbourhood very soon, and that while we cannot go with them we cannot remain either.

"A man must have something to think of besides himself; a deformed dwarf must never think of himself at all, unless he thinks great things of himself. I am depressed to-night. I have been living too fast all day. What a long day it has been. I told that young whelp, Hanbury, I should show him something more wonderful than Miracle Gold. I took him with me to Grimsby Street, and the marvellous likeness between those two girls took the sight out of his eyes and the speech out of his mouth, and the little brains he has out of his head. Then I go with him to see *her* who is the other, only with glory added to beauty. She is better and more wonderful than Miracle Gold, better and more wonderful than the substance of the ruby flash in the flame of the diamond. If the devil had but let me grow up as other men, she might have made me try to carry myself and act like a god. I am of Satan's crew now--it would hardly pay to apostatize. Here's Timmons."

The knock agreed upon sounded on the door and reverberated through the hollow darkness. Leigh rose, and sliding his left foot and supporting his body on the stick, held close in under his ribs, went to the door and opened it.

"Twelve to the minute," said Timmons, holding up his hand and waving it in the direction whence came the sound of a church clock striking midnight.

"Let us go for a walk," said Leigh, turning west, away from Welbeck Place and the Hanover, and shutting the door behind him.

"But I have the stuff with me," said Timmons, in a tone of annoyance and protest.

"Let us go for a walk, I say," cried Leigh imperiously, striking his thick twisted stick fiercely on the flags as he spoke.

The two men turned to the left, and went on a few paces in silence. Timmons was sulky. A nice thing surely for a creature to ask a man to call on business at his private residence with valuable property at midnight and then slam the door in his face and coolly ask him to go out for a walk! It was a downright insult, but a man couldn't resent an insult from such a creature. That was the worst of it.

"I have been in telegraphic communication with Birmingham since I saw you," said Leigh, stopping under a lamp-post, pouring out a few drops of eau-de-cologne into his palm and inhaling the spirit noisily.

"Oh?" said Timmons interrogatively, as he looked contemptuously at the dwarf.

"Hah! That's very refreshing. Most refreshing. May I offer you a little eau-de-cologne, Mr. Timmons?" said the little man with elaborate suavity.

"No, thanks," said Timmons gruffly. "I don't like it." Timmons's private opinion was that a man who used perfume of any kind must be an effeminate fool. It was not pleasant to think this man, with whom he was about to have very important business transactions, should be an effeminate fool. Perhaps it indicated that he was only a new kind of villain; that would be much better.

"Hah!" said Leigh, as they re-commenced their walk, "I am sorry for that, for it is refreshing, most refreshing. I was saying that since I had the pleasure of visiting your emporium--I suppose it is an emporium, Mr. Timmons?" he asked, with a pleasant smile.

"It may be, or it may be an alligator, or a bird-show, or anything else you like to call it," said Timmons in exasperation. "But you were saying you had a message from Birmingham since I saw you."

"I had not only a message, but several messages. I went straight from your emporium to King's Cross, so as to be near Birmingham and save delay in wiring. I know where I can usually get a clear wire there--a great thing when one is in a hurry--the mere signalling of the message is, as you know, instantaneous."

"Ay," said Timmons scornfully, with an impatient serpentine movement running up his body and almost shaking his head off its long, stalk-like neck. "Well, is the fool off the job?" asked he coarsely, savagely, in slang, with a view to showing how cheap he held such unprincipled circumlocution.

The dwarf stopped and looked up with blank amazement on his face and an ugly flash in his eyes. "Is what fool off the job, Mr. Timmons? Am I to understand that you are tired of these delays?"

Timmons snorted in disdainful rage. The implication that he was the only fool connected with the matter lay in the tone rather than the words, but it was unmistakable. The dwarf meant to insult him grossly, and he could not strike him, for it would be unmanly to hit such a creature,

and he could not strangle him, for there were people about the street. By a prodigious effort he swallowed down his rage, spread his long thin legs out wide, as if to prevent the flight of Leigh, and said in a hoarse, threatening, sepulchral voice: "Look here, Mr. Leigh. I've come on business. What have you to say to me? I have twenty-six ounces that will average fifteen carats. Are you going to act square and stump up?"

"Hah! I see," said Leigh, smiling blandly, as though rejoicing on dismissing the injurious suspicion that Timmons wanted to back out of the bargain. "I own I am relieved. The fact, my dear sir, is, that on leaving you I telegraphed to my correspondent in Birmingham for----"

"No more gammon," said the other, menacingly. They were in front of a church, of the church whose clock they had heard strike midnight before they left Leigh's doorstep. Here there was a quiet space suited to their talk. The church and churchyard interrupted the line of houses, and fewer people passed on that side of the way than on the other. There were no shops in this street. Still it was lightsome, and never quite free from the sound of footsteps or the presence of some one at a distance. Stamer had hinted that Leigh might try to murder Timmons for plunder, and now Timmons was almost in the humour to murder Leigh for rage.

Leigh made a gesture of gracious deprecation with his left hand and bowed. "This, Mr. Timmons, is a matter of business, and I never allow anything so odious as fiction to touch even the robe of sacred business." He lifted his hat, raised his eyes to the top of the spire of the church and then bowed low his uncovered head. "For, Mr. Timmons, business is the deity every one of our fellow-countrymen worship."

"What are you going to do; that's what I want to know?" said the other fiercely.

"Precisely. Well, sir, I shall tell you my position in two words. I suspect my Birmingham correspondent." Leigh threw back his head and smiled engagingly, as though he had ended an amusing anecdote.

"By ----, you don't say that?" cried Timmons, fairly startled and drawing back a pace.

"I do."

"What does he know?"

"About what, my dear sir? What does he know about what? Are you curious to learn his educational equipments? Surely you cannot be curious on such a point?" He looked troubled because of Timmons's idle curiosity.

"Don't let us have any more rot. You say you suspect this man?"

"I do."

"What does he know of the stuff?"

"Of the stuff, as you call it, he knows from me absolutely nothing."

"How can you suspect him if he doesn't know? How can he peach if you haven't let him into the secret?"

"I didn't say I suspected him of betraying the secret of my manufacture."

"Then what *do* you suspect him of--speak plain?" Timmons's voice and manner were heavy with threat.

"Of something much worse than treachery."

"There is nothing worse than treachery in our business."

"I suspect this man of something that is worse than treachery in any business."

"It has no name?"

"It has a name. I suspect this man of not having much money."

"Ah!"

"Is not that bad? Is not that worse than treachery?"

Timmons did not heed these questions. They were too abstract for his mind.

"And you think this villain might cheat, might swindle us after all our trouble?"

"I think this villain capable of trying to get the best of us, in the way of not paying promptly or the full price agreed upon, or perhaps not being able to pay at all."

"And, Mr. Leigh, when did you begin to suspect this unprincipled scoundrel?" Timmons's language was losing the horrible element of slang as the virtuous side of his nature began to

assert itself.

"Only to-day; only since I saw you in Tunbridge Street."

"Mr. Leigh, I hope, sir, you'll forgive my hot words of a while ago. I know I have a bad temper. I humbly ask your pardon, Mr. Leigh." Timmons was quite humble now.

"Certainly, freely. We are to work, as you suggested, on the co-operative principle. If through my haste or inefficiency the money had been lost, we should all be the poorer."

"I have advanced about twenty pounds of my own money on the bit I have on me. My own money, without allowing anything for work and labour done in the way of melting down, or for anxiety of mind, or for profit. If that little bit of yellow stuff could keep me awake of nights, I often wonder how the people that own the Bank of England can sleep at all."

"They hire a guard of soldiers to sleep for them in the Bank every night."

"Eh, sir?"

"Hah! Nothing. Now you understand why I did not ask you into my place and take the alloy. We must wait a little yet. We must wait until I can light upon an honest man to work up the result of our great chemical discovery. I hope by this day week to be able to give you good and final news. In the meantime the ore is safe with you."

"I'm sure I'm truly grateful to you, sir."

"What greater delight can a person have than helping an honest man to protect himself against business wretches who are little better than thieves?"

"Eh?"

"Hah! Nothing. Give me a week. This day week at the same hour and at the same place."

"Very good. I shall be there."

An empty hansom was passing. Leigh whistled and held up his hand to the driver.

Suddenly both he and Timmons started, a long clang came from the other side of the railings.

"'Tisn't the last Trumpet for the tenants of these holdings," said Leigh, pointing his long, skinny, yellow, hairy hand at the graves. "It's the clock striking the quarter-past twelve. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Timmons, in a tone of reserve and suspicion. He was far from clear as to what he thought of the little man now bowling along down the road in the hansom.

Yes, this man was quite beyond him. Whether the whole thing was a solemn farce or not he could not determine. This man talked fifty to the dozen, at least fifty to the dozen.

Timmons touched his belt. Ay, the gold was there sure enough. That was a consolation anyway, but---

He shook his head, and set out to walk the whole way back to the dim, dingy street off the Borough Road, where he had a bed-room in which he spent no part of his time but the hours of sleep.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN EARLY VISITOR TO TIMMONS.

