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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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MIRACLE GOLD.

MIRACLE GOLD.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NEW RELATIVES.

When John Hanbury turned his face homeward to Chester Square from Grimsby Street that evening, the long summer day was at last ended, and it was dusk.

He had, before setting out for the country that morning, written a note to his mother explaining whither he was going, and left it with the document she had given him the night before. He wound up his note by telling her he was still, even after the night, so confused and hurried in his thoughts that he would make no comment on the discovery except that it was one of the most extraordinary that had ever befallen man. He was going into the country to find what confirmation he could, if any, of the marvellous tale.

On getting back to London he had had a strange meeting with his mother. Both were profoundly moved, and each, out of mercy to the other, affected to be perfectly calm, and fell to discussing the new aspect of affairs as though the news into which they had just come was no more interesting than the ordinary surprises that awaken interest once a week in the quietest family. Beyond an embrace of more warmth and endurance than usual, there was no sign that anything very unusual had occurred since their last meeting. Then Mrs. Hanbury sat down, and her son, as was his custom when excited, walked up and down the room as he told his Derbyshire experience.

"In a few hours," he went on, after some introductory sentences, "I found out all that is to be found out about the Graces near their former place, Gracedieu. It exactly corresponds with all my father says. The story of Kate Grace's disappearance and marriage to a foreign nobleman (by the tradition he is French), is still told in the place, and the shop in which her father formerly carried on his business in wool can still be pointed out, unaltered after a hundred and thirty years. There is Gracedieu itself, a small house in a garden, such as a man who had made money in trade in a country town would retire to. There is also the tradition that Grace, the wool dealer, did not make his money in trade, but came into it through his rich son-in-law, whose name is not even guessed at, the people there being content as a rule to describe him as a foreigner, while those who pride themselves on their accuracy, call him a Frenchman, and the entirely scrupulous say he was a French count."

"And do these Graces still live at Gracedieu, John?"

"No, mother. They left it years ago--generations ago. And now I want to tell you a thing almost as incredible as the subject of my father's letter. No longer since than yesterday I met, in London, the representative of these Graces, the only surviving descendant."

"That is truly astonishing," said Mrs. Hanbury. "Yesterday was a day of wonders."

"A day of miracles," said the young man thoughtfully.

For the first time in his life he had a secret from his mother, and he was at this moment in doubt as to whether he should impart to her, or not, all the circumstances of his going to Grimsby Street yesterday. He had no inclination to speak now of the quarrel or disagreement with Dora. That incident no longer occupied a front and illumined position in his mind. It was in a dim background, a quiet twilight.

"How did you come across them? What are they like?"

"I came across them quite by accident. It is much too long a tale to tell now. Indeed, it would take hours to tell fully, and I want not to lose any time at present."

"As you please, John. This is a day when wonders come so quick that we lose all sense of their importance. Tell me just what you like. I am only concerned about one thing."

"And what is that, mother?" He asked in a troubled voice. He was afraid she was about to make some reference to Dora.

"That you do not allow yourself to become too excited or carried away," she said, with pleading solicitude.

He kissed her, and said cheerfully: "Trust me, mother, I am not going to lose my head or knock myself up. Well, when I met Mrs. and Miss Grace yesterday----"

"Oh, the representatives are women?"

"Yes, mother, and gentlewomen too; though I should think far from well off----"

"If," said Mrs. Hanbury promptly, "narrow circumstances are all the drawback they labour under that could be soon put right."

"God bless you, my good mother," cried the son with affectionate pride. "Well, when I saw them yesterday in their place in Grimsby Street I had, of course, no notion whatever that they were in any way related to us. I took no particular notice of them beyond observing that they were ladies. The strangest thing about them is that the younger is--is----" He hesitated, not knowing how much of yesterday's events must come out.

"What?" said the mother with a smile.

"Is, as I said, a perfect lady."

"Yes; but why do you hesitate?"

"Well, mother, I don't know how to put it," he laughed lightly, and coloured impatiently at his own blundering stupidity.

"I will help you. That the younger is fifty, wears corkscrew curls, and teaches the piano in that awful Grimsby Street. Never mind, John, I am not afraid of an old maid, even if you are."

"Good heavens! I don't mean that, mother! I'll put it in this way. It is not to say that there is a strong likeness, but, if you saw Miss Grace, you would be prepared to swear it was Miss Ashton."

"What? So like Dora Ashton! Then, indeed, she must be not only ladylike but a beauty as well."

"The two would be, I think, quite indistinguishable to the eye, anyway. The voices are not the same."

"Now, indeed, you do interest me. And was it because of this extraordinary resemblance you sought the young lady's acquaintance?"

"Well, as I said, it is too long a story, much too long a story to tell now. I did not seek the lady's acquaintance. A man who knew us both, and whom I met yesterday by accident, was so struck by the similarity between Miss Ashton and Miss Grace that he insisted upon my going with him to the house of this Mrs. Grace."

"Oh, I understand. You were at Mrs. Ashton's Thursday, met some man there, and he carried you off. Upon my word you seem to be in a whirl of romances," she said gaily.

"That was not exactly the way the thing arose. The man who introduced me was at Ashton's, but we shall have the whole story out another day."

"Then what do you think of doing now? You seem in a great hurry."

"I'm not, mother, in a great hurry anywhere in particular.

"You, of course, are wishing to run away to Curzon street?"

"No. They are not at home this evening. Mrs. Ashton said they were to dine at Byngfield's. I am in a hurry, but in a hurry nowhere. I am simply in a blaze of excitement, as you may imagine." He paused, and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. The worst was over. There had been a reference to Dora and no explanation, a thing he wished to avoid at any expense just now. There had been a statement that he had met the Graces, and no mention of Leigh. His mind had been in a wild whirl. He had in the first burst of his interview with his mother magnified to himself the unpleasant episodes of yesterday, as far as Leigh was concerned at all events. Now he was more at rest. He had got breathing space, and he could between this and the next reference decide upon the course he should pursue in that most uncomfortable affair. There would be ample excuse for almost any irregularity on his part with regard to her in the amazing news which had come upon him. His mind was calmer and more unclouded now.

"Well, perhaps if you talk to me a while you may grow cooler. Tell me anything you like or nothing. You will wear yourself out, John, if you don't take care. To judge from your father's letter to you he attached on practical importance to the secret it contained, to the only object he had in communicating it was to keep you still. It has had so far an effect the very opposite of what he desired."

"I know I am very excitable. I will try to be more calm. Let me see. What can we talk about? Of course I can neither think nor speak about anything which does not bear on the disclosure."

"Tell me then what you heard of the Graces in Derbyshire, and why you think them not well off. That may have a practical use, and will take your mind off your own place in the affair."

"Oh! yes. Well, you see Castleton isn't a very big place, and Mr. Coutch is the most important professional man in it, so I found my way to him, and he told me he had been making inquiries for a widow and her granddaughter who lived in London, and I asked where they lived and so on, and found out that Mrs. Grace who was making the inquiries was the very Mrs. Grace I had met yesterday. I told Coutch that I was the person he was looking for, that I represented the other branch of the Grace family, and that I was most anxious to befriend my relatives by giving them what information they might desire. I did not say anything to him about the Polish affair, or the man whom Kate Grace had married, beyond informing Coutch that he had not been a French nobleman, and that I was a descendant of that marriage.

"Then he told me he feared from what his London correspondent had written him that the Graces were in distress, or anyway were far from well off, as Mrs. Grace had lately lost a large sum of money, and Miss Grace every penny she had in the world. His correspondent said he thought the only object of the inquiry was to find out if by any chance there might be ever so remote a chance of tracing the other branch of the family with a view to finding out if by will or failure of that line some property might remain to those who bore the name of Grace, and were direct in the line of the wool-dealer of the eighteenth century. I then told him that I was not either exactly poor or rich, and that I would be most happy to do anything in my power for my distant relatives. He said that there was not even a trace of property in his neighbourhood to which either of the branches had the shadow of a claim, as Gracedieu had generations ago passed away from the family by sale, and they had never owned anything else there."

"I am delighted you told this man we would be happy to be of any use we could to this poor old lady, and her granddaughter. Of course, John, in this case you must not do anything in which I am not a sharer. All I have will be yours legally one day, and in the mean time is yours with my whole heart and soul. Apart altogether from my desire to aid in this matter because these people are your people, it would, of course, be my duty to do so, because they are your dead father's people. You own you are restless. Why not go to them and tell them all? Say they have friends and well-wishers in us, and that I will call upon them to-morrow."

So mother and son parted, and he went to Grimsby Street. He had left Chester Square in a comparatively quiet state of mind, but as he drove in the hansom his imagination took fire once more, and when he found himself in Mrs. Grace's sitting-room he was highly excited.

When he returned to Chester Square he sought his mother's room. He found her sitting alone in the twilight. In a hasty way he described the interview between himself, Mrs. and Miss Grace, and said he had conveyed his mother's promise of a visit the next day.

Then he said: "Do you know, I think we had better keep all this to ourselves?"

"I am glad, my son, you are of that opinion. Up to this I have spoken to no one, not even to your aunt Preston or Sir Edward, who were here to-day. I don't remember ever having heard that the Hanburys were related to people called Grace, and I suppose if I did not hear it, no one among our friends did. I hope you cautioned Mrs. and Miss Grace. But, remember, John, this is not wholly our secret. It is theirs quite as much, if not more, than ours. All we can do for the present is to keep our own tongues quiet."

"I am sure you will like Mrs. and Miss Grace. They are very quiet people and took my news very well. Good news or news of this kind tries people a great deal more than calamitous news.

They seem to be simple and well-bred."

"Well, when people are simple and well-bred, and good-natured, and not selfish----"

"I think they are all that," he interjected.

"There is no merit in getting on with them. The only thing to consider John, is, will they get on with me? Am I to be got on with by them?"

"Why, my mother would get on with the most disagreeable women ever known."

"Yes, but then these two may not be the most disagreeable. At all events I'll do my best. Do you intend staying in or are you going to the club or to Curzon Street?"

"The Curzon Street people are dining out at Byngfields' as I told you earlier in the day. I am too restless to stay in the house and the club seems too trivial for an evening like this. I think I'll go out and walk to that most delightful of all places."

"Where is that?"

"Nowhere in particular. I am too tired and excited to decide upon anything to-night. I'll just go for a stroll and think about nothing at all. I'll say good night, as I may not be back early."

And so mother and son parted.

He left the house. It was almost dark. He wandered on in an easterly direction, not caring or heeding where he went. He tried to keep his mind from hurrying by walking at a leisurely rate, and he tried to persuade himself he was thinking of nothing by employing his eyes actively on all things that came his way as he strolled along. But this device was only an attempt and scarcely a sincere attempt.

"A king," he would think, insensibly holding his head high, "one of my people, my great grandfather's grandfather, has been king of an old monarchy and millions of men. It is a long time ago, no doubt, but what does all blood pride itself upon if not former splendours? A king! And the king of no miserable Balkan state or Christian fragment of the Turkish empire, but a king of an ancient and powerful state which stood powerful and stubborn in the heart of fierce, military, warlike Europe and held its own! Poniatowski was no doubt an elected king, but so were the others, and he was a Lithuanian nobleman before he became King. The kingdom over which he ruled exists no longer except in history, and even if the infamous partitions had never taken place and Stanislaus had owned his English marriage and taken his English family with him, I should have no more claim to the throne than to that of the Queen. But I am the lineal descendant of a king who reigned for a generation, and neither the malignity of to-day nor the lies of history can destroy that fact.

"Still the whole thing is, of course, only moonshine now, and if I went to Lithuania, to Wolczyn itself, they would laugh at my pretensions. The family estates and honours had been vapourized before that last of the Poniatowskis fell under Napoleon. So my father asserts, and he took some trouble to enquire. Therefore, no doubt it would be best to keep the whole thing secret. But can we?"

He put the thought away from him as having no immediate urgency. It would be best for him to think of nothing at all, but to watch the gas lamps and the people and the cabs and carriages hurrying through the free air of England.