Men in Mr. Timmons's business never look fresher at one period of the day than another. They seem no brighter for sleep, and, to judge by their appearance, either soap and water has no effect on them, or they seek no effect of soap and water. Lawyers put aside their wigs and gowns, and professors their gowns and mortar-boards, and butchers their aprons, and cooks their caps,

before they leave the scene of their labours, but dealers in marine-stores never lay aside their grime. They cannot. The signs and tokens of their calling are ground into their flesh, and would resist any attempt at removal. Mr. Timmons was no exception to his class. On Thursday morning he was in every outward seeming the same as on Wednesday night. He was the same as on all other mornings, except that he came a little earlier than usual to his place in Tunbridge Street. He had private business to transact before throwing open the front of his store to the eyes of the few stragglers who passed through that gloomy haunt of discarded and disabled vehicles of the humbler kind.

He went in through the wicket, locked the wicket after him, and without loss of time dug up the old canvas-bag from under the sand, rolled up the chamois belt, and, having placed the belt in the bag, re-buried the latter in its old hiding place. Then he rose and stretched himself and yawned, more like a man whose day's work was over than about to begin.

He sat down on the old fire-grate where Mrs. Stamer had rested the night before, yawned again, leaned his head against the wall and fell fast asleep. The fact is he had slept little or nothing the night before. Oscar Leigh's strange conduct had set him thinking and fearing, and the knowledge that for the first time his chamois-belt was away from its home made him restless and kept him awake.

John Timmons had no regular time for throwing his bazaar open to the public. The shutters were never taken down before eight o'clock and never remained up after ten. He had come that morning at seven, and sat down to rest and doze before eight. At a little after nine he jumped up with a start and looked round with terror. A knock on the outside of the shutters had aroused him. He had often been at the store as early as seven, but never until now had he heard a demand for admittance at so early an hour. Could it be he had slept long into the day, or were the police after him?

He looked round hastily, wildly, out of his pale blue eyes. He threw up his arms on high, and shook them, indicating that all was lost. Then he composed himself, pulled his hat straight over his forehead, drew down his waistcoat and coat-sleeves, arranged his blue tie, and clearing his throat with a deep loud sound, stepped quickly to the wicket, where for a moment he moved his feet rapidly about to give the newly-levelled sand an appearance of ordinary use.

With great noise and indications of effort he unlocked the door and opened it.

A low-sized man, with grizzled hair and mutton-chop whiskers and blue spectacles, dressed in seedy black, and looking like a schoolmaster broken in health and purse, stood in the doorway.

Timmons stared at the man in amazement first, anger next, and lastly rage.

"Well?" he bellowed fiercely; "who are you? What do you want?"

The man did not speak. He coolly stepped over the bar of the wicket and stood close to Timmons in the dimly-lighted store.

The dealer was staggered. Was this a policeman come to arrest him? If he was, and if he had come alone, so much the worse for him!

Timmons put his hand on the man's shoulder, drew the man quickly clear of the wicket, shut the door and locked it. Then turning menacingly on the intruder, who had taken a couple of paces into the store, he said ferociously, "Now, sir! What is it?"

Quick as lightning the man drew a revolver from his waist-band under his coat and presented it at Timmons's head.

The latter fell back against the shutters with an oath and a shout of dismay.

Swift as thought the man dropped the weapon and thrust it back into its place in his waist-band under his coat, saying as he did so:

"You always said you should know me if I was boiled. What do you say now?"

"Stamer!" yelled Timmons, with another oath.

The other laughed. "And not even boiled either."

"By ----, I'll have it out of you for this trick yet," said Timmons in a whisper. "What a fright you gave me! and what a shout I made! Someone may have heard me. You should not play such tricks as that, Stamer. It's no joke. I thought you were a copper." And he began walking up and down rapidly to calm himself.

"If you'll excuse me, Mr. Timmons," said the man, humbly and with an apologetic cough, "but I think your nerves want looking after."

"You scoundrel!"

"They do indeed, sir; you ought to get your doctor to put them right."

"You cursed blackguard!" hissed Timmons as he strode up and down the dark store, wiping the sweat off his streaked forehead with the ball of his hand.

"In an anxious business like ours, sir, a man can't be too careful. That's my reason again' the drink. Attendin' them temperance meetin's has done me a deal of good. I never get flustered now, Mr. Timmons, since I gave up the drink. I know, sir, you're next door to a teetotaller. It may be too much studyin', sir, with you. I have heard, sir, that too much studyin' on the brain and such like is worse than gin. If you could get away to the sea-side for a bit, sir, I'm certain 'twould do you a deal of good. You know I speak for your good, Mr. Timmons."

"You fool, hold your tongue! First I took you for a policeman----"

"I haven't come to that yet, sir," said the man in a tone of injury, and raising his shoulders to his ears as if to protect them from the pollution of hearing the word.

"And then I took you for a thief."

"Mr. Timmons!" cried the man pathetically. "Couldn't you see who I was? I never came here on business, sir. I came for the pleasure of seeing you, and to try if you would do a favour for me."

"Hold your tongue!" cried Timmons. "Hold your tongue, you fool."

The man said no more, but leaning his back against the wall, looked up blankly at the unceiled rafters and boards of the floor above.

The manner of Mr. John Timmons gradually became less volcanic. He arranged his necktie and thrust his hands deep into his trousers' pockets instead of swinging them round him, or running his fingers through his grizzled hair and whiskers. Suddenly he stopped before his visitor, and said grimly in a low voice, "Stamer, aren't you surprised you are alive?"

Stamer stood up on his feet away from the wall and said in a tone of expostulation, "Now, Mr. Timmons, it isn't so bad as that with me yet. I may have let one or two people see the barrel, you know, just to help business; but I never pulled trigger yet, sir. Indeed, I didn't."

"I mean, you fool, aren't you surprised I didn't kill you?" he asked heavily.

"You kill me, sir! For what?" cried the man in astonishment.

"For coming here at this time of the morning in the disgraceful state you are now in," he said, pointing scornfully at the other.

"Disgraceful state, Mr. Timmons, sir! You don't mean to say you think I'm in liquor?" said Stamer in an injured tone.

"In liquor, no. But worse. You are in masquerade, sir. In masquerade."

"Indeed, I'm not, sir. Why, I couldn't be! I don't even as much as know what it is."

"I mean, sir (and you know very well what I mean), that you are not here in your own clothes. What do you mean in coming here with your tomfoolery?" said Timmons severely. He was now quite recovered from his fright, and wanted to say nothing of his recent abject condition. The best way of taking a man's mind off you is to make an attack on him.

"Not in my own clothes! I hope you don't think I'm such a born loony as to walk about the streets in togs that I came by in the course of business. If you think that of me, sir, you put me down very low. I'm a general hand, as you ought to know, sir, and when there isn't anything to be done in the crib line, I'm not above turning my hand to anything that may be handy, such as tickers in a crowd. I use the duds I have on when I go to hear about the African Blacks. I change about, asking questions for information, and writin' down all the gentlemen tell me in my notebook, and I wind up my questions by asking not what o'clock it is, which would be suspicious, but how long the meeting will last, and no man, sir, that I ever saw can answer that question without hauling out his ticker, and then I can see whether it is all right, or pewter, or a Waterbury. Mr. Timmons, Waterburys is growing that common that men who have to make a living are starving. It's a downright shame and imposition for respectable English gentlemen to give their time to tryin' to improve the condition of the African Black, and do nothing to encourage the English watch-maker. What's to become of the English watch-maker, Mr. Timmons? I feel for him, sir!"

"You have a great deal too much talk for a man in your position. Why did you come here at this hour and in this outlandish get-up?"

"Well, sir," said Stamer, answering the latter question first, "you see I was here yesterday in fustian, and I didn't like to come here to-day in the same rags. It might look suspicious, for a man in my line can't be too careful. Of course, Mr. Timmons, you and I know, sir, that I come here on the square; but bad-minded people are horrid suspicious, and sometimes them new hands in the coppers make the cruellest and most unjust mistakes, sir. So I hope you'll forgive me coming here as an honest man. It won't occur again, sir. Indeed it won't."

"You have a great deal too much talk for a man in your position," repeated Timmons, who by

this time had regained his ordinary composure. "You know I treat you as men in your position are never treated by men in mine. I not only give you a fair price for your goods, but now, when the chance comes, I am going to admit you to the advantages of the co-operative system."

"It's very, very kind of you, sir, and I'm truly thankful, sir; and I need only say that, barring thick and thin uns, I bring you everything, notes included, that come my way. The thick and thin uns, sir, are the only perquisites of the business I look for."

"Stamer, hold your tongue. Tell me in two words, what brought you here?"

"Well, sir, I was anxious to know how you got on last night? You know how anxious I was about you, because of your carrying so much stuff with you down a bad locality like Chelsea. I know you got there safe. I hope you'll excuse me, Mr. Timmons, for the liberty I took, but I thought two of us would be safer than one."

"You know I got there! Two of us safer than one! What do you mean? You are full of talk and can't talk straight. Out with it, man! Out with it!" cried Timmons, shaking his fist in Stamer's face.

"I took the liberty of followin' you, sir, at a respectful distance and I saw you safe to Mr. Leigh's door----"

"You infernal, prying ruffian----"

"No, sir. I was not curious. I was only uneasy about you, and I only saw you at his door all right; then I knew I could be of no more use, for, of course, you'd leave the stuff with him, and if anyone got wind of it there would be no use in followin' you after, and I could do nothing while you was in the house."