But Dora? What of Dora? Dora had said good night to him and then good bye. He had behaved badly, shamefully, no doubt. There was no excuse for him or for any man allowing himself to be carried away by temper in speaking to a lady, above all in speaking to a lady whom he thought and intended to make his wife. Could Dora ever forgive him? It was more than doubtful. If she did, what assurance had he for the future? How would Dora take this discovery about the husband of Kate Grace in the eighteenth century? She would think little or nothing about it. She had no respect for hereditary honours or for old blood. She judged all men by their deeds and by their deeds alone. Hence she had tolerated him, doubtless, when she believed him to be no more than the son of a City merchant possessing some abilities. She had tolerated him! It was intolerable to be tolerated! And by the woman he intended asking to be his wife.

He had asked her to be his wife and she had hung back because he had not yet done anything important, had not yet even taken up a well-defined position in politics.

If he told her to-night that he was descended from Stanislaus II. King of Poland she would not be impressed ever so little. He did not attach much importance to his old Lithuanian blood or the transient gleam of kingship which had shone upon his race. But there was, in spite of Dora, something in these things after all, or all the world was wrong.

Dora was really too matter-of-fact. No doubt the rank is but the guinea stamp and the man is the gold for all that. But in our complex civilization the stamp is very convenient; it saves the trouble of assaying and weighing every piece of yellow metal we are offered as gold, and Burns himself, in his letters at least, shows anything but this fierce democratic spirit. Why Burns' letters

erred the other way, and were full of sickening tuft-hunting and sycophancy.

What a marvellous likeness there was between the appearance of those two young girls. Now, if anyone had said there was a remote cousinship between the girls all who saw would say cousinship! Sisterhood! No twins could be more alike. And yet the resemblance was only accidental.

He would like to see them together and compare them.

Like to see them together? Should he?

Well, no.

Dora was generous, there was no question of that; and she was not disposed to be in the least jealous. But she could scarcely help wondering how he felt towards another girl who was physically her counterpart and seemed to think more of blood and race.

It might occur to Dora to look at the likeness between herself and his cousin Edith in this way: To me John Hanbury is merely a young man of promising ability, who may if he likes forward causes in which I take a great interest. I sometimes cross him and thwart him, but then he is my lover, and, though I despise rank, I am his social superior in England now anyway. How would it be with him if this young girl whose appearance is so like mine cares' for him, apart from his abilities and possible usefulness in causes interesting to me, and sets great store by noble race and royal blood?

That would be an inquiry upon which Dora might not care to enter. Or it might be she would not care? Might it be she was glad to say good-bye?

"Perhaps Dora has begun to think she made a mistake in listening to me at all. After yesterday and my cowardly weakness and vacillation during the afternoon, and my unpardonable outburst after dinner, she may not care to send me away from her because she pities me! Good God! am I going to marry a woman who pities me?

"I will put Dora away from my thoughts for the present.

"The Graces must come to live with us, that's certain.

"Fancy that odious dwarf and Dora pitying me! I cannot bear the thought! I could not breathe five minutes in an atmosphere of pity. There are good points in my character, but I must take care of them or they might deteriorate into baseness. I must take care of myself, beware of myself. I am not perfect, I am not very vile. I should like to be a god. Let me try."

He had told his mother he was going Nowhere in particular. It was quite plain his reflections were bringing him no nearer to Curzon Street.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LEIGH AT HIS BENCH.

Tom Stamer was afraid of only two people, namely, John Timmons and the policeman. Of both he had experience. In his fear of Timmons were mingled love and admiration. No such diluting sentiments qualified his feelings towards the guardians of law and order. He had "done time," and he did not want to do it again. He was a complete stranger to anything like moral cowardice. He had never even heard of that weakness by that name. He was a burglar and a thief without any code at all, except that he would take anything he wished to take, and he would die for John Timmons. He did not look on dying as a very serious thing. He regarded imprisonment as a monstrous calamity, out of all proportion to any other. He would not go out of his way to kill a policeman, but if one stood in his way he would kill him with as little compunction and as much satisfaction as a terrier kills a rat. If up to the present his hands were clean of blood, it was because shedding it had never seemed to him at once expedient and safe. If he were made absolute king he would like to gather all the police of the kingdom into a yard with high walls and shoot them from a safe balcony.

Although his formulated code was limited to the two articles mentioned above, certain things he had not done wore the air of virtue. He never quarrelled with any man, he never ill-treated his wife, he never cheated anyone. When drunk he was invariably amiable and good-natured, and

gave liberally to others. He was a completely loyal friend, and an enemy all the more merciless and horrible because he was without passion.

He had little or no mind, but he was on that account the more terribly steadfast. Once he had resolved upon a thing nothing could divert him from trying to accomplish it. His was one of those imperfect, half-made intellects that are the despair of philanthropists. You could do nothing whatever with him; he could rob and murder you. If he had all those policemen in that high-walled court he would not have inflicted any torture upon them. He would have shot them with his own hand merely to make sure the race was extirpated. His fidelity was that of an unreasoning beast. He knew many men of his own calling, and by all of them he was looked upon as being the most mild and true, and dangerous and deadly burglar in London. He was morally lower than the lowest of the uncorrupted brutes.

Stamer had made up his mind that Oscar Leigh was in league with the police, and that this postponement of buying the gold from Timmons was merely part of some subtle plan to entrap Timmons and himself.

This conviction was his way of deciding upon taking Oscar Leigh's life. He did not even formulate the dwarf's death to himself. He had simply decided that Leigh meant to entrap Timmons in the interest of Scotland Yard. Timmons and himself were one.

Wait a week indeed, and be caught in a trap! Not he! Business was business, and no time was to be lost.

When he left Tunbridge Street that morning, he made straight for Chelsea. This was a class of business which did not oblige him to keep his head particularly clear. He would lay aside his ordinary avocation until this affair was finished. The weather was warm, so he turned into a public-house in the Vauxhall Bridge Road and sat down at a table to think the matter over while cooling and refreshing himself with a pint of beer.

One thing puzzled him. How was it that the dwarf pretended to be with Timmons half-a-mile away, at the time he himself, and half-a-dozen other men who knew Leigh's appearance thoroughly, saw him as plain as the sun at noonday winding up his clock at the second floor window of the house opposite the Hanover? There could, of course, not be the least doubt that Timmons had been deceived, imposed upon in some way. But how was it done? Timmons knew the dwarf well, knew his figure, which could not easily be mistaken, and knew his voice also. They had met several times before Timmons even broached the gold difficulty to him. Leigh had told Timmons that he was something of a magician. That he could do things no other man could do. That he had hidden knowledge of metals, and so on, and could do things no other man living could do with metals, and that he had books of fortune-telling and magic and the stars, and so on.

Stamer's education had been neglected. He had read little, and knew nothing of magic and these things, but he had heard it was only foolishness. Timmons was an honourable man and wouldn't lie. He had said the plan of getting rid of the gold was to be that Leigh was to pretend to make it and sell it openly or with very little secrecy. That was a good notion if Leigh could persuade people he made it. Unfortunately gold could not be run into sovereigns. It had to be stamped cold and that could only be managed by machinery.

Well, anyway, if this man, this Leigh, knew a lot of hidden things he might know a lot about chloroform and laudanum and other drugs he heard much about but that did not come in his way of business. Leigh might know of or have invented something more sudden and powerful than chloroform and have asked Timmons to smell a bottle, or have waved a handkerchief in Timmons's face, and Timmons might have there and then gone off into a sleep and dreamed all he believed about the walk at midnight and the church clock.

That looked a perfectly reasonable and complete explanation. In fact it was the explanation and no other was needed. This was simplicity itself.

But what was the object of this hocusing of Timmons, and, having hocused the man, why didn't he rob him of the gold he had with him, or call the police? That was a question of nicer difficulty and would require more beer and a pipe. So far he was getting on famously, doing a splendid morning's work.

He made himself comfortable with his tobacco and beer and resumed where he had left off.

The reason why the dwarf didn't either take the gold or hand over Timmons to the police was because he hadn't all he wanted. When he got Timmons asleep he left him somewhere and went back to wind his clock just to show he wasn't up to anything. What was it Timmons hadn't? Why, papers, of course. Timmons hadn't any papers about Stamer or any of them, and the only thing Leigh would have against Timmons, if he gave him up then, would be the gold, out of which by itself they could make nothing! That was the whole secret! Leigh knew the time when Timmons would come to his senses to a minute, and had him out in the street half a mile from the house before he knew where he was.

If confirmation of this theory were required had not Timmons told him that Leigh carried a silver bottle always with him, and that he was ever sniffing up the contents of the bottle? Might not he carry another bottle the contents of which, when breathed even once, were more

powerful, ten times more powerful, than chloroform?

This explanation admitted of no doubt or even question. But if a clincher were needed, was it not afforded by what he had heard the landlord and frequenters of the Hanover say last night about this man's clock? They said that when the clock was wound up by night the winding up always took place in the half hour between midnight and half-past twelve, and furthermore that on no occasion but one, and that one when Leigh was out of town, that one and singular occasion being the night before his visit to the Hanover, had a soul but the dwarf been seen in the clock room or admitted to it.

This affair must be looked after at once. It admitted of no delay. He would go to the Hanover and early enough to try some of their rum hot, of which he had heard such praises last night.

This was the substance of Stamer's thinking, though not the words of his thought.

On his way to Chetwynd Street he thought:

"He wants to get evidence against Timmons, and he wants to get evidence against me for the police. If he doesn't get it from Timmons pockets next Thursday, he'll get it some other way soon, and then Timmons and I will be locked up. That must be prevented. He is too clever for an honest, straightforward man like Timmons. It isn't right to have a man like that prying into things and disturbing things. It isn't right, and it isn't fair, and it must be stopped, and it shall be stopped soon, or my name isn't Tom Stamer. I may make pretty free in this get-up. It belonged to a broken-down bailiff, and I think I look as like a broken-down bailiff as need be. When Timmons didn't guess who I was, I don't think anyone else will know, even if I met a dozen of the detectives."

He was in no hurry. He judged it to be still early for the Hanover. He wanted to go there when people were in the private bar, some time about the dinner hour would be the best part of the day for his purpose, and it was now getting near that time.

When he reached Welbeck Place he entered the private bar of the Hanover, and perching himself by the counter opposite the door, on one of the high stools, asked for some rum hot. There was no one in this compartment. The potman served him. As a rule Williams himself attended to the private compartment, but he was at present seated on a chair in the middle of the bar, reading a newspaper. He looked up on the entrance of Stamer, and seeing only a low-sized man, in very seedy black, and wearing blue spectacles, he called out to Tom to serve the gentleman.

Mr. Stamer paid for his steaming rum, tasted it, placed the glass conveniently at his right elbow, lit his pipe, and stretched himself to show he was quite at his ease, about to enjoy himself, and in no hurry. Then he took off his blue spectacles, and while he wiped the glasses very carefully, looked around and about him, and across the street at the gable of Forbes's bakery, with his naked eyes.

He saw with satisfaction that Oscar Leigh was sitting at the top window opposite, working away with a file on something held in a little vice fixed on his clockmaker's bench.

Oscar Leigh, at his bench in the top room of Forbes's bakery, overlooking Welbeck Place, was filing vigorously a bar of brass held in a little vice attached to the bench. He was unconscious that anyone was watching him. He was unconscious that the file was in his hand, and that the part of the bar on which he was working gradually grew flatter and flatter beneath the fretting rancour of the file. He was at work from habit, and thinking from habit, but his inattention to the result of his mechanical labour was unusual, and the thoughts which occupied him were far away from the necessities of his craft.

When he put the rod in the vice, and touched its dull yellow skin into glittering ribs and points sparkling like gold, he had had a purpose in his mind for that rod. Now he had shaved it down flat, and the rod and the purpose for which it had been intended were forgotten. The brazen dust lay like a new-fallen Danæe shower upon the bench before him, upon his grimy hands, upon his apron. He was watching the delicate sparkling yellow rain as it fell from the teeth of inexorable steel.