"Ah!" cried Timmons sharply, as though Stamer had convicted himself of lying. "If you came away when you saw me go into the house how did you find out the man's name? *I* never told you. That's one question I want to ask you; now here's another. What o'clock was it when you saw me go into the house?"

"Twelve to the minute."

"How do you know? Had you a red herring in your pocket? Eh?" asked Timmons derisively, shaking his forefinger in Stamer's face.

"I heard the clock, a church clock strike."

Timmons paused and drew back. He recollected his holding up his hand to Leigh, as the latter opened the door, and drawing attention to his own punctuality.

"But then what did you mean by going peeping and prying about there. Did you think I was deceiving you?" The dealer scowled at his visitor as he put the question.

Stamer made a gesture of humility and protest:

"Oh, no, sir! It was this way. When I saw you safe into the house----"

"Oh--ha-ha-ha! So you saw me safe into the house, did you? Ha-ha-ha--ho-ho-ho!" laughed Timmons in an appallingly deep voice.

"Well, no," answered Stamer in mild protest. "I didn't exactly see you go into the house. You know, for the moment I forgot I had these duds on, and I thought you might turn round and look back and see me and be wild with me for followin' you, so the minute you stopped at the door and knocked I slipped into a public that's at the corner, to be out of sight in case you should turn around, as most people do, to have a good look before going into a strange house--anyway I always do----"

"Very likely. Very likely you do have a good look round both before and after too. Well, and when you got into the public-house--although you're not on the drink--you began making your inquiries, I dare say?" said Timmons in withering reproach. "Or, may be you didn't bother to ask questions, but told all you knew right off to the potman or the barmaid. Eh?"

"Mr. Timmons, you're too hard," said Stamer in an injured tone, and with a touch of outraged dignity. "If you don't want to hear what happened, or won't believe what I say, I'll stop."

"Well, go on, but don't take all day."

"There isn't much to tell. I got into the private bar at the end of a passage and, just as I got in, the landlord was sayin' how Mr. Leigh, the little gentleman over the way, with the hump on him, had been in that day, and had told him wonderful things he was going to do with the skeleton of Moses, or somethin' of that kind, which had been found at the bottom of the Nile, or somewhere. This mention of a little man with a hump made me take an interest, for I remembered what you told me last evenin'. And, as the landlord was talking quite free and open for all to hear, I asked for a tuppenny smoke and a small lemon--for I'm off the drink----"

"Go on, or you'll drive me to it," said Timmons impatiently.

"I couldn't understand what the landlord was sayin' about the Prince being as dry as snuff, but anyway, after a minute he said: 'There he is, winding up his wonderful clock,' and all the men in the bar looked up, and I did too, and there was the little man with the hump on his back pulling at something back and forward like the rods in a railway signal-box."

"You saw him?"

"Yes, and all the men in the bar saw him."

"How many men were there in the private bar?"

"Half-a-dozen or eight."

"You were drunk last night, Stamer."

"I was as sober as I am now."

"What o'clock was it then?"

"Well, I cannot say exactly, between twelve and half-past."

"How long did you stay in that public-house?"

"Until closing time."

"And how soon after you went in did you see the little man working the handle, or whatever it was?"

"A minute after I went in. As I went in the landlord was speakin', and before he finished what he had to say he pointed, and I looked up and saw Mr. Leigh."

"The next time you dog me, and tell a lie to get out of blame, tell a good lie."

"Mr. Timmons, what I tell you is as true as that there's daylight at noon."

"Tell a better lie next time, Stamer," said Timmons, shaking his minatory finger at the other.

"Strike me dead if it isn't true."

"Why, the man, Mr. Leigh, did not go back into the house at all last night. He and I went for a walk, and were more than half-a-mile away when a quarter past twelve struck."

"Has your Mr. Leigh a twin brother?"

"Pooh! as though a twin brother would have a hump! Stamer, I don't know what your object is, but you are lying to me."

"Then the man's neighbours does not know him. All the men in the bar, except two or three, knew the hump-backed Leigh, and they saw the man's face plain enough, for at twenty minutes past twelve by the clock in the bar he stopped working at the handle and turned round and nodded to the landlord, who nodded back and waved his hand and said, 'There he his a noddin' at me now.' The publican is a chatty man. And then Mr. Leigh nodded back again, and after that turned round and went on working at the handle again."

"I tell you, at a quarter past twelve last night, I was standing under the church clock you heard, talking to Mr. Leigh, and as they keep all public-house clocks five minutes fast, that's the time you say you saw him. I never found you out in a lie to me, Stamer. I'll tell you what happened. You got beastly drunk and dreamed the whole thing."

"What, got drunk in half-an-hour? 'Tain't in the power of liquor to do it. Mr. Timmons, I swear to you I had nothing to drink all yesterday but that small lemon. I swear it to you, so help me---, and I swear to you, so help me, that all I say is true, and that all I say I saw I saw with my eyes, as I see you now, with my wakin' eyes and in my sober senses. If you won't take my word for it, go down to Chelsea and ask the landlord of the Hanover--that's the name of the house I was in."

The manner of the man was earnest and sincere, and Timmons could not imagine any reason for his inventing such a story. The dealer could make nothing of the thing, except that Stamer was labouring under some extraordinary delusion. Timmons had never been to Leigh's place before and never in the Hanover. If he had not been with Leigh during the very minutes Stamer was so sure he had seen Leigh working at his clock, he would have had no hesitation whatever in believing what the other had told him. But here was Stamer, or rather the hearsay evidence of the landlord of the public house, that Leigh was visibly working at his clock and in Chetwynd Street at the very moment the dwarf was talking to himself in the open air half-a-mile away. Of course five minutes in this case might make all the difference in the world, and there is often more than five minutes' difference in the time of clocks in public places; but then Stamer said Leigh was together the whole quarter-hour from midnight to a quarter past twelve!

There was something hideous, unearthly, ghastly, about this deformed dwarf. The chemist or clockmaker, in the few interviews which had taken place between them, had talked of mysteries and mysterious power and faculties which placed him above other men. There was something creepy in the look of the man, and something horrible in the touch of his long, lean, sallow, dark-haired, monkeylike fingers. The man or monster was unnatural, no doubt--was he more or less than mortal? Did he really know things hidden from other men? To make up for his deformities and deficiencies had powers and faculties denied to other men been given to him?

John Timmons did not believe in ghosts, but he did believe in devils, and he was not sure that devils might not even now assume human form, or that Oscar Leigh was not one of them, habilitated in flesh for evil purposes among men.

Stamer held no such faith. He did not believe in devils. He believed in man, and man was the only being he felt afraid of. He thought it no more than reasonable that Timmons should lie to him. He had the most implicit faith in the material honesty of Timmons in the dealings between the two of them; but lying was a consideration of spiritual faith, and he had no spiritual faith himself. But he was liberal-minded and generous, and did not resent spiritual faith in others. It was nothing to him. Timmons was the only man he had ever met who was absolutely honest in the matter of money dealings with him, and Stamer had elevated Timmons into the position of an idol to which he paid divine honours. He would not have lied to Timmons, for it would have done no good. He brought the fruits of his precarious and dangerous trade as a thief and burglar to Timmons, and he acted as agent for other men of his trade and class, and Timmons was the first fence he had met who treated him honourably, considerately. He had conceived a profound admiration and dog-like affection for this man. He would have laid down his life for him freely. He would have defended him with the last drop of his blood against his own confederates and associates. He would not have cheated him of a penny; but he would have lied to him freely if there was any good in lying, but as far as he could see there wasn't, and why should he bother to lie?

He was anxious about the fate of the twenty-six ounces of gold. If Timmons got the enhanced price promised by the dwarf, some more money, a good deal more money, was promised to him by Timmons, and he knew as surely as fate that if Timmons succeeded the money would be paid to himself. But he was afraid of the craft of this Oscar Leigh who was not shaped as other men, whom other men suspected of possessing strange powers, and who, according to his own statement, had been fishing up the corpses of prophets, or something of that kind, out of the bottom of the Nile.

A long silence had fallen on the two men. Timmons had resumed his walk up and down the store, but this time his eyes were cast down, his steps slow. He had no reason to distrust Stamer beyond the ordinary distrustfulness with which he regarded all sons of Adam. He had many reasons for relying on Stamer more than on nine-tenths of the men he met and had dealings with. He was puzzled, sorely puzzled, and he would much prefer to be alone. He was confounded, but it would not do to admit this, even in manner, to Stamer, and he felt conscious that his manner was betraying him. He stopped suddenly before his visitor and said sharply "Now that you have been here half-an-hour and upwards can't you say what you want. Money?"

"No, sir. Not money to-day. I called partly to know if you was safe, and partly to know if you had arranged. I hope you will excuse my bein' a little interested and glad to see you all right." Stamer never used slang to Timmons. He paid this tribute to the honesty of the dealer.

"Yes. Of course, it would be bad for you if I was knifed or shot. You'd fall into the hands of a rogue again. Well, you may make your mind easy for the present. I am alive, as you see. He did not come to any final arrangement last night. I brought the stuff back again with me safe and sound, and I am to meet him again at the same place in a week. Are you satisfied now?"

"No!" Stamer moved towards the door.

"Why?"

Stamer shook his head. "Have nothing to do with that man."

"What maggot have you got in your head now, Stamer?"

"He'll sell the pass. It is not clear in my mind now that he has not sold the pass already, that he has not rounded on you. If you meet him there again in a week it isn't clear to me that you won't find more company than you care for."

"What do you mean? Shall you be there?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"The police."

Stamer hurried through the wicket and was gone.

Timmons shut the door once more, and leaning his back against it plunged into a sea of troubled thoughts.

CHAPTER XXIV.

GRACEDIEU, DERBYSHIRE.

When Edith Grace came into the little sitting-room in Grimsby Street, the morning after her flight from Eltham House, she found her grandmother had not yet appeared. She went to Mrs. Grace's door and asked if she might bring the old woman her breakfast. To her question she received a blithe answer that Mrs. Grace would be ready in a minute. The girl came back to the room where the breakfast was laid and sat down to wait. The old woman always presided, and sat with her face to the window. She liked to see as much sunlight and cheerfulness as came into Grimsby Street. On the table were two plates, two cups, eggs, rashers, and a loaf of bread. By the side of Mrs. Grace's plate a letter. It was a frugal-looking breakfast for middle-class people, but much, more elegantly appointed than one would expect to find in a Grimsby Street lodging-house. The cutlery, linen, silver and china were bright and clean and excellent. There were no delicacies or luxuries on the table, but the adjuncts of the viands were such as no lady need take exception to.

Edith was dressed in a perfectly plain black gown, one she had got for her duties as companion. She had a trace of colour at the best of times. This morning she looked pale and listless. She had slept little during the night. She had lain awake, alternately reviewing the extraordinary events of the day before, and trying to discover some means by which in her future search of employment she might insure herself against repeating her recent experience.

Up to this she knew little or nothing of the world. Her father, a barrister, had died when she was young. Her mother had been dead since her childhood. She had spent seven years at a boarding school, during which time she had come home for the holidays to find her grandmother's position gradually declining, until from a fine house in Bloomsbury the old woman was reduced to poor lodgings in Grimsby Street, where the two had lived together since Edith left school, three years ago. The money left her by her father had been more than enough to pay the fees of the "select seminary for young ladies" where she had spent those seven years.

While at school she had kept much apart from the other boarders, and had made no friends, for she knew all the girls she met at Miss Graham's had homes much better than she could hope to possess after her grandmother had been compelled to leave Russell Square.

Edith did not care to take any of her school-fellows into the secret of their decaying fortunes. She was too proud to pretend to be their equal in wealth, and too sensitive to allow them to know how poor she was. She was the quietest, most silent, most reserved girl in all the school. The majority of those around her were the daughters of City men. Her father had been a barrister. He had never soiled his fingers with business. He had been a gentleman by the consecration of generations of forefathers who had never chattered across a counter, never been in trade; and she was a lady. She did not despise those around her for their wealth or unfortunate origin. She simply kept herself to herself, and made no friends. She was kind and considerate to all, and polite almost to painfulness, but she would let no one near her. Her school-fellows said Edith Grace would be perfect, simply perfect, if she only had a heart.

But, alas! the girl had a heart, and what is worse still, a heart very hard to possess in seeming peace in a young breast confronted with a decaying fortunes.

Her school-fellows said she ought to be a queen. By this they meant that she was, by her appearance and manners, suited to statelinesses, and splendours, and pageants. They conceived a queen to be above the common nature of our kind. To be free from the aches and pains of feeling. To be superior to the bemeaning littlenesses of life. To be incapable of joy or suffering which does not involve the triumph or the ruin of a state.

From the moment of her father's death she knew she must expect to be poor, poor far below any depth she would have been likely to know, if he had lived a dozen years longer. Young as she then was, she felt within herself a love of all the beautiful things that money can buy. She loved rich and exquisite flowers, and dainty fabrics, and sparkling stones, and gleaming metals, and

fine odours, and stately pictures, and glories of lamps and melody. As she grew older, her love of these things would, she told herself, increase. To what purpose? To the torture of desire denied; for with such splendour she could hold no converse. She was poor, and she should always be poor. What was to be done? Beat down, stamp out these tastes, teach herself to rise above them. Deny herself.

In time she should leave school and be a woman. She should, when she left school, be a young woman, and a young woman of no ordinary personal attractions. She knew this as fully as she knew that the perfume of the tuberose is sweet, by the evidence of one of her senses. How should it be with her, then? All these other girls around her would marry, she never. For who would come wooing her? Some other lodger in Grimsby Street! A City clerk, or a prosperous hairdresser, or a furniture dealer, or a man who contracted for the supply of suppers, or a man who beat carpets, or a baker in a white cap, or the son and heir of a tailor! She had no moderation of power to discriminate between any of these. They were all preposterously impossible lovers, and there were no others left! No thing was degrading even to fancy. There was only one way of meeting this aspect of her poverty--she should never marry. That was easy enough. Nothing could be easier than to keep all men at as great a distance as she kept the cabman, or the young man who sold her the double elephant paper for drawing, or the telegraph clerk. No man should, to her dying day, ever say anything to her beyond the mere business words necessary to their meeting. Thus she should be as strong in this way as she was now in her indifference to diamonds or the opera. People said girls were weak, but girls could be as strong as men, stronger than men, if they only made up their minds not to long for pretty, or fine, or interesting objects.

In the latter class Edith supposed lovers would find their place.

She should be strong because she should be self-contained. She should be content because she should be undesiring. She should be independent because she should form no ties of any kind. Her position should be completely unassailable.

So she did not allow herself to display any particular affection for any one of her schoolmates. She was uniformly kind, and gentle, and polite. But she was too poor to love anyone, for it would rend her heart to be separated from one she loved, and she could run no risk of breaking her heart about her poverty when her poverty did not step in to separate her from one on whom she settled her affections.

So for the three years she had lived at home with her grandmother she comported herself with strict exclusiveness. No young man out of the formidable list of possible suitors she had allowed to a young girl with her means had approached her to tell a tale of love, and towards all whom she met she sought to pass for a retiring shadow.

But her first advent into the world had brought an alarming, a horrible awakening.

The discipline of denial to which she had inured herself prepared her for the loss of her modest competency. Up to the time of leaving school, she had regarded her income as sure as the coming of the planets into the constellations. Soon after leaving Miss Graham's doubts began to arise in her mind. When at length the blow came, and she learned she was penniless, no giant despair crushed her. She simply bowed to the inevitable, without going to the trouble of even affecting indifference. The money or income had been hers, and was gone. To lose an income was an unmixed evil, but it ought to affect her less than others, for had she not cultivated self-abnegation? Was she not used to desire little or nothing, and was not the step between asking for little next to that of working for the necessaries of life, for the things indispensable? She should now have to go forth and earn her bread, for she could not think of encroaching on the little left to her grandmother. She was young, and healthy, and accomplished, as far as Miss Graham's select seminary for young ladies at Streatham could make a receptive pupil accomplished.

Up to this she had allowed herself only one luxury, a deep, and quiet, and romantic love, the love for her kind-hearted old grandmother. That need not even now be put away, could not, indeed, be put away, but it might and must be dissimulated. Or, anyway, it might and must remain undemonstrative, for to show much affection to her grandmother would be to enhance the pain of the old woman at the parting.

Hence she steeled herself, and prepared for the separation with seeming indifference, which only made the desolation seem to Mrs. Grace more complete, more like death, and freed it from the torture of struggling with a living and cruel force.

When Edith Grace saw Oscar Leigh, and arranged to go as companion to his mother, although she shrank naturally from his objectionable manner and unhappy appearance, she was better pleased than if he had belonged to the ordinary mould of man. His deformities made him seem a being proper to a new condition of life, a condition of life in which his very unusualness would enable her to preserve and even increase the feeling of reserve, and being apart from the world, cultivated by her with such success at Miss Graham's and at home. He was so much out of the common, he need not be taken into account at all. His unhandsome appearance would be no more to her than the unhandsomeness of this street in which she, who dreamed of parks and palaces, and the Alhambra of Granada, lived. No doubt to look at him was to feel unpleasant, but the endurance of unpleasant sights was not very much harder, if so hard, as doing without

pleasing sights, and she had taught herself to abstain from longing after gratifying the eyes. The system of self-denial which she had imposed upon herself with so much success needed only a little extension to cover endurance of the undesirable. She was strong, fortified at every point. This system of hers was the whole secret of getting through life scatheless. It afforded an armour nothing could pierce. It made her superior to fate--absolutely superior to fate.

She had built for herself a tower of strength. She lived in a virgin fortress.