Oscar Leigh was thinking of gold--Miracle Gold.

Stamer had resumed his blue spectacles. He was furtively watching out of the corners of his eyes behind the blue glasses the man at the window above. He too was thinking of a metal, but not of the regal, the imperial yellow monarch of the Plutonian realms, but of a livid, dull, deadly, poisonous metal--lead, murderous lead.

The gold-coloured dust fell from the dwarf's file like a thin, down-driven spirt of auriferous vapour.

"Miracle Gold," he thought, "Miracle Gold. All gold is Miracle Gold when one tests it by that only great reagent, the world. The world, the world. In my Miracle Gold there would be found an alloy of copper and silver. Yes, a sad and poisonous alloy. Copper is blood-red, and silver is virgin white, and gold is yellow, a colour between the two, and infinitely more precious than they, the

most precious of all metals is gold.

"The men who sought for the elixir of life sought also for the philosopher's stone. They placed indefinite prolongation of life and transmutation of the baser metals into gold side by side in importance. And all the time they were burying in their own graves their own little capital of life; they were missing all the gold of existence!

"They ceaselessly sought for endless life and found nothing but the end of the little life which had been given them! They ceaselessly sought to make gold while gold was being made all round them in prodigal profusion! They seared up their eyes with the flames of furnaces and the fumes of brass, to make another thing the colour of flame, the colour of brass! Was there no gold made by the sunlight or the motion of men's hearts?

"I cannot make this Miracle Gold. I can pretend to make it and put the fruit of violence and rapine abroad as fruit of the garden of the Hesperides. The world will applaud the man who has climbed the wall and robbed the garden of the Hesperides, providing that wall is not in London, or England, or the British Empire.

"I am not thinking of making this gold for profit; but for fame; for fame or infamy?

"I am in no want of money, as the poor are in want of money, and I do not value money as the rich value it. From my Miracle Gold I want the fame of the miracle not the profit of the gold. But why should I labour and run risk for the philosopher's stone, when I am not greedy of pelf? For the distinction. For the glory.

"Mine is a starved life and I must make the food nature denies me.

"But is this food to be found in the crucible? or on the filter?

"I am out of gear with life, but that is no reason why I should invent a dangerous movement merely to set me going in harmony with something that is still more out of gear with life.

"The elixir of life is not what is poured into life, but what is poured out of it. We are not rich by what we get, but by what we give. Tithonus lived until he prayed for death.

"And Midas starved. He would have given all the gold in the world for a little bread and wine or for the touch of a hand that did not harden on his shoulder.

"Here is a golden shower from this brass bar.

"Miracle Gold! Miracle Gold does not need making at my hands. It is made by the hands of others for all who will stretch forth their hands and take it. It is ready made in the palm of every hand that touches yours in friendship. It is the light of every kindly eye.

"It is on the lips of love for lovers.

"One touch of God's alchemy could make it even in the breast of a hunchback if it might seem sweet to one of God's angels to find it there!"

He dropped the file, swept the golden snow from the bench, rose and shook from his clothes the shower of golden sparks of brass. Then he worked his intricate way deftly through the body of the clock and locking the door of the clock-room behind him, descended the stairs and crossed Welbeck Place to the Hanover public house.

CHAPTER XXIX.

STRONG SMELLING SALTS.

Stamer had by this time been provided with a second glass of the Hanover's famous rum hot. Mr. Williams the proprietor was still immersed in his newspaper, although Stamer's implied appreciation of the hot rum, in the order of a second glass, had almost melted the host into the benignity of conversation with the shabby-looking stranger. On the appearance of the dwarf, Williams rose briskly from his chair and greeted the new-comer cordially. Stamer did not stir beyond drawing back a little on his stool. Out of his blue spectacles he fixed a steady and cat-like gaze upon Leigh.

"How warm the weather keeps," said Leigh, climbing to the top of a stool, with his back to the door of the compartment and directly opposite Stamer. "Even at the expense of getting more dust than I can manage well with, I think I must leave my window open," pointing upwards to the clock-room. "The place is suffocating. Hah! Suffocating."

"Why don't you get a fine muslin blind and then you could leave the window open, particularly if you wet the blind."

"There's something in that, Mr. Williams; there's a great deal in what you say, Mr. Williams. But, you see, the water would dry off very soon in this broiling weather, and then the dust would come through. But if I soaked the blind in oil, a non-drying oil, it would catch all the dust and insects. Dust is as bad for my clock as steel filings from a stone are for the lungs of a Sheffield grinder. Hah! Yes, I must get some gauze and steep it in oil. Would you lend me the potman for a few minutes? He would know what I want and I am rather tired for shopping."

"Certainly, with pleasure, Mr. Leigh. Here, Binns, just put on your coat and run on an errand for Mr. Leigh, will you."

The potman who was serving the only customer in the public bar appeared, got his instructions and money from the clock-maker and skipped off with smiling alacrity. The little man was open-handed in such matters.

"Yes; the place is bad enough in the daytime," went on Leigh as he was handed a glass of shandy-gaff, "but at night when the gas is lighted it becomes choking simply."

"It's a good job you haven't to stay there long at night. No more than half-an-hour with the gas on."

"Yes, about half-an-hour does for winding up. But then I sometimes come there when you are all in bed. I often get up in the middle of the night persuaded something has gone wrong. I begin to wonder if that clock will get the better of me and start doing something on its own account."

"It's twice too much to have on your mind all by yourself. Why don't you take in a partner?" asked Williams sympathetically, "or," he added, "give it up altogether if you find it too much for you?" If Leigh gave up his miserable clock, Leigh and Williams might do something together. The two great forces of their minds might be directed to one common object and joined in one common fame.

"Partner! Hah!" cried Leigh sharply, "and have all my secrets blown upon in twenty-four hours." Then he added significantly. "The only man whom I would allow into that room for a minute should be deaf and dumb and a fool."

"And not able to read or write," added Williams with answering significance.

"And not able to read or write," said the dwarf, nodding his head to Williams.

The publican stood a foot back from the counter and expanded his chest with pride at the thought of being trusted by the great little man with the secret of the strange winder of two nights ago. Then he added, by way of impressing on Leigh his complete trustworthiness respecting the evening which was not to be spoken of, "By-the-way Mr. Leigh, we saw you wind up last night, sure enough."

"Oh yes, I saw you. I nodded to you."

"Yes, at ten minutes past twelve by my clock, a quarter past twelve by my watch; for I looked, Mr. Leigh. You nodded. I told the gentlemen here how wonderfully particular you were about time, and how your clock would go right to a fraction of a second. If I am not mistaken this gentleman was here. Weren't you here, sir?" Williams said, addressing Stamer for the first time, but without moving from where he stood.

"I happened to be here at the time, and I saw the gentleman at the window above," said Stamer in a meek voice.

Then a remarkable thing happened.

The partition between the private bar and the public bar was about six feet high. Just over the dwarf's head a pair of long thin hands appeared on the top of the partition, and closed on it with the fingers pointing downward. Then very slowly and quite silently a round, shabby, brown hat stole upwards over the partition, followed by a dirty yellow-brown forehead, and last of all a pair of gleaming blue eyes that for a moment looked into the private bar, and then silently the eyes, the forehead, and the hat, sank below the rail, and finally the hands were withdrawn from the top of the partition. From the moment of the appearance of the hands on the rail until they left it did not occupy ten seconds.

No one in the private bar saw the apparition.

"Well," said Leigh, who showed no disposition to include Stamer in the conversation, "I can have a breath of air to-night when I am winding up. I am free till then. I think I'll go and look

after that mummy. Oh! here's Binns with the muslin. Thank you, Binns, this will do capitally."

He took the little silver flask out of his pocket, and poured a few drops from it into his hand and sniffed it up, and then made a noisy expiration.

"Very refreshing. Very refreshing, indeed. I know I needn't ask you, Williams. I know you never touch it. You have no idea of how refreshing it is."

The smell of eau-de-cologne filled the air.

Stamer watched the small silver flask with eyes that blazed balefully behind the safe screen of his blue glasses.

"Would you oblige me," he said in a timid voice, holding out his hand as he spoke.

Leigh was in the act of returning the tiny flask to his waistcoat pocket. He arrested it a moment, and then let it fall in out of sight, saying sharply: "You wouldn't like it, sir. Very few people do like it. You must be used to it."

Stamer's suspicions were now fully roused. This was the very drug Leigh had used with Timmons. It produced little or no effect on the dwarf, for as he explained, he was accustomed to it, but on a man who had never inhaled it before the effect would be instant, and long and complete insensibility. "I should like very much to try. I can stand very strong smelling salts."

"Oh! indeed. Can you? Then you would like to try some strong smelling salts?" said Leigh with a sneer as he scornfully surveyed the shabby man who had got off his stool and was standing within a few feet of him. "Well, I have no more in the flask. That was the last drop, but I have some in this." Out of his other waistcoat pocket he took a small glass bottle with a ground cap and ground stopper. He twisted off the cap and loosened the stopper. "This is very strong, remember."

"All right." If he became insensible here and at this time it would do no harm. There was plenty of help at hand, and nothing at stake, not as with Timmons last night in that house over the way.

"Snuff up heartily," said the dwarf, holding out the bottle towards the other with the stopper removed.

Stamer leaned on one of the high stools with both his hands, and put his nose over the bottle. With a yell he threw his arms wildly into the air and fell back on the floor as if he were shot.

Williams sprang up on the counter and cried: "What's this! He isn't dead?" in terror.

The potman flew over the counter into the public bar, and rushed into the private compartment.

The solitary customer in the public bar drew himself up once more and stared at the prostrate man with round blue eyes.

Leigh laughed harshly as he replaced the stopper and screwed on the cap.

"Dead! Not he! He's all right! He said he could stand strong salts. I gave him the strongest ammonia. That's all."

The potman had lifted Stamer from the ground, propped him against the wall and flung half a bottle of water over his head.

Stamer recovered himself instantly. His spectacles were in pieces on the floor. He did not, considering his false beard and whiskers, care for any more of the potman's kindnesses. He stooped, picked up his hat and walked quickly out of the Hanover.

"I like to see a man like that," said Leigh, calmly blowing a dense cloud of cigar-smoke from his mouth and nodding his head in the direction Stamer had taken.

"You nearly killed the man," said Williams, dropping down from the counter inside the bar and staring at Leigh with frightened eyes that looked larger than usual owing to the increased pallor of his face.

"Pooh! Nonsense! That stuff wouldn't kill anyone unless he had a weak heart or smashed his head in his fall. I got it merely to try the effect of it combined with a powerful galvanic battery, on the nasal muscles of my mummy. Now, if that man were dead we'd get him all right again in a jiffy with one sniff of it. I was saying I like a man like him. You see, he was impudent and intruded himself on me when he had no right to do anything of the kind, and he insisted on smelling my strong salts. Well, he had his wish, and he came to grief, and he picked himself up, or rather Binns picked him up, and he never said anything but went away. He knew he was in the wrong, and he knew he got worsted, and he simply walked away. That is the spirit which makes Englishmen so great all the world over. When they are beaten they shake hands and say no more about the affair. That's true British pluck." Leigh blew another dense cloud of smoke in front of

him and looked complacently at Williams.

"Well," said the publican in a tone of doubt, "he didn't exactly shake hands, you know. He does look a bit down in the world, seems to me an undertaker's man out of work, but I rather wonder he didn't kick up a row. Many another man would."

"A man of any other nationality would, but not a Britisher. If, however, you fancy the poor chap is out of work and he comes back and grumbles about the thing, give him half-a-sovereign from me."

"Mr. Leigh, I must say that is very handsome of you, sir," said Williams, thawing thoroughly. He was a kind-hearted man, and did think the victim of the trick ought to get some sort of compensation.

Meanwhile, Stamer had reached the open air and was seemingly in no great hurry to go back to the Hanover to claim the provision Leigh had made for his injury. He did not seem in a hurry to go anywhere, and a person who knew of what had taken place in the private bar, and seeing him move slowly up Welbeck Place with his left shoulder to the wall and his eyes on the window of the workshop, would think he was either behaving very like a kicked cur and slinking away with the desire of attracting as little attention as possible, or that he was meditating the mean revenge of breaking the dwarf's window.

But Stamer was not sneaking away. He was simply taking observations in a comprehensive and leisurely manner. Above all, he was not dreaming of breaking the clockmaker's window. On the contrary he was hugging himself with delight at the notion that he would not have to break Leigh's window. No, there would not be the least necessity for that. As the window was now no doubt it would be necessary to smash one pane at least. But with that muslin blind well-soaked in oil stretched across the open, caused by the raising of the lower sash there would be no need whatever of injuring the dwarf's glass.

He passed very slowly down Welbeck Place towards the mews under the window which lighted the private bar, and through which he had watched the winding up of the clock last night. His eyes, now wanting the blue spectacles, explored and examined every feature of Forbes's with as close a scrutiny as though he were inspecting it to ascertain its stability.

When he had deliberately taken in all that eyes could see in the gable of Forbes's bakery, he turned his attention to his left, and looked with care unmingled with anxiety at the gable or rather second side of the Hanover. Then he passed slowly on. It might almost be fancied from his tedious steps that he had hurt his back or his legs in his fall, but he did not limp or wriggle or drag his legs.

Beyond the Hanover, that is on this side between the end of the public house and the Welbeck Mews, were two poor two-storey houses, let in tenements to men who found employment about the mews. These houses Stamer observed closely also, and then passed under the archway into the mews. Here he looked back on the gables of the tenement houses. They were, he saw, double-roofed, with a gutter in the middle, and from the gutter to the mews descended a water-pipe into the ground.

When there was nothing more to be noted in the outside of the gables, Stamer pulled his hat over his eyes and struck out briskly across the mews, which he quitted by the southern outlet.

As he finished his inspection and left the mews he thought:

"So that was the stuff he gave Timmons, was it? I suppose it had more effect on him or he got more of it. It didn't take my senses away for more than a flash of lightning, but more of it might knock me silly for a while. Besides, Timmons is not as strong a man as I. It is a wonder it did not kill him. I felt as if the roof of my skull was blown off. I felt inclined to draw and let him have an ounce. But then, although he may be playing into the hands of the police, he isn't a policeman. He couldn't have done the drill, although his boots are as big as the regulation boots. Then, even if I did draw on him I couldn't have got away. There were too many people about.

"So he'll wind up his clock to-night between twelve and half-past, will he? It will take him the longest half-hour he ever spent in all his life! There's plenty of time to get the tools ready, and for a little practice too."

Stamer had no personal resentment against Leigh because of the trick put upon him. A convict never has the sense of the sacred inviolateness of his person that belongs to men of even the most depraved character who have never "done time." He had arrived at his deadly intent not from feelings of revenge but from motives of prudence. Leigh possessed dangerous information, and Leigh was guilty of treason and was trying to compass betrayal; therefore he must be put away, and put away at once.

Meanwhile the man who drew himself up by his hands, and looked over the partition between the public and private bar, had left the Hanover. He was a very tall man with grizzled, mutton-chop whiskers and an exceedingly long, rusty neck. He wore a round-topped brown hat, and tweed clothes, a washed-out blue neckerchief, the knot of which hung low on his chest. He had no linen collar, and as he walked carried his hands thrust deep into his trousers' pockets.

He too, had come to Chetwynd Street, to the Hanover, to gather any facts he might meet about this strange clockmaker and his strange ways. He had gone into the public bar for he did not wish to encounter face to face the man about whom he was inquisitive. He had sent a boy for Stamer's wife and left her in charge of his marine store in Tunbridge Street, saying he was unexpectedly obliged to go to the Surrey Dock. He told her of the visit Stamer had paid him that morning, and said he thought her husband was getting a bit crazy. Then he left her, having given her instructions about the place and promising to be back in a couple of hours.

Timmons was more than three hours gone, and when he re-entered Tunbridge Street Mrs. Stamer came in great excitement to meet him, saying she had no notion he would be so long and that if Tom came back during her absence he would be furious, as she had left no word where she was to be found. To this Timmons replied shortly that he didn't suppose Stamer would have come back, and parted from her almost rudely, which showed he was in a mind far from ordinary, for he was always jocular and polite after his fashion to the woman.

When he was alone in his own place he began walking up and down in a state of great perturbation.

"I don't know what to make of it--I don't know what to make of it," he thought. "Stamer is no fool, and I know he would not lie to me. He says he saw Leigh wind up the clock at the time Leigh was standing with me under the church tower. The landlord of that public-house says he saw him, and Leigh himself says he nodded to the landlord at a quarter past twelve! I'm not mad, and I wasn't drunk. What can it mean? I can make nothing of it.

"There may be something in what Stamer says after all. This miserable, hump-backed creature may be only laying a trap for us. If I thought I was to be caught after my years of care and caution by a mannikin like that, I'd slit his wizard for him. I did not like his way last night, and the more I think of it the less I like it. I think I had better be off this job. I don't like it, but I don't care to fail, particularly after telling Stamer all about it.

"What business had that fool Stamer to walk straight into the lion's mouth? What did he want in Chetwynd Street? No doubt he went there on the same errand as I, to try to find out something more about last night. Well, a nice thing he did find out. What infernal stuff did the dwarf give Stamer to smell? It was a mercy it did not kill the man. If it had killed Stamer, and there had been an inquest, it would have made a nice mess. No one could tell what might have come out about Stamer, about the whole lot, about myself!

"It is plain no one ought to have further dealings with that little man. Anyone who could give stuff like that to a man to smell in broad daylight, and in the presence of witnesses, would not stick at a trifle in the dark and when no one was by. Yes, I must cut the dwarf. Fortunately, there is nothing in Leigh's possession he can use against me. I took good care of that.

"How will Stamer take the affair? Will he cherish anger? Will he want revenge?"

"Well, if he will let him."

These were not the words in which Timmons thought, but they represent the substance of his cogitations.

Meanwhile, Oscar Leigh had left Chetwynd Street, and gone back to the clock-room to fix the new blind Binns, the potman, had bought for him. He had not intended returning that day, but he had nothing special to do, and the blind was a new idea and new ideas interested him.

He let himself in by the private door, and went straight to the clock-room. He had a bottle of sweet oil, and the roll of muslin. He oiled the muslin, and having stretched and nailed it in position, raised the lower sash of the window about two feet from the sill. The muslin was double, and the two sheets were kept half an inch apart by two rods, so that any dust getting through the outer fold might be caught by the inner one. Having settled this screen to his satisfaction, he left the room and descended once more.

"My clock," he thought, "will be enough for fame. I will not meddle with this Miracle Gold. I am committed to nothing, and anything Timmons may say will be only slander, even if he did dare to speak."

He reached the street, and wandered on aimlessly.

"My clock when it is finished will be the most perfect piece of mechanism ever designed and executed by one man. It will be classed among the wonders of the world, and be spoken of with admiration as long as civilization lasts.

"But I must take care it does not get the upper hand of me. Already the multiplicity of the movements confuse my head at times when I am not near it. I must be careful of my head, or my great work will suffer. Sometimes I see those figure of time all modelled and fashioned and in their proper dispositions executing their assigned evolutions. At times I am in doubt about them. They grow faint, and cobwebby, and misty, as though they were huddled together in some dim room, to which one ray of light was suddenly admitted. I must be careful of my head.

"Long ago, and also until not very long ago, when I added a new effect or movement it fell into its proper place and troubled me no more. Now, when I am away from my clock, when I cannot see and touch it, I often forget a movement, or give it a wrong direction, draw from it a false result.

"I am too much a man of one idea. I have imagination enough for a score of hands and ten stout bodies, and I have only a pair of hands and THIS!"

He paused and looked down at his protuberant chest and twisted trunk, and shrunken, bent legs, and enormous feet.

"I am a bad specimen of the work of Nature's journeyman, to put it as some one does, and I am abominably made--all except the head!"

He threw up his head and glanced around with scornful challenge in his eye.

"Hey!" cried a man's voice in alarm.

He looked up.

The chest of a horse was within a hand's breadth of his shoulder. The horse's head was flung aloft. The horse snorting and quivering, and bearing back upon his haunches.

Leigh sprang aside and looked around. He was in the middle of Piccadilly at Hyde Park Corner. He had almost been ridden over by a group of equestrians.

The gentleman whose horse had nearly touched him, took off his hat and apologised.

"You stopped suddenly right under the horse's head," said the gentleman. "I am extremely sorry."

Leigh raised his stick to strike the head of the horse.

The rider pulled his horse sharply away and muttered something under his breath.

"Oh, Sir Julius," cried a voice in terror, "it's Mr. Leigh!"

The dwarf's stick fell from his hand. "God's mercy in Heaven!" he cried in a whisper, as he took off his hat slowly, "Miss Ashton!"

Then, bareheaded and without his stick, he went up to the side of her horse, and said in a hoarse whisper, "I will have nothing to do with that Miracle Gold!"

A groom who had dismounted handed him his stick, and putting on his hat, he hastened away through the crowd which had begun to gather, leaving Dora in a state of mingled alarm and pity.

"Is he mad?" said Sir Julius Whinfield as the dwarf disappeared and the equestrians moved on.

"I'm sure I don't know. I think not. For a moment he terrified me, and now he breaks my heart!"

"Breaks your heart?"

"Oh, he ought not to be human! There surely can be no woe like his!"

CHAPTER XXX.

DORA ASHTON ALONE.

Dora Ashton was greatly shocked and distressed by the peril of Oscar Leigh and his subsequent behaviour.

"I am sure, Miss Ashton, I hope you will not imagine for a moment either that I was riding carelessly or that I recognised Mr. Leigh until you spoke. I saw him plainly enough as he was crossing the road. He was not minding in the least where he was going. He would have got across us in good time if he had only kept on; but he pulled up suddenly right under my horse's nose. I

am sure I was more frightened than he. By Jove! how he glared at me. I think he would have killed me there and then if he could. He was going to strike my horse with that dreadful bludgeon of his. I am sure I was much more frightened than he was," said Sir Julius, in a penitential tone of voice, as the two rode on side by side.

The other members of the party, including Mr. Ashton, had fallen behind and were also discussing the incident among themselves.

"You were quite blameless," said the girl, who was still pale and trembling. "I don't suppose the poor man was much afraid. Of what should he be afraid?"

"Well," said the baronet, stroking the arching neck of his bay, "he was within an ace of being ridden over, you know."

"And suppose he had been knocked down and ridden over, what has he to fear, poor man?" she said. Her eyes were fixed, and she was speaking as if unconscious she uttered her words. The group had turned out of the noise of Piccadilly and were riding close together.

"He might have been hurt, I mean seriously hurt. Particularly he?"

"Hurt! How could he be hurt? You might be hurt, or I might be hurt, but how could he be hurt. Particularly he! You fancy because he is maimed and misshapen he is more likely to be hurt than a sound man?"

"Assuredly."

"I cannot see that. When people say a man was hurt, they do not mean merely or mostly that he endured pain. They mean that he was injured or disabled in some way. How can you injure or disable him? He is as much injured and disabled as a man can be and live."

"That is very true; but he might have been killed. Miss Ashton, you do not mean to say you think it would be better he had been killed?" cried Sir Julius in a tone of one shocked and surprised.

"I do not know. Surely death and Heaven must be conditions of greater ease and happiness for him than for ordinary mortals."

"I am entirely of your opinion there. But from what I saw and heard of this man yesterday and to-day, I am disposed to think he has self-esteem enough to sustain him in any difficulty and carry him through any embarrassment."

"How are we to know how much of this self-esteem is assumed?"

"It does not matter whether it is assumed or not, so long as it is sustaining."