In thinking over at Miss Graham's the possible suitors a young lady who lodged in Grimsby Street might have, she had allowed as likely a City clerk, or a prosperous hairdresser, or a man who contracted for the supply of suppers, or a man who beat carpets, or a baker in a white cap, or the son and heir of a tailor. With such, she had some kind of acquaintance, either personal or by strong hearsay. Often in amused reverie, she passed these candidates for the hand of an imaginary young lady before her view. The young men were invariably in their Sunday best when they came a-wooing. There was a dandified air, an air of coxcombry, about them which amused her. They were, of course, dandies only after their kind; not like Lord Byron in his Childe Harold days, or the dandy officers for whom the great Duke of Wellington prayed so devoutly. They wore gloves of a sort, and flowers in their button-holes. They carried canes in genteel imitation of the beaux of old. Their hair was arranged with much precision and nicety. Their figures were good. They were stalwart and valorous, not, indeed, in the grand way, but as of their kind. They made displays, as displays may be made in reasonable conduct, of their physical graces and alertness. They carried themselves with the heroic air, without the inartistic stiffness of soldiers of the rank and file. Their features were well proportioned and agreeable, and they wore smiles of bland confidence and alluring archness. They looked their approbation of this imaginary young lady, but their good manners, their awe, never allowed them to do anything more than strut like harmless peacocks before the object of their admiration.

When the girl was alone and in good spirits, she often laughed aloud at these phantom suitors of this imaginary young lady lodger in Grimsby Street. She did not look on them with the pity of disdain. She regarded them as actors in a play. She summoned them for her amusement and dismissed them without emotion, without even thanks for the entertainment which they had afforded her.

On stepping out of the world of dreams into the world of reality what had happened?

This man, this deformed, odious little man, whose bread she was to eat for hire and whose money she was to take for services under his roof, had paid her attentions! forced his hateful attentions upon her! attempted to kiss her after an acquaintance of a few hours!

Good Heavens! Had she, Edith Grace, lived to see that day? Had it come to this with her? Had she fallen so low? Had she suffered such degradation and lived?

It was not the young lady lodger in Grimsby Street of her imagination, who had been compelled to listen to the ridiculous suits of the clerk, and the caterer, and the carpet-beater, and the baker, and the tailor of her fancy, but she herself, Edith Grace, who had had love offered to her by this miserable creature who was her master also!

Yet she had lived through it, and the house, Eltham House, had not fallen down on them, nor had the ground opened and swallowed them, and neither her grandmother herself nor Leigh seemed to realise the enormity of the crime!

Even if she had been the young lady of her imagination, and the young men of her fancy had taken flesh and done this thing, it would be unendurable degradation. What had occurred had been endured, although to reason a thing infinitely less seemed unendurable! In pity's name, had all that had taken place happened to her, Edith Grace?

Thoughts in part such as these had haunted the dark hours and early morning of the young girl. What wonder she was wakeful. Then she had to consider the future. Turn which way she might, the prospect was not cheerful. The necessity for her seeking her own living was as imperative as ever. She could not live at home in idleness without absolutely depriving her grandmother of the comforts of life. All her own money had vanished into thin air, and so much of Mrs. Grace's that there would be barely enough for her mere comfort. When Edith arranged to go to Eltham House Mrs. Grace had given the landlady notice that she should no longer require the second bed-room. It was doubtful if even the sitting-room could be retained, and if the old woman had to content herself with a bed-room and the "use" of a sitting-room (which no lodger ever used except to eat in), the poor old woman would mope and pine and, in all likelihood, sicken and break down. This consideration, being one not of her own, Edith allowed to trouble her deeply. For herself she had no pity, but she could not forbear weeping in the security of her own room when she thought of her grandmother suffering absolute poverty in old age. No wonder the girl looked pale and worn.

She was standing at the window absorbed in thought, when Mrs. Grace glided into the room and took the girl in her arms before Edith was aware of her presence.

"Thank God, you are here once more, my darling. To see you makes even this place look like home. Oh, what a miserable time it was to me while my child was away. It seemed an age. Short

as it was, it seemed an age, darling. Of one thing, Edy, I am quite certain, that no matter what is to become of us we shall never be separated again, never, darling, never. That is, if you are not too proud or too nice to be satisfied with what will satisfy your old grandmother."

It was only in moments of great emotion that Mrs. Grace called her grand-daughter by the affectionate pet name, Edy. The girl's name was Edith, and she looked all Edith could mean, and deserved the full stateliness of the name. But this morning the old woman's heart was overflowing upon the lost one who had returned. The heart of the blameless prodigal was so disturbed and softened that it became human, and all Edith could say or do was to fall upon the bosom of the old woman, and with her young, soft, moist lips, kiss the dry lips of the other and cry out:

"Oh, mother! oh, mother!" and burst into tears.

Mrs. Grace calling the young girl Edy was not by any means common, but Edith's weeping in a scene was without any parallel. It frightened the grandmother. What she, the passionless, the collected, the just Edith in tears! This was very serious, very serious indeed. The affair of Eltham House must have had a much greater effect upon the child than anything which had hitherto occurred, for Mrs. Grace could remember no other manifestation exactly so sudden and so vehement.

"There child, there!" cried the old woman, caressing the bent, shapely, smooth head against her breast. She durst not say any more. She was afraid of checking this outburst of feeling, afraid of saying something which would not be in harmony with the feelings of this troubled young heart.

So the girl sobbed her long-pent torrent of chaotic feeling away, the old woman stroking softly the dark glossy hair with one hand and pressing the head to her bosom with the other.

In a little while Edith recovered her composure, and stealing out of her grandmother's arms, turned towards the window to conceal her red and tear-stained face. The old woman went and busied herself at the table, re-arranging what was quite in order, and making changes that were no improvement. At last she sat down and saw the letter awaiting her close to her plate. She took it up anxiously, hoping it might prove the means of introducing some new subject between them.

Mrs. Grace was no slave to that foolish modern habit of tearing and rending a letter open the minute one sees it, as though it were a long-lost enemy. Most of the few letters she received were pleasant. She liked to savour the good things that came by the post before she bolted them. To one who knows how to enjoy this self-denial of delay, the few moments before a letter addressed in unknown or partly remembered handwriting are more precious than the coarse pleasures of realization. While the seal is unbroken one holds the key of an intensely provoking mystery. Once the envelope is removed the mystery is explained, and no mystery ever yet improved upon explanation. The writing of this letter was unknown to Mrs. Grace. She could make nothing of it. She turned the back, she could make nothing of that either. She was expecting a letter from her solicitor, Mr. James Burrows. This was not from him. He had the bad taste to print his name on the back of the envelope, a vandalism which paralyzed all power of speculation at once, and was more coldly and brutally disenchanting than the habit of writing the name of the sender on the left-hand corner of the face, for this external signature had often the merit of being illegible. The writing on the face of this was in a business, clerkly hand. The thing was a circular, no doubt.

"Edy," she said, "here is a letter. I have not my glasses with me. Will you read it to me, dear?"

The girl turned round, took the letter and went back to the window--for a better light.

"From whom is it?" asked Mrs. Grace, when she saw Edith break the envelope.

"It is signed Bernard Cutch," answered the girl in a low voice.

"Bernard Cutch--Bernard Cutch. I do not know anyone of that name. Are you quite sure the address is right?"

"Quite sure, mother. 'Mrs. Grace, 28, Grimsby Street.'"

"Well, go on, child. Let us hear what this Mr. Cutch has to say. Breakfast must wait. Nothing grows cold in such lovely weather. I hope this Mr. Cutch has good news."

"DEAR MADAM,

"Mr. James Burrows, solicitor, of Lincoln's Inn, wrote me a few weeks ago, with a view to ascertaining some facts regarding the Graces of Gracedieu----"

"Stop," said Mrs. Grace, "where is the letter dated from?"

"Castleton, Derbyshire," answered the girl with some awakening of interest in her voice and

manner.

"Wait a minute, Edith." The old woman rose excitedly and came to the window. "I must tell you, dear, that when first Mr. Burrows wrote me to say the bank had failed, and that your money and mine were gone, I went to him, as you know, and got no hope of ever saving anything out of the bank. But I did not tell you then, for I was ashamed of being so weak as to mention the matter to Mr. Burrows, that I told him all I knew of the history of the Graces of Gracedieu, and of the old story of mysterious money going to the runaway Kate Grace, of a hundred and twenty or thirty years ago. I asked him to make what inquiry he could, and let me know any news he might pick up. I was foolish enough to imagine, dear, that something might come to you out of the property of the rich Graces if we only knew where they are, if there are any. Now go on, dear."

Edith re-commenced the letter:--

"DEAR MADAM,

"Mr. James Burrows, solicitor, of Lincoln's Inn, wrote me a few weeks ago, with a view to ascertaining some facts regarding the Graces of Gracedieu, near this place. He requested, with a view to saving time, that I should forward you the result of my inquiries.

"I regret to say that I have not been able to find out much. Gracedieu is a small residence about a couple of miles from this. No property of any extent is or was, as far as I can ascertain, attached to the place. In the middle of the last century the Graces lived in this town, and dealt, I believe, in wool. The family were in comfortable circumstances, and one of the daughters, a lady of great beauty, attracted the attention of all who lived in the town, or saw her in passing through. She disappeared and was, so the story goes, never afterwards heard of here. It was rumoured she married a very handsome and rich young foreign nobleman who had been on a visit in the neighbourhood, but nothing is known for certain of her fate.

"Some years after the disappearance of the young lady, Mr. Grace seemed to come suddenly into a large amount of money; for he gave up the wool business, bought a few acres of land, and built a house for himself a couple of miles out of the town, and called his place Gracedieu. From the name of the house it was assumed the gentleman the young Miss Grace had married was a French nobleman. Why this was supposed from the name is not clear, except that the name is French. It is, however, a common name enough in England. I know two other Gracedieus. About a hundred years ago the Graces left Gracedieu for ever, and went to reside, it is believed, in London. Absolutely nothing else is known of them in this neighbourhood, and even this much would not be remembered only for the romantic disappearance of Miss Kate Grace, the rumour she was married, and the sudden influx of wealth upon the family.