"What! Does it not matter at what expense it is hired for use? You amaze me, Sir Julius. You are generally sympathetic and sound, I think you have not been taking your lessons regularly under Lady Forcar. She would be quicker sighted in a matter of this kind." The girl shook off her air of abstraction and smiled at the young man.

"No, Miss Ashton, I am not neglecting the lectures of Lady Forcar, but of late they have not been much concerned with man. I deeply deplore it, but she has taken to pigs. Anyway she would talk of nothing but pigs yesterday, at your mother's. And even the improvement of my mind does not come within her consideration under the head of pigs, although I begged of her to be gracious and let it."

"That is very sad indeed. You must feel sorely slighted. And what has she to say about pigs?"

"Oh, I really couldn't think of half the distractingly flattering things she has to say about them. She made me miserably jealous, I assure you. She says she is going to write an article for one of the heavy, of the very heaviest, magazines, and she is going to call her article 'Dead Pigs and the Pigs that eat them,' and such harmless people as you and I are to be considered among the latter class in the title. Isn't that fearful. She says from this forth, her mission is pigs."

"I shall certainly read this wonderful article when it appears," said the girl with a laugh. "Can you tell me anything more about this article?"

"No; except that it was Mr. Leigh started the subject between her and me."

"Mr. Leigh?" said Dora gravely.

"Yes. When she saw him eat all your bread and butter, she said he was a man who, in the hands of a clever wife, might act the part of a Napoleon the Great in social matters."

The grave look on Dora's face changed to one of sadness. At first, when Sir Julius mentioned the dwarf's name, she thought some unkind reference was about to be made to his unhappy physical deformities. Now her anxiety was relieved on that score only to have her feelings aroused anew over the spectacle of his spiritual desolation. He marry! How could he marry? And

yet he had told them he had found the model for his Pallas-Athena. She was not so simple as to think the mere intellectual being was represented to him by the model for his Pallas-Athena. Suppose he used the name of Pallas-Athena only out of shyness for what struck him as mere loveliness in woman, mere good looks and kindness of nature? What a heart-breaking thought! What an awful torture it must be to be hungry for love and beauty in such a form!

Sir Julius Whinfield left her at the house in Curzon Street, and she went up to her own room to change her dress. She had nothing arranged for between that and dinner. Her father had gone away on foot from the house, and her mother had taken the carriage before luncheon to pay a visit to some people in whom Dora was not interested. The girl had all the afternoon to herself, and she had plenty of thought to occupy it. She threw herself in a large easy chair by the open window. Her room was at the back of the house, and looked out on a space of roofs and walls and tiny gardens. There was nothing in view to distract the eye. There was much within to exercise the spirit.

"It would be madness," was the result of deep and long thought, "to go any further. I like him well enough and admire him greatly, and I daresay--no, let me be quite candid--I know he likes me. I daresay we are better disposed towards each other than one tenth of the people who marry, but that is not enough.

"We did not fall in love with one another at first sight. It was no boy and girl attachment. We were attracted towards one another by the intellectual sides of our characters. I thought I was wiser than other girls in not allowing my fancy to direct my fate. I thought he and I together might achieve great things. I am now afraid it is as great, even a greater, mistake to marry for intellect than to marry for money or position.

"I have made up my mind now. Nothing shall change me. My decision is as much for his good as my own. Last night was not the climax of what would be. It was only the first of a long line of difficulties or quarrels that would increase as time went on.

"We have been enduring one another out of admiration for one another, not loving one another for our own and love's own sake.

"It will cost me many a pang, but it must be done. I shall make no sign. I shall make no announcement. No one has been formally told we are engaged, and no one has any business to know. If people have guessed it, let them now guess the engagement has been broken off. I am not bound to enlighten them."

Then she rose and found materials for a letter, and wrote:

"DEAR MR. HANBURY,

"I have been thinking a great deal of the talk we had last night after dinner, and I have come to the conclusion that it was all for the best. We should never be able to agree. I think the least said now the better. Our engagement has not been announced to anyone. Nothing need be said about its being broken off. I hope this arrangement will be carried out with as little pain to either as possible. I shall not send you back your letters. I am sure getting back letters is always painful, and ought to be avoided. I shall burn yours, and I ask you to do the same with any notes you may have of mine. Neither will I return the few things that cannot be burned. None of them is, I think, of any intrinsic value to you beyond the value it had between you and me. I shall keep them for a week and then destroy them.

"Believe me, Mr. Hanbury, I take this step with a view to our mutual good, and in no haste or pique. I shall always think of you, with the greatest interest and respect. I should like, if you think well of it, that we may remain friends in appearance as I hope we may always be in spirit.

"I ask you for only one favour. Pray do not make any attempt whatever to treat this decision as anything but final and irrevocable.

"Yours very sincerely,

"Dora Ashton."

She determined not to post this letter until late that night. To-morrow she was dining out. She should leave home early and not come back until she had to go straight to her room to dress. After dinner, they were going to the theatre, so she should avoid all chance of meeting him if he disregarded her request and called.

So far the difficult parts of the affair had been done, and done too with much less pain than she could have imagined. She had taken the two great steps without faltering. She had made up her mind to end the engagement between her and John Hanbury, and she had written to him saying the engagement was at an end. If ill-matched people who found themselves engaged to one another only acted with her decision and promptness what an infinity of misery would be

avoided. She was almost surprised it had required so little effort for her to make up her mind and to put her decision on paper. She had often heard of the miseries such a step entailed, and here she was now sitting alone in her own room after doing the very thing and feeling little the worse of it. She was but twenty-one, and she had broken with the only man she had ever seriously thought of as a lover, and it had not caused her anything like the pang she had suffered last night when he reproached her so bitterly and told her he could expect nothing but betrayal at her hands.

And now that the important part of the affair had been disposed of in a business-like way, what had she to do?

Nothing.

She could do nothing else whatever. It wanted some hours of dinner-time, and no one ever called upon them on Fridays except--him, and he would not call to-day. She should have the whole of the afternoon to herself. That was fortunate, for although she did not feel greatly depressed or cast down, she was not inclined towards company of any kind. It had been arranged early yesterday that she should ride with her father in the Park to-day, and she had not cared to plead any excuse, for she did not want to attract attention to herself, and besides, she did not feel very much in need of any excuse since she knew he would not be there. He knew they were to ride there. In fact he had promised to meet her there, but after last night he would not of course go, for he would not like the first meeting after last night to occur in so public a place and so soon after that scene.

Yes, everything was in perfectly regular order now and she had the afternoon to herself without any fear of interruption. So she could now sit down and rest, and--think.

Then she remained quite still for a long time in her easy chair, quite still, with her hand before her face and her eyes closed. The difficulties had been faced and overcome in a wise and philosophical way, and nothing remained to be done but to do nothing, and as she sat and thought this doing of nothing became harder than all that had gone before. She had told herself she was a person of convictions and principles when she was resolving on action and acting on resolve. She had no further need of her convictions and principles. She laid them aside with the writing materials out of which she had called forth that letter to Jack--to Mr. Hanbury. She did not realize until this moment, she had not had time to realize it, that she was a woman, a young girl who had given her heart to a young man, and that now he and she had parted to meet no more on the old terms.

It was easy to shut up the ceremonious gates of the temple and say worship was at an end in that place for ever. But how fared it in the penetralia of her heart? How did she face the inner chambers of her soul where the statue of her hero stood enshrined for worship? It cost but little effort to say that the god was deposed, but could she all at once effectually forbid the priestess to worship?

Ah, this doing of nothing when all had been done, was ten thousand times harder than action!

All the faculties of her reason were in favour of her decision, but what has the reason to do with the glance of an eye, or the touch of a hand, of the confiding commune of a soul in sympathy with one's own?

She understood him better than any other woman ever should. It was her anxiety that he should stand high in his own regard that made her jealous of his little weaknesses, and they were little, and only weaknesses after all, and only weaknesses in a giant, not the weaknesses of a man of common clay. If she had loved more what he was to her than what she dreamed he might be to himself and all the world, she would have taken no trouble in these matters that angered him to fury.

And why should he not be angered with her for her poor, feeble woman's interference with his lion nature? Why should he not turn upon her and revile her for coming across his path? Who was she that she must irritate him that was all the world to her, and deferred to by all men who came his way? Why should she thwart or impede him?

He was not perfect, no doubt, but who had set her the task of perfecting him?

Her haughty love.

Yes, the very intensity of her love had ended in the estrangement of the lover. She found noble qualities in the man, and she had tried to make him divine. Not because he was her lover, but because she loved him. She had given him her heart and soul, and now she had sacrificed her love itself upon the altar of her devotion.

That was the heroic aspect of the affair, and as in all other sorrows that take large shape, the heroic aspect elevated above pain and forbade the canker of tears.

But this girl saw other aspects too.

She should miss him--oh, so bitterly! She should miss him the whole of her life forth from that

hour! She should miss him in the immediate future. She had missed him that day in the Park. She should miss him tomorrow. He always came on Saturdays. He used to say he always came to Curzon Street on Saturday afternoon, like any other good young man, to see his sweetheart when the shop was shut. She should miss him on Sunday, too, for he always came on Sunday, saying, the better the day the better the deed. On Mondays he made it a point to stay away, but contrived to meet her somewhere, in the Park, or at a friend's place, or in Regent Street, and now he would stay away altogether, not making a point of it, but because she had told him to make an observance of always staying away.

She should miss his voice, his marvellous voice, which could be so clarion toned and commanding among men, and was so soft and tunable for her ear. When he spoke to her it always seemed that the instrumental music designed to accompany his words had fined off into silence for shame of its inadequacy. How poor and thin and harsh all voices would sound now. They would merely make idle sounds to the idle air. Of old, of that old which began its backward way only yesterday, all voices had seemed the prelude of his. They sounded merely as notes of preparation and awakening. They were only the overture, full of hints and promises.

She should miss his eyes. She should miss the clear vivid leap of flame into his eyes when he glanced at her with enthusiasm, or joy, or laughter. She should miss the gleam of that strange light which, once having caught his eye in moments of enthusiasm, appeared to bathe his face while he looked and spoke. She should miss the sound of his footstep, that fleet herald of his impatient love!

Oh, it was hard--hard--hard to be doomed to miss so much!

And all this was only what she should miss in the immediate future.

In the measure of her after life would be nothing but idle air. In her dreams of the future she had pictured him going forth from her in the morning radiant and confident, to mingle in some worthy strife, and coming back in the evening suffused with glory, to draw breaths of peaceful ease in her society, in her home, her new home, their joint home. She had thought of the reverse of this picture. She had thought of him returning weary and unsuccessful, coming home to her for rest now, and soothing service of love and inspiriting words of hope.

She had visions of later life and visions of their gradual decay, and going down the hill of life hand in hand together. She had dreamed they should never, never, never be parted.

And now they were parted for ever and ever and ever, and she should miss him to-day and to-morrow and all the days of the year now half spent, and of all the after years of her life.

She should miss him in death. She should not lie by his side in the grave. She should not be with him in the Life to Come.

All the glory of the world was only a vapour, a mist. The sunlight was a purposeless weariness. The smell of the flowers in the window-sill was thin and foretold decay. What was the use of a house and servants and food. Lethe was a river of Hell. Why? Why not a river of Paradise?

She should not be with him even in the grave--even in the grave where he could have no fear of her betraying him!

She would now take any share of humbleness in life if she might count on touching his hand and being for ever near him in the tomb.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WINDING UP THE CLOCK.

It was eleven o'clock that night when Tom Stamer, dressed in the seedy black clothes and wearing the false beard and whiskers he had on in the morning, started from the Borough once more for the West. He had not replaced the spectacles broken in his fall at the Hanover in Chetwynd Street. He carried a very substantial-looking walking-stick of great thickness and weight. It was not a loaded stick, but it would manifestly be a terrible weapon at close quarters, for, instead of consisting of metal only in one part of one end, it was composed of metal throughout. The seeming stick was not wood or leaded wood, but iron. It was not solid, but hollow

like a gas pipe, and at the end intended to touch the ground, the mouth of the tube was protected by a brass ferrule to which a small tampion was affixed. The handle was massive and crooked, and large enough to give ample hold to the largest hand of man. About a couple of inches from the crook there was a joining where the stick could be unscrewed.