"The land attached to Gracedieu in the time of the builder of the house was about five acres. The family, as far as is known, never held any other property here.

"If you desire it, search, involving considerable expense, can be made in the records of the town and parish and county, but I understand from Mr. Burrows that no expense is to be incurred without hearing further from you or him.

"Yours faithfully,

"Bernard Couth."

The girl turned away from the window, dropped the letter to the floor, and said in a listless voice, looking, with eyes that did not see external things, at the old woman, "Mother you ought to be glad you are not one of the family of Grace."

"Why, child, why?"

"We are an accursed race."

"My child! my child, what folly you talk. There is no disgrace in marriage, no disgrace in this. There was no shame in this, and who knows but the mysterious man who ran away with the beautiful Kate long ago, and married her, may now be a great man in France. He was a nobleman then and honours are things that grow, dear. If we could only find out the title he had. I suppose we could if we tried."

The girl shook her head. "Where there is no disgrace, mother, there is no secrecy about such things. I thought the Graces went further back than that."

"What! Do you want them to go back to Noah or Adam? Why this is four or five generations! How many of the best titled houses in England go back so far? Nonsense, child, I wish we knew what the French title is."

"So there really was no family of Grace of Gracedieu after all. That is if this account is true. And there was no estate, mother, and there can be no money. I am very, very sorry for you, mother."

"For me, child! Why for me? I don't want anything, pet. I have enough for my darling and myself, more than enough. I did not make these inquiries on my own account, but it was on yours that I asked Mr. Burrows to find out for me. Anyway, dear, no harm has been done. Come pet, breakfast must be getting cold even this warm morning. How delightful it is to be able to breakfast with the window open. Tea is such a luxury this warm weather."

It was the only luxury on that table tasted by either woman that morning. The food went away untouched.

When the landlady saw the unbroken food, she said to her daughter, "I know the poor ladies are sorely troubled by their losses in that shameful bank. There's one thing I can't make out about our corrupt nature. The people who are troubled by something wrong with their bodies eat and drink more than is good for them by way of trying to coax themselves to break their fast, and them that are troubled in their minds don't eat anything at all. The matter seems upside down somehow."

CHAPTER XXV.

TWO OF A RACE.

That day had not opened pleasantly or auspiciously for Mrs. Grace and her granddaughter. As soon as the pretence of breakfast was disposed of, Edith went to her room and the old woman took her work and sat in the open window.

Edith was too unnerved to think of doing anything that day towards getting a new place. Disappointment and despair seemed to hedge her in on all sides; but she was resolved to persevere in getting a situation as soon as she recovered from the effects of her late discomfiture and shock. The need for immediate employment was all the greater now, for her outfit and expedition to Eltham House had not only absorbed the money she had by her, but all her grandmother could command as well, and there would be little or nothing coming in now.

For herself she did not care, because she had schooled herself to regard herself and her feelings as of no consequence. Until that morning she had enjoyed the sustaining power of family pride. If what this attorney of Castleton said were true, she no longer could count on that support. What were three or four or five generations to one who had believed her name and race had come with the blood-making William? She had no blood in her veins worth speaking about. She was at most fifth in line from an humble dealer in wool, in an obscure provincial town. She who had regarded half-a-dozen of the great ducal houses as new people! She! who was she or what was she? After all perhaps it might be better that one who had to earn her bread by rendering service should not have too far back reaching a lineage. There was less derogation in earning money by service when one came of a race of humble dealers in wool than if one had come of an historic house.

But the discovery had a depressing effect nevertheless. Her grandmother didn't feel the matter, of course, so much as she felt it; for the old woman had none of the Grace blood in her veins. Never had she, while at school, committed the vulgar folly of boasting of her family. How fortunate that was, in face of the fact disclosed this morning. Why, her people had started as small shopkeepers, come by money and affected therefrom the airs of their betters, and the consequence of illustrious race. The claims of the Grace family were nothing more than a piece of pretentious bombast, if not, at the outset, deliberate lying. No doubt her father had believed he was well-bred and of gentle birth, but his father before him, or, anyway, his father before him again, must have known better.

No doubt the house of Leeds could show no higher origin, but then she had had nothing but contempt for the house of Leeds. She would rather have come of an undistinguished soldier of William's, one who never in himself, or any descendant of his, challenged fame or bore a title, than owe origin to a City source. She had believed the Graces had the undiluted blood of Hastings, and now she found they could trace back no further than the common puddle of an

obscure country town. The romantic past and mysterious background of an old race, no longer modified the banalities of her position. If she were to choose a suitor of her peers she should have to take one of the bourgeois tribe, and one in poor circumstances, too, to suit her own condition!

Why, if ever she thought of marriage, the fit mate for her was to be found in that line of vulgar admirers she had paraded for her amusement, her laughter, her scorn!

After the discovery of that morning, she, Edith Grace, could lift her head no more.

The hours of the weary, empty day went by slowly for the girl. The blaze of sunlight was unbroken by a cloud. The sun stood up so high in heaven it cast scant shadows. Grimbsy Street was always quiet, but after the morning efflux of men towards the places of their daily work, the street was almost empty until the home-returning of the men in the late afternoon and early morning. In the white and flawless air there was nothing to mark the passage of time.

A sense of oppression and desolation fell upon Edith. In the old days, that were only a few hours of time gone by, she could always wrap herself from the touch of adversity in the rich brocaded cloak of noble, if undistinguished, ancestry. Now she was cold and bare, and full in the vulgar light of day, among the common herd of people. No better than the very landlady whose rooms they occupied, and whom a day back she looked on as a separate and but dimly understood creation.

In the middle of the day there was a light lunch, at which Mrs. Grace made nothing of the disappointment of the morning, and Edith passed the subject almost silently. Then the afternoon dragged on through all the inexhaustible sunlight to dinner, and each woman felt a great sense of relief when the meal arrived, for it marked the close of that black, blank day, and all the time between dinner and bed-time is but the twilight dawn of another day.

An after-dinner custom of the two ladies was that Mrs. Grace should sit in her easy chair at one side of the window in summer, and Edith at the other, while the girl read an evening paper aloud until the light failed or the old woman fell asleep.

It was eight o'clock, and still the unwearying light pursued and enveloped the hours pertinaciously. The great reflux of men had long since set in and died down low. Now and then a brisk footstep passed the window with sharp beating sound; now and then a long and echoing footfall lingered from end to end of the opposite flagway; now and then an empty four-wheeled cab lumbered sleepily by.

The fresh, low voice of the girl bodied forth the words clearly, but with no emotion or aid of inflection beyond the markings of the punctuation on the page. She had been accustomed to read certain parts of the paper in a particular order, and she began in this order and went on. The words she read and uttered conveyed no meaning to her own mind, and if at any moment she had been stopped and asked what was the subject of the article, she would have been obliged to wait and trust to the unconsciously-recording memory of her ear for the words her voice had uttered.

The old woman's eyes were open. She was broad awake, but not listening to a word that Edith read. The girl's voice had a pleasing soothing effect, and she was sadly fancying how they two could manage to live on the narrow means now adjudged to her by fate.

Suddenly there was a sharper, brisker sound than usual in the street. The old woman awoke to observation. The sound approached rapidly, and suddenly stopped close at hand with the harsh tearing noise of a wheel-tire grating along the curbstone. Mrs. Grace leaned forward and looked out of the window. A hansom cab had drawn up at the door, and a man was alighting.

"There's the gentleman who was here yesterday with Mr. Leigh," said Mrs. Grace drawing back from the window.

Edith paused a moment, and then went on reading aloud in the same mechanical voice as before.

"I wonder could he have forgotten his gloves or his cane yesterday?" said Mrs. Grace, whose curiosity was slightly aroused. Any excitement, however slight, would be welcome now.

"I don't know, mother. If he forgot anything he must have left it downstairs. I saw nothing here, and I heard of nothing."

"If you please, Mrs. Grace, Mr. Hanbury has called and wishes to see you," said the landlady's daughter from the door of the room.

"Mr. Hanbury wants to see me!" said the old lady in astonishment. "Will you kindly ask him to walk up? Don't stir, darling," she said as Edith rose to go. "No doubt he brings some message from Mr. Leigh."

With a listless sigh the young girl sank back upon her chair in the window-place.

"Mr. Hanbury, ma'am," said the landlady's daughter from the door, as the young man looking

hot and excited, stepped into the room, drew up, and bowed to the two ladies.

"I feel," said the young man, as the door was closed behind him, "that this is a most unreasonable hour for a visit of one you saw for the first time, yesterday, Mrs. Grace; but last night I made a most astounding discovery about myself, and to-day I made a very surprising discovery about you."

"Pray, sit down," said the old lady graciously, "and tell us what these discoveries are. But discovery or no discovery I am glad to see you. A visit from the distinguished Mr. Hanbury would be an honour to any house in London."

The young man bowed and sat down. In manner he was restless and excited. He glanced from one of the women to the other quickly, and with flashing eyes.