Stamer accounted to the eyes of observers for carrying so massive a stick by affecting a lameness of the right leg. When he entered a dense crowd or came upon a point at which the people were hurrying, he raised the stick up from the ground and laid aside his limp. But where people were few and close observation of him possible, his lameness grew very marked, and not only did his stick seem indispensable, but he put it down on the pavement as gingerly as though the least jar caused him pain. Sympathetic people who saw him fancied he had but just come out of hospital, and were inclined to be indignant that he had not been supplied with more effectual support, such as crutches.

One old gentleman asked him if he ought not to have a second stick; Stamer snivelled and said he knew he ought, but declared with a sigh he had no money to buy another one. The old gentleman gave Stamer a shilling. Stamer touched his hat, thanked the old gentleman for his kindness and his gift, and requested Heaven to bless him. The old gentleman wore a heavy gold chain and, no doubt, a watch. But Stamer had important business on hand, and there were a great number of people about, and he did not want to run, for running would make his arm unsteady, so he asked Heaven to bless the old gentleman and forebore to rob him.

But the thought of that missed opportunity rankled in him. The feeling that he had been obliged to neglect business and accept charity fretted and vexed him. The thought of the mean squalid shilling made him sick, and as soon as he came to a quiet place he threw it with a curse into the middle of the road. He had shillings of his own, and didn't want charity of any man. If he had stolen the shilling that would have been a different affair. Then it would have come to him in a straightforward business-like way, and would, doubtless, be the best he could have done under the circumstances. But now it seemed the result of a fraud committed upon him, to which he had been forced to consent. It was the ransom he had under duress accepted for a gold watch and chain, and was, therefore, loathsome and detestable in his sight. Its presence could not be endured. It was abominable. Foh! He was well rid of it?

He did not approach Welbeck Place by Chetwynd Street. He did not intend repeating his visit to Mr. Williams's house. He had got there all he wanted and a little more. He kept along by the river and then retraced the way he had come that afternoon after leaving the Hanover. On his previous visit to-day to this locality he had been silent and watchful as a cat, and he had a cat's strong sense of locality. He never forgot a place he was once in; and, piercing northward from the river through a network of mean streets he had never seen until today, he hit upon the southward entrance to Welbeck Mews with as much ease and certainty as though he had lived there for twenty years.

The mews were lonely after nightfall, and the road through them little used. When Stamer found himself in the yard, the place was absolutely deserted. They were a cabman's mews and no one would, in all likelihood, have business there for a couple of hours. The night was now as dark as night ever is at that time of the year, and the place was still. It wanted about twenty minutes of twelve yet.

When Stamer came to the gable of the house next but one to the Hanover, and the wall of which formed one half of the northern boundary of the yard, he paused and listened. He could hear no sound of life or movement near him beyond the snort or cough of a horse now and then.

The ostler who waited on the cabmen lived in the house at the gable of which he stood, and at this hour he had to be aroused in case of any man returning because of accident, or a horse knocked up by some long and unexpected drive. As a rule, the ostler slept undisturbed from eleven at night till half-past four or five in the morning.

After a pause of two or three minutes, Stamer stooped, slipped off his boots, slung them around his neck, and having hitched the crook of his heavy stick to a belt he wore under his waistcoat, he laid hold of the waterpipe that descended from the gutter of the double roof to the yard, and began ascending the gable of the house with surprising agility and speed.

In less than two minutes from the time he first seized the waterpipe he disappeared in the gutter above. He crawled in a few yards from the edge and then reclined against the sloping slates of the roof to rest. The ascent had taken only a couple of minutes, but the exertion had been very great, and he was tired and out of breath.

Then he unscrewed the ferrule and withdrew the tampion and unscrewed the handle of his stick, and was busy in the darkness for a while with the weapon he carried. Overhead the stars looked pale and faint and wasting in the pall of pale yellow cloud that hangs by night over London in summer, the glare of millions of lights on the vapour rising up from the great city.

He particularly wished to have a steady hand and arm that night, in a few minutes, so he made up his mind to rest until five minutes to twelve. Then he should get into position. He should creep down the gutter until he came to the wall of the Hanover, the gable wall of the Hanover standing up over the roofs of the houses on which he now was lying. He should then be almost opposite

the window at which he last night saw the dwarf wind up his clock. He should be a little out of the direct line, but not much. The width of Welbeck Place was no more from house to house than fifty feet. The distance from the wall of the house he should be on then, and the wall of Forbes's bakery could not be more than sixty feet. The weapon he carried was perfectly trustworthy at a hundred, a hundred-and-fifty yards, or more. He had been practising that afternoon and evening at an old hat at forty yards, and he had never missed it once. Forty yards was just double the distance he should be from that window if he were on a parapet instead of being at the coping tile, lying on the inside slope of the roof. Allow another ten feet for that. This would bring the distance up to seventy feet at the very outside, and he had never missed once at a hundred and twenty feet. He had given himself now and then a good deal of practice with the gun, for he enjoyed peculiar facilities; because the factory wall by which the lane at the back of his place ran, prevented anyone seeing what he was doing, and the noise of the factory drowned the whurr of the gun and the whizz of the bullet.

There was to be a screen, or curtain, or blind up to-night, but that was all the better, for it made no difference to the aim or bullet, and it would prevent anything being noticed for a while, perhaps until morning no one would know.

The work would go on at the window until half-past twelve. It would be as well not to do it until very near half-past; for then there would be the less time for anyone in the Hanover to spy out anything wrong. At half-past would come the noise and confusion of closing time. There would then be plenty of people about, and it would be quite easy to get away.

It was a good job there were no windows in the Hanover gable, though no one was likely to be upstairs in the public-house until after closing time. The landlord was not a married man. It was a good job there was no moon.

It would be a good job when this was done.

It was a good job he thought of waiting until just half-past twelve, for then everything would be more favourable below, and his hand and arm would have more time to steady.

It was a good job that in this country there were some things stronger than even smelling-salts!

At half-past eleven that night the private bar of the Hanover held about half-a-dozen customers. The weather was too warm for anything like a full house. Three or four of the men present were old frequenters, but it lacked the elevating presence of Oscar Leigh, who always gave the assembly a distinctly intellectual air, and it was not cheered and consoled by the radiation of wealth from Mr. Jacobs, the rich greengrocer of Sloane Street.

The three or four frequenters present were in no way distinguished beyond their loyalty to the house. They came there regularly night after night, drank, in grave silence, a regular quantity of beer and spirits, and went away at closing time with the conviction that they had been spending their time profitably attending to the improvement of their minds. They had no views on any subjects ever discussed. They had, with reference to the Hanover, only one opinion, and it was that the finishing touches of a liberal education could nowhere else in London be so freely obtained without derogation and on the self-respecting principle of every man paying his way and being theoretically as good as any other. If they could they would put a stop to summer in these islands, for summer had a thinning and depreciating effect on the company of the private bar.

A few minutes later, however, the spirits of those present rose, for first Mr. Jacobs came in, smiling and bland, and then Mr. Oscar Leigh, rubbing his forehead and complaining of the heat.

Mr. Jacobs greeted the landlord and the dwarf affably, as became a man of substance, and then, knowing no one else by name, greeted the remainder of the company generally, as became a man of politeness and consideration.

"I'll have three-pennyworth of your excellent rum hot," said Mr. Jacobs to the landlord, in a way which implied that, had not the opinion of an eminent physician been against it, he would have ordered ten times the quantity and drunk it with pleasure. Then he sat down on a seat that ran along the wall, took out of his pocket a cigar-case, opened it carefully, and, having selected a cigar, examined the weed as though it was not uncommon to discover protruding through the side of these particular cigars a diamond of priceless value or a deadly drug. Then he pierced the end of his cigar with a silver piercer which he took out of a trouser's pocket, pulled down his waistcoat, and began to smoke, wearing his hat just a trifle on one side to show that he was unbent.

Just as he had settled himself comfortably, the door of the public department opened, and a tall, thin man, with enormous ears, wearing long mutton-chop whiskers, a brown round hat, and dark chocolate-coloured clothes, entered and was served by the potman.

"I have only a minute or two. I must be off to wind up," said Leigh. "Ten minutes to twelve by your clock, Mr. Williams, that means a quarter to right time. I'll have three of rum hot, if you please."

"That's quite right, Mr. Leigh," said the landlord, proceeding to brew the punch and referring

to his clock. "We always keep our clock a few minutes fast to avoid bother at closing time. The same as always, Mr. Jacobs, I see, and I _smell_."

"I beg your pardon?" said the greengrocer, as though he hadn't the least notion of what the landlord alluded to.

"A good cigar, sir. That is an excellent cigar you are smoking."

It was clear that up to that moment Mr. Jacobs had not given a thought to the quality of his cigar, for he took it from his lips, looked at it as though he was now pretty certain this particular one did not exude either priceless diamonds or deadly drugs, and said with great modesty and satisfaction, "Yes, it's not bad. I get a case now and then from my friend Isaacs of Bond Street. They cost me, let me see, about sixpence a piece."

There was a faint murmur of approval at this statement. It was most elevating to know that you were acquainted with a man who smoked cigars he bought in Bond Street, and that he did not buy them by the dozen or the box even, but by the case! If a man bought cigars by the case from a friend in Bond Street at the rate of sixpence each, what would be the retail price of them across the counter? It was impossible to say exactly and dangerous to guess, but it was certain you could not buy one for less than a shilling or eighteen-pence, that is, if a man like Mr. Jacobs' friend Mr. Isaacs would demean himself by selling a single one at any price to a chance comer.

"Still working at your wonderful clock, Mr. Leigh?" said the greengrocer from Sloane Street, with the intention of sharing his conversation fairly between the landlord and the dwarf, the only men present who were sitting above the salt.

"Well, sir, literally speaking, I cannot be said to be working at it now. But I am daily engaged upon it, and before a quarter of an hour I shall be busy winding it up."

"Have you to wind it every day?"

"Yes. St. Paul's clock takes three quarters of an hour's winding every day with something like a winch handle. My clock takes half an hour every night. It must be wound between twelve and one, and I have made it a rule to wind it in the first half hour. My one does not want nearly so much power as St. Paul's. It is wound by a lever and not a winch handle. By-and-by, when it is finished and placed in a proper position in a proper tower, and I can increase the power, once a week will be sufficient."

"It is, I have heard, the most wonderful clock in London?"

"In London! In London! In the worlds sir. It is the most wonderful clock ever conceived by man."

"And now suppose you forgot to wind it up, what would happen?"

"There is no fear of that."

"It must be a great care on your mind."

"Immense. I have put up a curtain today, so that I may be able to keep the window open and get a breath of air this hot weather."

"Are you not afraid of fire up there and so near a bakehouse?"

"I never thought of fire. There is little or no danger of fire. Mr. Forbes is quite solvent."

"But suppose anything were to happen, it is so high up, it could not be got down?"

"Got down! Got down! Why, my dear sir, it is twelve feet by nine, and parts of it are so delicate that a rude shake would ruin them. Got down! Why it is shafted to the wall. All my power comes through the wall, from the chimney. When it is shifted no one will be able to stir bolt or nut but me. I must do it, sir. No other man living knows anything about it. No other man could understand it. Fancy anyone but myself touching it! Why he might do more harm in an hour than I could put right in a year, ay, in three years. Well, my time is up. Good night, gentlemen."

He scrambled off his high stool and was quickly out of the bar. It was now five minutes to twelve o'clock right time.

He crossed Welbeck Street and opening the private door of Forbes's in Chetwynd Street went in, closing the door after him.

As he came out John Timmons emerged from the public bar of the Hanover, and turned into Welbeck Place. He went on until he came opposite the window of the clock-room. Here he stood still, thrust his hands deep down in his trousers' pockets, and leaning his back against the wall, prepared to watch with his own eyes the winding of the clock.