Edith leaned back on her chair, and looked at the visitor. He was sitting between the two a little back from the window, so that the full light of eight o'clock in midsummer fell upon him. The girl could in no way imagine what discovery of this impetuous, stalwart, gifted young man could interest them.

"You see, Mrs. Grace," he said, looking rapidly again from one to the other, "I have just come back from the country where I had to go on an affair of my own. An hour or two ago I got back to London, and after seeing my mother and speaking to her awhile I came on here to you."

"Are all men impudent," thought Edith, "like Leigh and this one. What have we to do with him or his mother, or his visit to the country?"

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Grace. "I know. I understand. You've been to Millway and Eltham House with Mr. Leigh, and you have been kind enough to bring us news of my grand-daughter's luggage."

"Eh? What?" He looked in astonishment from one to the other.

"Are all men," thought Edith indignantly, "so pushing, and impudent, and interfering? What insolence of this man to call at such an hour about my luggage!"

"Eltham House? Millway? Miss Grace's luggage? Believe me, I do not understand." Again his eyes wandered in confused amazement from one to the other.

"My grand-daughter left Mr. Leigh's house early yesterday morning and did not bring her luggage with her," said the old woman severely. "If you have not called on behalf of Mr. Leigh about the luggage, may I ask to what you are referring when you say you have been to the country and found out something of interest to me?"

"But I have not said I have been to Mr. Leigh's place in the country. May I ask you where it is?"

"Near Millway, on the south coast; Sussex, I think."

"I don't know where Millway is. I have never been there; I have not come from the south. I have been in the Midlands since I had the pleasure of seeing you yesterday."

"The Midlands? The Midlands?" said the old woman, leaning forward and looking at him keenly.

Edith's face changed almost imperceptibly. She showed a faint trace of interest.

"Yes; I have just come back from Derbyshire. You are interested in Derbyshire, aren't you?"

"Go on," said the old woman eagerly. She was now trembling, and caught the arms of her easy chair to steady her hands.

"In Derbyshire I had occasion to visit Castleton, and there I met a Mr. Couth, who said he had been in communication with you respecting your family--the Graces of Gracedieu, in the neighbourhood of Castleton."

"Yes, yes," said the old woman impatiently. "That is quite right. I had a letter from Mr. Couth this morning, saying the Graces had left the place long ago, and owned no property in the place. Have you any other--any better news?"

"Not respecting the Graces and Gracedieu, as far as your questions go."

"Oh," said the old woman, and with a sigh she sank back in the chair, her interest gone. "The Graces are a Derbyshire family, and as my grand-daughter has just lost all her little fortune, I was anxious to know if there were any traces of her people in Derbyshire still."

The eyes of the man moved to the girl and rested on her.

"I am sorry to hear Miss Grace has lost her fortune," he said softly. "Very sorry indeed."

"It was not very much," said the old woman, becoming garrulous and taking it for granted

Hanbury was an intimate friend of Leigh's and knew all the dwarf's affairs, "and the loss of it was what made my granddaughter accept the companionship to old Mrs. Leigh down at Eltham House, near Millway. Miss Grace could not endure Mr. Leigh, and left, without her luggage, a few hours after arriving there. That was why I thought you came about Miss Grace's luggage."

"Miss Grace a companion to Mr. Leigh's mother?" cried the young man in a tone of indignant protest. "What!" he thought. "This lovely creature mewed up in the same 'house with that little, unsightly creature?"

"Yes. But she stayed only a few hours. In fact she ran away, as no doubt your friend told you."

"Mr. Leigh told me absolutely nothing of the affair; and may I beg of you not to call him my friend? He told you I was a friend of his, but I never met him till yesterday, and I have no desire to meet him again. When he had the impudence to bring me here I did not know where I was coming, or whom I was coming to see. I beg of you, let me impress upon you, Mr. Leigh is no friend of mine, and let me ask you to leave him out of your mind for a little while. The matter that brings me here now has nothing to do with him. I have come this time to talk about the Grace family, and I hope you will not think my visit impertinent, though the hour is late for a call."

"Certainly not impertinent. I am glad to see you again, Mr. Hanbury, particularly as you tell me that odious man is no friend of yours."

"You are very kind," said the young man, with no expression on his face corresponding with the words. "Mr. Coutch, the attorney of Castleton, told me that a few weeks ago you caused inquiries to be made in his neighbourhood respecting the Grace family. Now it so happened that this morning, before London was awake, I started for Castleton to make inquiries about the Grace family."

"What, you, Mr. Hanbury! Are you interested in the Grace family?" enquired the old woman vivaciously.

"Intensely," he answered, moving uneasily on his chair. He dreaded another interruption.

Edith Grace saw now that Hanbury was greatly excited. She put out her hand gently and laid it soothingly on her grandmother's hand as it rested on the arm of the chair. This young man was not nearly so objectionable as the other man, and he had almost as much as said he hated Leigh, a thing in itself to commend him to her good opinion. It was best to hear in quiet whatever he had to tell.

"Yes, my child," said Mrs. Grace, responding to the touch of the girl's hand, "I am most anxious to hear Mr. Hanbury."

"When I had the pleasure of seeing you yesterday I did not take more interest in Castleton than any other out-of-the-way English town of which I knew nothing, and my only interest in your family was confined to the two ladies in this room. Last night a document was given me by my mother, and upon reading it, I conceived the most intense interest in Castleton and Gracedieu and the family which gave that place a name."

He was very elaborate, and seemed resolved upon telling his story in a way he had arranged, for his eyes were not so much concerned with Mrs. Grace and Edith as with an internal scroll from which he was reading slowly and carefully.

"I went to Derbyshire this morning to see Gracedieu and to make inquiries as to a branch of the Grace family."

"And you, like me, have found out that there is no trace of the other branch," said the widow sadly. "You found out from Mr. Coutch that there were my granddaughter and myself and no clue to anyone else."

"Pardon me. I found out all I wanted."

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Grace, sitting up in her chair and becoming once more intensely interested. "You found out about the other branch?"

"Yes, I found out all about the other branch."

"And where--where are they? Who are they? What is the name?" cried the old woman in tremulous excitement.

"The other branch is represented by Miss Grace, here," said Hanbury, softly laying his hand on the girl's hand as it rested on the old woman's.

"What? What? I don't understand you! We are the Graces of Gracedieu, or rather my husband and son were, and my grand-daughter is. There was no difficulty in finding out us. The difficulty was to find out the descendants of Kate Grace, who married a French nobleman in the middle of the last century."

He rose, and bending over the girl's hand raised it to his lips and kissed it, saying in a low

voice, deeply shaken: "I am the only descendant of Kate Grace, who, in the middle of the last century, married Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski, called Stanislaus the Second, King of Poland."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE END OF DAY.

Edith sprang from her chair trembling, abashed, overwhelmed. Mrs. Grace fell back and stared at Hanbury. It was not a moment for coherent thought or reasonable words. Even John Hanbury was as much overcome as though the discovery came upon him then for the first time. He felt more inclined for action than for words, and thought was out of the question. He would have liked to jump upon a horse and ride anywhere for life. He would have liked to plunge into a tumultuous river and battle with the flood. The sight of lives imperilled by fire, and rescue possible through him alone, would have afforded a quieting relief in desperate and daring effort.

In his own room, the night before, when he came upon this astounding news in his father's letter, the discovery brought only dreams and visions, echoing voices of the past, and marvellous views of glories and pageantries, splendours and infamies, a feeble ancestor and a despoiled nation.

Now, here was the first effect of declaring his awful kinship to the outside world. His mother's was he, and what was his glory, or infamy of name, was hers; although she was not of the blood. He knew that whatever he was, she was that also, body and soul. But here were two women, one of whom was allied to his race, though stranger to his blood; and the other of whom was remotely his cousin, whose ancestor had been the sister of a king's wife, and he, the descendant of that king. This young girl was kin, though not kind, they were of the half-blood. Revealing his parentage to these two women, was as though he assumed the shadowy crown of kingship in a council of his kinsfolk, conferring and receiving homage.

A king! Descended from a king!

How had his mind shifted and wavered, uncertain. How had his aspirations now fixed on one peak, now on another, until he felt in doubt as to whether there were any stable principle in his whole nature. How had his spirit now sympathised with the stern splendours of war, and now with the ennobling glories of peace. How had he trembled for the rights of the savage, and weighed the consideration that civilization, not mere man, was the only thing to be counted of value. How had he felt his pulses throb at the thought of the lofty and etherealizing privileges of the upper classes, and sworn that Christ's theory of charity to the poor, and fellowship with the simple and humble, was the only way of tasting heaven, and acting God's will while on earth. Had all these mutations, these dizzying and distracting vacillations, been only the stirring of the kingly principle in his veins?

After many meaningless exclamations and wide questions by Mrs. Grace, and a few replies from Hanbury, the latter said, "I think the best thing I can do is to tell you all I know, as briefly as possible."

"That will be the best," said Mrs. Grace. "But if the man who married Kate Grace was a Pole, how did they come to call him a Frenchman?"

"No doubt he used French here in England, as being the most convenient language for one who did not know English. Remember, he was a private gentleman then."

"I thought you said he was a count?"

"Well, yes, of course he was a count; but I meant, he had no public position such as he afterwards held, nor had he any hopes of being more than plain Count Poniatowski."

"Oh, I see. Then may we hear the story?" She settled herself back in her chair, taking the hand of her grand-daughter into the safe keeping and affectionate clasp of both her hands.

"Towards the end of the first half of the eighteenth century, Count Poniatowski, son of a Lituianian nobleman, came to England. He was a man of great personal beauty and

accomplishments. While he was in this country he made the acquaintance of Sir Hanbury Williams, and became a favourite with that poet and diplomatist. When Sir Hanbury went as Ambassador to St. Petersburg, he took the young nobleman with him. In the Russian capital, he attracted the attention of the Grand Duchess Catherine. When she came to the Russian throne--when King Augustus III. of Poland died, in 1764--Catherine, now Empress--used her influence to such effect, that Stanislaus was elected King of Poland. He was then thirty-two years of age. It was under this unfortunate king that the infamous partition of Poland took place, and the kingdom was abolished. Russia, Austria and Germany now own the country over which Stanislaus once reigned."

"And how about Kate Grace?" asked the widow in a low voice.

"I am coming to that, as you may imagine, but I wanted first to tell you who this man was. Well, Stanislaus spent a good while in England, and among other places that he went to was Derbyshire, and there, while staying in the neighbourhood with a gentleman, a friend of Sir Hanbury Williams, he saw and fell in love with Kate Grace, the beauty of the place in those times. He made love to her, and she ran away with him, and was married to him in the name of Augustus Hanbury, in the town of Derby, as the parish Register, my father says, shows to this day. Subsequently she came to London and lived with him as his wife, but under the name of Hanbury. He sent a substantial sum of money to his father-in-law, and an assurance that Kate had been legally married, but that, for family reasons, he could not acknowledge his wife just then, but would later. Subsequently he went to Russia in the train of his friend, Sir Hanbury Williams, leaving behind him his wife and infant son comfortably provided for. He had not been long in St. Petersburg when his King, Augustus III of Poland, recalled him to that kingdom. Meanwhile, his wife, Kate Grace that had been, died; they said of a broken heart. Young Stanislaus Hanbury, the son of this marriage, was taken charge of by one of the Williams family, and when Stanislaus became King of Poland, he sent further moneys to the Graces, and to provide for his son, Stanislaus. But the Graces never knew exactly the man their daughter had married. They were quite sure she was legally married, and had no difficulty in taking the money Stanislaus sent them. They were under the impression their daughter had gone to France, that she died early, and that she left no child."

"It is a most wonderful and romantic history," said the old woman in a dazed way. The story had seemed to recede from her and hers, and to be no more to her than a record of things done in China a thousand years ago. The remote contact of her grand-daughter with the robes of a crowned King, had for the time numbed her faculties. It seemed as though the girl, upon the mere recital, must have suffered a change, and that it would be necessary to readjust the relations between them.

Edith did not say anything. She merely pressed the under one of the two hands that held hers.

"A very romantic history," said the visitor. "I have now told you whom Kate Grace married. She married a man who, after her death, sat thirty years on the throne of Poland, and was alive when that kingdom ceased to exist. What this man was I will not say. It is not my place, as a descendant of his, to tell his story. It has been told by many. I know little of it, but what I know is far from creditable to him. Remember, I never had my attention particularly directed to Stanislaus the Second, or Poland, until last night, and since then I have been enquiring after the living, and not unearthing the records of the dead."

"And you never even suspected anything of this until last night?" said Mrs. Grace, who now began slowly to recover the use of the ordinary faculties of the mind.

"Never. Nor did my mother. In the long paper my father left in charge of my mother he says he only heard the facts from some descendant of Sir Hanbury Williams. When he found out who he really was he seemed to have been seized with a positive horror of the blood in his veins, not because of what it had done in the past, but of what it might do in the future. He was a careful, timid man. He thought the best way to kill the seed of ambition in the veins of a Hanbury would be to reduce the position of the family from that of people of independent means to that of traders. Hence he went into business in the City; although he had no need of more money, he made a second fortune. He says his theory was that, in these days, no man who ever made up parcels of tea, or offered hides for sale, could aspire to a throne, and that no man of business who was doing well at home, ever became a conspirator abroad. When he saw I was taking a great interest in the struggles of parties in France, he thought the best thing he could do would be to let me know who I was, and leave me his opinion as to the folly of risking anything in a foreign cause, when one could find ample opportunity of employing one's public spirit usefully in England, for notwithstanding his foreign blood, my father was an Englishman with Englishmen against all the world. His instructions to my mother were, that if, at any time, I showed signs of abandoning myself to excess in politics, I was to get the paper, for if I leaned too much to the people the knowledge that I had the blood of a King in me might modify my ardour; and if I seemed likely to adopt the cause of any foreign ruler or pretender, I might be restrained by a knowledge that, as far as the experience of one of my ancestors went, unwelcome rulers meant personal misery and national ruin."

"And, Mr. Hanbury, what do you purpose doing? Do you intend changing your name and claiming your rights?"

"The only rights I have are those common to every Englishman. The name I have worn I shall continue to wear. Though my great grandfather's grandfather was for more than thirty years a king, there is not now a rood of ground for his descendants to lord it over. This marriage of Stanislaus Poniatowski with Kate Grace has been kept secret up to this. Now I wish to bind you and Miss Grace to secrecy for the future. I have told you the history of the past in order, not to glorify the past and magnify the Hanburys, but in order to establish between you two, and my mother and myself, the friendly relations which ought to exist between kith and kin. You are the last left of your line and we of ours. To divulge to the public what I have told you now would be to expose us to ridicule. I came here yesterday in the design of saving myself from ridicule a thousand times less than would follow if any one said I set up claims to be descended from a king. I will tell you the story of yesterday another time. Anyway, I hope I have made out this evening that we are related. I know, if you will allow it, we shall become friends. As earnest of our friendship will you give me your hands?"

The old woman held out hers with the young girl's in it and Hanbury stood up and bent and kissed the two hands.

Then Mrs. Grace began to cry and sob. It was strange to meet a kinsman of her dead husband, and her son, and her son's child, so late in her life, and it comforted her beyond containing herself, so she sobbed on in gratitude.

"My mother, who is the greatest-hearted woman alive, will come to see you both tomorrow. Fortunately all the Stanislaus or Grace, or Hanbury, money was not in rotten banks, and as long as English Consols hold their own there will be no need to seek a fortune in Millway or any other part of Sussex. Edith, my cousin, I may call you Edith?" he asked, gently taking her hand.

"If it pleases you," she said, speaking for the first time. She had felt inclined to say "Sir," or "My Lord," or even "Sire." She had been looking in mute astonishment at the being before her. She, who had more respect for birth than for power, or wealth, or genius, had sat there listening to the speech of this man as he referred to his origin in an old nobility, and related the spreading splendours of his forefathers blossoming into kingly honours, regal state! There, sitting before her, at the close of this dull day of disenchantment and sordid cares, was set a man who was heir not only to an ancient title in Poland, but to the man who had sat, the last man who had sat, in the royal chair of that historic land. Her heart swelled with a rapture that was above pride, for it was unselfish. It was the intoxicating joy one has in knowledge of something outside and beyond one's self, as in the magnitude of space, the immensities of the innumerable suns of the heavens, the ineffable tribute of the flowery earth to the sun of summer. Her spirit rose to respect, veneration, awe. What were the tinsel glories she had until that morning attributed to her own house, compared with the imperial, solid, golden magnificence of his race? Nothing. No better than the obscure shadows of the forgotten moon compared with the present and insistent effulgence of the zenith sun.

And, intolerable thought! the blood of this man had been allied with the humble stream flowing in her veins, and he was calling her cousin, and kissing her hand, he standing while she sat! instead of her kneeling to kiss his hand and render him homage!

"My lord and my king," she thought. "Yes, my king. After a joy such as this, the rest of life must seem a desert. After this night I shall desire to live no more. I, who thought myself noble because I came of an untitled soldier of the Conqueror's, am claimed as cousin by the son of one who ruled in his country as William himself ruled in England, from the throne!"

"And we shall be good friends," Hanbury said, smiling upon her.

"Yes," she said, having no hope or desire for better acquaintance with the king in her heart, for who could be friends with her king, even though there were remote ties of blood between them?

He caught the tone of doubt in the voice, and misconstrued it. "You will not be so unkind, so unjust, as to visit my intrusion of yesterday upon me?"

"No." How should one speak to a king when one could not use the common titles or forms?

"You must know that the man I came with yesterday told me if I accompanied him he would show me something more wonderful than miracle gold."

"Yes," she said, for he paused, and her answer by some word or note was necessary to show she was hearkening.

"And I came and saw you, Edith, but did not then know you were my cousin, nor did you dream it?"

"No."

"You are the only relative I have living, except my mother, and you will try and not be distant and cold with me?"

"Yes, I will try." But in the tone there was more than doubt.

"And you will call me John or Jack?"

"Oh!--no--no--no!" She slipped from her chair and knelt close to where he stood.

"Are you faint?" he cried, bending over her anxiously.

"I am better now," she said, rising.

Unknown to him she had stooped and kissed his hand.

END OF VOLUME II.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MIRACLE GOLD: A NOVEL (VOL. 2 OF 3) ***

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