In less than five minutes the window of the top room, which had been dark, gradually grew illumined until the light came full through the transparent oiled muslin curtain. Timmons could

see for all practical purposes as plainly as through glass.

"There Leigh is, anyway," thought Timmons, "working away at his lever. Can it be he was doing the same thing at this hour last night? Nonsense. He was walking away from this place with me at this hour last night as sure as I am here now. But what did he say himself to-day? I shouldn't mind Stamer, for he is a fool. But the landlord and Stamer say the same thing, and Leigh himself said it too this day. I must be going mad.

"There, he is turning round now and nodding to the men in the bar. They said he did the same last night, and, as I live, there's the clock we were under striking the quarter past again! I must be going mad. I begin to think last night must have been all a dream with me. I don't think he's all right. I don't believe in witchcraft, but I do believe in devilry, and there's something wrong here. I'll watch this out anyway. I must bring him to book over it. I'll tell him straight what I know--that is if I know anything and am not going mad----"

Whurr--whizz!

"Why what's that over head?"

Timmons looked up, but saw nothing.

"It's some young fellows larking."

He glanced back at the window.

"What a funny way he's nodding his head now. And there's a hole in the curtain and there seems to be a noise in the room. There goes the gas out. I suppose the clock is wound up now. Well, it's more than I can understand and a great deal more than I like, and I'll have it out of him. It would be too bad if that fool Stamer were right after all, and--but the whole thing is nonsense.

"Strange I didn't hear the clock strike the hour and yet Leigh's light is out. I suppose his half hour winding was only another piece of his bragging.

"Is the light quite out? Looks now as if it wasn't. He must have put it out by mistake or accident, for surely it hasn't struck half-past twelve yet.

"Ah, what's that? He is lighting a match or something. No, my eyes deceive me. There is no light. Everything here seems to deceive me. I'll go home.

"Ah, there's the half-hour at last!"

And John Timmons walked out of Welbeck Place, and took his way eastward.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MORNING AFTER.

Mr. John Timmons was not a hard-working man in the sense of one devoted ardently to physical labour. His domain was thought. He was a merchant, a negotiator, not an artisan. He kept his hands in his pockets mostly, in order that his brain might not be distracted by having to look after them. He had a theory that it is wasteful to burn the candle at both ends. If you employ your brain and your hands it will very soon be all over with you. Still, he held that the appearance of indulgence or luxury was most unbecoming in any place of business, and particularly in a marine store, where transactions were concerned with so stern and stubborn things as junk and old metal. He dealt in junk, but out of regard for the feelings of gentlemen who might have had bitter and long acquaintance with it while adorning another sphere, Timmons kept the junk away from sight in the cellar, to which mere callers were never admitted. Timmons had an opinion that the mere look of junk had a tendency to damp the professional ardour of men who had ever spent the days of their captivity in converting it into oakum.

On the ground floor of Timmons's premises there was no such thing as a chair. He looked on a chair in a marine store as a token of dangerous softening of manners. If a man allowed himself a chair in his place of business why not also a smoking-cap and slippers?

But Timmons had a high office stool, which was a thing differing altogether from a chair. It

was of Spartan simplicity and uncomfotableness, and besides, it gave the solvent air of a counting house to the place. It had also another advantage, it enabled you to sit down without placing your eyes lower than the level of a man of your own height standing.

On Saturday morning about nine o'clock Timmons was reposing on the high stool at his doorway, if any part of this establishment may be called a doorway, where one side was all door and there was no other means of exit. He had bought a morning paper on his way to business, and he now sat with the advertising sheet of the paper spread out before him on his knees. Sometimes articles in which he dealt were offered for sale in that sheet, and once in a way he bought a paper to have a look at this sheet, and afterwards, if he had time, scan the news. He made it a point never to look at the reports of the police courts or criminal trials. Every man has his own feelings, and Timmons was not an exception. If an inquiry or trial in which he took interest was going on in London he was certain to know more of it than the newspapers told. He avoided the accounts of trials that did not interest him. They had as damping effect on him as the sight of junk had on some of his customers.

Beyond the improvement of his mind gathered from reading the advertisement columns of things for sale, he got no benefit out of the advertising sheet. None of the articles offered at a sacrifice was at all in his way. When he had finished the perusal of the marvellous miscellany he took his eyes off the paper and stared straight at the brick wall before him.

He turned his mind back for the twentieth time on the events of yesterday.

There was not in the whole list of what had occurred a single incident that pleased him. He was a clear-headed man, and prided himself on his brains. He had neither the education nor the insolence to call his brains intellect. But he was very proud of his brains, and his brains were completely at a loss. As with all undisciplined minds, his had not the power of consecutive abstract thought. But it had the power of reviewing in panoramic completeness events which had come within the reach of its senses.

The result of his review was that he did not like the situation at all. There was a great deal about this scheme he did not understand, and with such minds not to understand is to suspect and fear.

It was perfectly clear that for some purpose or other, Leigh hung back from entering upon the matter of their agreement, and now it seemed as though there might be a great deal in what Stamer feared, namely, that Leigh might have the intention of betraying them all into the hands of the police. Stamer had told him that in the talk at the Hanover, the night before, the landlord had informed the company under the seal of secrecy that Leigh on one occasion entrusted the winding up of the clock to a deputy who was deaf and dumb, and not able to write. That, no doubt, was the person they had seen in the clock-room the evening before, and not the dwarf. Leigh had not taken him into confidence respecting this clock, or this man who wound it up for him in his absence, but Leigh had taken him into confidence very little. It was a good thing that Leigh had not taken the gold from him. Of course, he was not such a fool as to part with the buttons unless he got gold coins to the full value of them, but still they might, if once in the possession of the little man, be used in evidence against him. The great thing to guard against was giving Leigh any kind of hold at all upon him.

He did not know whether to believe or not Leigh's account of the man in Birmingham. It looked more than doubtful. His talk about telegraphing and all that was only bunkum. The whole thing looked shaky and dangerous, and perhaps it would be as well for him to get out of it.

At all events he was pretty sure not to hear any more of the matter for a week or so. He should put it out of his head for the present.

He took up the newspaper this time with a view to amusement not business.

He glanced over it casually for a time, reading a few lines here and there. He passed by columns of parliamentary reports in which he took no interest whatever. Then came the law courts which he shunned. Finally he came upon the place where local London news was given. His eye caught a large heading, "Fire And Loss Of Life In Chelsea." The paragraph was, owing to the late hour at which the event took place, brief, considering its importance. It ran as follows:--

"Last night, between half-past twelve and one o'clock, a disastrous and fatal fire broke out in the bakery establishment of Mr. Forbes at the corner of Chetwynd Street and Welbeck Place, Chelsea. It appears from the information we have been able to gather, that the ground floor of the establishment is used as a baker's shop and the floor above as a store house by Mr. Forbes. The top floor, where the fire originated was occupied by Mr. Oscar Leigh, who has lost his life in the burning. The top floor is divided into three rooms, a sitting-room, a bed-room, and a workshop. In the last, looking into Welbeck Place, the late Mr. Leigh was engaged in the manufacture of a very wonderful clock, which occupied fully half the room, and which Mr. Leigh invariably wound up every night between twelve and half-past twelve.

"Last night, at a little before twelve, Mr. Leigh left the Hanover public house, at the opposite corner of Welbeck Place, and went into the bakery by the private entrance beside the shop door

in Chetwynd Street. In the act of letting himself in with his latchkey he spoke to a neighbour, who tried to engage him in conversation, but the unfortunate gentleman excused himself, saying he hadn't a minute to spare, as the clock required his immediate attention. After this, deceased was seen by several people working the winding lever of the clock in the window. At half-past twelve he was observed to make some unusual motions of his head, so as to give the notion that he was in pain or distress of some kind. Then the light in the clock-room was extinguished and, as Mr. Leigh made no call or cry (the window at which he sat was open), it was supposed all was right. Shortly afterwards, dense smoke and flames were observed bursting through the window of the room, and before help could arrive all hope of reaching the unfortunate gentleman was at an end.

"The building is an old one. The flames spread rapidly, and before an hour had elapsed the whole was burnt out and the roof had fallen in.

"At the rear of the house proper is an off building abutting on Welbeck Mews. In this slept the shopman and his wife. This bakehouse also took fire and is burned out, but fortunately the two occupants were saved by the fire escape which had been on the spot ten minutes after the first alarm.

"It is generally supposed that the eccentric movements of Mr. Leigh were the result of a fit or sudden seizure of some other kind, and that in his struggles some inflammable substance was brought into contact with the gas before it was turned out."

Timmons flung down the paper with a shout, crying "Dead! Dead! Leigh is dead!"

At that moment the figure of a man appeared at the threshold of the store, and Stamer, with a scowl and a stare, stepped in hastily and looked furtively, fearfully, around.

"What are you shoutin' about?" cried Stamer, in a tone of dangerous menace. "What are you shoutin' about?" he said again, as he passed Timmons and slunk behind the pile of shutters and flattened himself up against the wall in the shadow of them.

"Leigh is dead!" cried Timmons in excitement, and taking no notice of Stamer's strange manner and threatening tone.

"I know all about that, I suppose," said Stamer from his place of concealment. He was standing between the shutters and the old fire-grate, and quite invisible to anyone in the street. His voice was hollow, his eyes bloodshot and starting out of his head. Notwithstanding the warmth of the morning, his teeth were chattering in his head. His bloodshot eyes were in constant motion, now exploring the gloomy depths of the store, now glancing savagely at Timmons, now looking, in the alarm of a hunted beast, at the opening into the street.

Timmons took little or no notice of the other man beyond addressing him. He was in a state of wild excitement, not exactly of joy, but triumph. It was a hideous sight to see this lank, grizzled, repulsive-looking man capering around the store, and exulting in the news he had just read, of a man on whom he had fawned a day before. "He's dead! The dwarf is dead, Stamer!" he cried again. In his wild gyrations his hat had fallen off, disclosing a tall, narrow head, perfectly bald on the top.

"Shut up!" whispered Stamer, savagely, "if you don't want to follow him. I'm in no humour for your noise and antics. Do you want to have the coppers down on us?--do you, you fool?" He flattened himself still more against the wall, as though he were striving to imbed himself in it.

Timmons paused. Stamer's words and manner were so unusual and threatening that they attracted his attention at last. "What's the matter?" he asked, in irritated surprise. "What's the matter?" he repeated, with lowering look.

"Why, you've said what's the matter," said Stamer, viciously. "And you're shouting and capering as if you wanted to tell the whole world the news. This is no time for laughing and antics, you fool!"

"Who are you calling a fool?" cried Timmons, catching up an iron bar and taking a few steps towards the burglar.

"You, if you want to know. Put that down. Put that bar down, I say. Do it at once, and if you have any regard for your health, for your life, don't come a foot nearer, or I'll send you after him! By ---, I will!"

Timmons let the bar fall, more in astonishment than fear. "What do you mean, you crazy thief? Have they just let you out of Bedlam, or are you on your way there? Anyway, it's lucky the place is handy, you knock-kneed jail-bird! Why he's shaking as if he saw a ghost!"

"Let me alone and I'll do you no harm. I don't want to have two on me."

"What does the fool mean? I tell you Leigh is dead."

"Can you tell me who killed him? If you can't, I can." He pointed to himself.

"What!" cried Timmons, starting back, and not quite understanding the other's gesture.

"Now are you satisfied? I thought you guessed. I wouldn't have told you if I didn't think you knew or guessed. Curse me, but I am a fool for opening my mouth! I thought you knew, and that, instead of saying a good word to me, you were going to down me and give me up."

Timmons stepped slowly back in horror. "You!" he whispered, bending his head forward and beginning to tremble in every limb. "You! You did it! You did this! You, Stamer!"

Stamer merely nodded, and looked like a hunted wild beast at the opening. He wore the clothes of last night, but was without the whiskers or beard. All the time he cowered in the shelter of the shutters, he kept his right hand behind his back.

Timmons retreated to the other wall, and leaned his back against it, and glared at the trembling man opposite.

"For God's sake don't look at me like that. You are the only one that knows," whined Stamer, now quite unmanned. "I should not have told you anything about it, only I thought you knew, when I heard you say he was dead. You took me unawares. Don't stare at me like that, for God's sake. Say a word to me. Call me a fool, or anything you like, but don't stand there staring at me like that. If 'twas you that did it, you couldn't be more scared. Say a word to me, or I'll blow my brains out! I haven't been home. I am afraid to go home. I am not used to this--yet. I thought I had the nerve for anything, and I find I haven't the nerve of a child. I am afraid to go home. I am afraid to look at my wife. I thought I shouldn't be afraid of you, and now you scare me worse than anything. For the love of God, speak to me, and don't look at me like that. I can't stand it."

"You infernal scoundrel, to kill the poor foolish dwarf!" whispered Timmons. His mouth was parched and open. The sweat was rolling down off his forehead. He was trembling no longer. He was rigid now. He was basilisked by the awful apparition of a man who had confessed to murder.

Stamer looked towards the opening, and then his round, blood-shot eyes went back to the rigid figure of Timmons. "I don't mind what you say, if you'll only speak to me, only not too loud. No one can hear us. I know that, and no one can listen at the door, without our seeing him. You don't know what I have gone through. I have not been home. I am afraid to go home. I am afraid of everything. You don't know all. It's worse than you think. It's enough to drive one mad----"

"You murderous villain!"

"It's enough to drive any man mad. I've been wandering about all night. I am more afraid of my wife than of anyone else. I don't know why, but I tremble when I think of her, more than of the police, or--or--or----"

"The hangman?"

"Yes. You don't know all. When you do, you'll pity me----"

"The poor foolish dwarf!"

"Yes. I was afraid he'd betray us--you----"

"Oh, villain!"

"And I got on a roof opposite the window, and when he was working at the lever, I fired, and his head went so--and then so--and then so----"

"Stop it, you murderer!"

"Yes. And I knew it was done. The neck! Yes, I knew the neck was broken, and it was all right."

"Oh! Oh! Oh, that I should live to hear you!"

"Yes. I thought it was all right, and it was in one way. For he tumbled down on his side, so----"

"If you don't stop it, I'll brain you!"

"Yes. And I got down off the roof and ran. I couldn't help running, and all the time I was running I heard him running after me. I heard him running after me, and I saw his head wagging so--so--so, as he ran. Every step he took, his head wagged, so--and so--and so----"

"If you don't stop that----"

"Yes. I will. I'll stop it. But I could not stop him last night. All the time I ran I couldn't stop him. His head kept wagging and his lame feet kept running after me, and I couldn't stop the feet or the head. I don't know how long I ran, or where I ran, but I could run no more, and I fell up against a wall, and then it overtook me! I saw it as plainly as I see you--plainer, I saw it----"

The man paused a moment to wipe his forehead.

"Do you hear?" he yelled, suddenly flinging his arms up in the air. "Do you hear? Will you believe me now? The steps again! The lame steps again. Do you hear them, you fool?"

"Mad!"

"Mad, you fool! I told you. Look!"

The figure of a low-sized, deformed dwarf came into the opening and crossed the threshold of the store.

With a groan Stamer fell forward insensible.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LEIGH CONFIDES IN TIMMONS.

Timmons uttered a wild yell, and springing away from the wall fled to the extreme end of the store, and then faced round panting and livid.

"Hah!" said the shrill voice of the man on the threshold. "Private theatricals, I see. I did not know, Mr. Timmons, that you went in for such entertainments. They are very amusing I have been told; very diverting. But I did not imagine that business people indulged in them in their business premises at such an early hour of the day. I am disposed to think that, though the idea is original, the frequent practice of such scenes would not tend to increase the confidence of the public in the disabled anchors, or shower-baths, or invalid coffee-mills, or chain shot, or rusty fire-grates, it is your privilege to offer to the consideration of customers. Hah! I may be wrong, but such is my opinion. Don't you think, Mr. Timmons, that you ought to ring down the curtain, and that this gentleman, who no doubt represents the villain of the piece confronted with his intended victim, had better get up and look after his breakfast?" He pointed to the prostrate Stamer, who lay motionless upon the sandy floor.

Timmons did not move or speak. The shock had, for the moment, completely bereft him of his senses.

"I have just come back from the country," said the dwarf, "and I thought I'd call on you at once. I should like to have a few moments' conversation with you, if your friend and very able supporter would have the kindness to consider himself alive and fully pardoned by his intended victim."

"Hush!" cried Timmons, uttering the first sound. The words of the hunchback, although uttered in jest, had an awful significance for the dazed owner of the place.

"Hah! I see your friend is not fabled to be in heart an assassin, but the poor and hard-working father of a family, who is just now indulging in that repose which is to refresh him for tackling anew the one difficulty of providing board and lodging and raiment for his wife and little ones. But, Mr. Timmons, in all conscience, don't you think you ought to put an end to this farce? When I came in I judged by his falling down and some incoherent utterance of yours that you two were rehearsing a frightful tragedy. Will you oblige us by getting up, sir? The play is over for the present, and my excellent friend Timmons here is willing to make the ghost walk."

The prostrate man did not move.

Timmons shuddered. He made a prodigious effort and tried to move forward, but had to put his hand against the wall to steady himself.

Leigh approached Stamer and touched him with his stick. Stamer did not stir.

"Is there anything the matter with the man? I think there must be, Timmons. What do you mean by running away to the other end of the place? Why this man is unconscious. I seem to be fated to meet fainting men."

Timmons now summoned all his powers and staggered forward. Leigh bent over Stamer, but, although he tried, failed to move him.

Timmons regained his voice and some of his faculties. "He has only fainted," said he, raising Stamer into a sitting posture.

Stamer did not speak, but struggled slowly to his feet, and assisted by Timmons walked to the

opening and was helped a few yards down the street. There the two parted without a word. By the time Timmons got back he was comparatively composed. He felt heavy and dull, like a man who has been days and nights without sleep, but he had no longer any doubt that Oscar Leigh was present in the flesh.

"Are we alone?" asked Leigh impatiently on Timmons's return.

"We are."

"Hah! I am glad we are. If your friend were connected with racing I should call him a stayer. I came to tell you that I have just got back from Birmingham. I thought it best to go there and see again the man I had been in treaty with. I not only saw him but heard a great deal about him, and I am sorry to say I heard nothing good. He is, it appears, a very poor man, and he deliberately misled me as to his position and his ability to pay. I am now quite certain that if I had opened business with him I should have lost anything I entrusted to him, or, if not all, a good part. Hah!"

"Then I am not to meet you _at the same place_, next Thursday night?" asked Timmons, with emphasis on the tryst. He had not at this moment any interest in the mere business about which they had been negotiating. He was curious about other matters. His mind was now tolerably clear, but flabby and inactive still.

"No. There is no use in your giving me the alloy until I see my way to doing something with it, and I feel bound to say that after this disappointment in Birmingham, I feel greatly discouraged altogether. Hah! You do not, I think you told me, ever use eau-de-cologne?"

"I do not."

"Then you are distinctly wrong, for it is refreshing, most refreshing." He sniffed up noisily some he had poured into the palm of one hand and then rubbed together between the two. "Most refreshing."

"Then, Mr. Leigh, I suppose we are at a standstill?"

"Precisely."

"What you mean, I suppose, Mr. Leigh, is that you do not see your way to going any further?"

"Well, yes. At present I do not see my way to going any further."

Timmons felt relieved, but every moment his curiosity was increasing. There was no longer any need for caution with this goblin, or man, or devil, or magician. If Leigh had meant to betray him, the course he was now pursuing was the very last he would adopt.

"You went to Birmingham yesterday. May I ask you by what train you went down?"

"Two-thirty in the afternoon."

"And you came back this morning?"

"Yes. Just arrived. I drove straight here, as I told you."

"And you were away from half-past two yesterday until now. You were out of London yesterday from two-thirty until early this morning?"

"Yes; until six this morning. Why are you so curious? You do not, I hope, suspect me of saying anything that is not strictly true?" said Leigh, throwing his head back and striking the sandy floor fiercely with his stick.

"No. I don't _suspect_ you of saying anything that is not strictly true."

The emphasis on the word _suspect_ caught Leigh's attention. He drew himself up haughtily and said, "What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean, sir," said Timmons, shaking his minatory finger at him, and frowning heavily, "not that I suspect you of lying, but that I am sure you are lying. I was at the Hanover last night, you were there too."

Leigh started and drew back. He looked down and said nothing. He could not tell how much this man knew. Timmons went on:

"I was in the public bar, against the partition that separates it from the private bar, when you came in. You called for rum hot, and you went away at close to twelve o'clock to wind up your clock. I went out then and saw you at the window winding up the clock. I was there when the light went out just at half past twelve. Now, sir, are you lying or am I?"

Leigh burst into a loud, long, harsh roar of laughter that made Timmons start, it was so weird and unexpected. Then the dwarf cried, "Why you, sir, you are lying, of course. The man you saw and heard is my deputy."

"You lie. I heard about your deputy. He is a deaf and dumb man, who can't write, and is as tall as I am, a man with fair hair and beard."

"My dear sir, your language is so offensive I do not know whether you deserve an explanation or not. Anyway, I'll give you this much of an explanation. I have two deputies. One of the kind you describe, and one who could not possibly be known by sight from myself."

"But I have more than sight, even if the two of you were matched like two peas. I heard your voice, and all your friends in the bar knew you and spoke to you, and called you Mr. Leigh. It was you then and there, as sure as it is you here and now." Timmons thought, "Stamer when he fired must have missed Leigh, and Leigh must have gone away, after, for some purpose of his own, setting fire to the place. He is going on just as if the place had not been burned down last night, why, I am sure I do not know. I can't make it out, but anyway, Stamer did not shoot him, and he is pretending he was not there, and that he was in Birmingham. He's too deep for me, but I am not sure it would not be a good thing if Stamer did not miss him after all."

The clockmaker paused awhile in thought. It was not often he was posed, but evidently he was for a moment at a nonplus. Suddenly he looked up, and with a smile and a gesture of his hands and shoulders, indicating that he gave in:

"Mr. Timmons," he said suavely, "you have a just right to be angry with me for mismanaging our joint affair, and I own I have not told you quite the truth. I did not go to Birmingham by the two-thirty yesterday. I was at the Hanover last night just before twelve, and I did go into Forbes's bakery as you say. But I swear to you I left London last night by the twelve-fifteen, and I swear to you I did not wind up my clock last night. It was this morning between four and five o'clock I found out in Birmingham that the man was not to be trusted. You will wonder where I made inquiries at such an hour."

"I do, indeed," said Timmons scornfully.

"I told you, and I think you know, that I am not an ordinary man. My powers, both in my art and among men, are great and exceptional. When I got to Birmingham this morning, I went to--where do you think?"

"The devil!"

"Well, not exactly, but very near it. I went to a police-station. It so happens that one of the inspectors of the district in which this man lives is a great friend of mine. He was not on duty, but his name procured for me, my dear Mr. Timmons, all the information I desired. I was able to learn all I needed, and catch the first train back to town. You see now how faithfully I have attended to our little business. I left the Hanover at five minutes to twelve, and at two minutes to twelve I was bowling along to Paddington to catch the last train, the twelve-fifteen."

"That, sir, is another lie, and one that does you no good. At twelve-fifteen I saw you as plain as I see you now--for although there was a thin curtain, the curtain was oiled, and I could see as if there was no curtain, and the gas was up and shining on you--I say at fifteen minutes after twelve I saw you turn around and nod to your friends in the bar. It's nothing to me now, as the business is off, but I stick to what I say, Mr. Leigh."

"And I stick to what I say."

"Which of the says?" asked Timmons contemptuously. "You have owned to a lie already."

"Lie is hardly a fair word to use. I merely said one hour instead of another, and that does not affect the substance of my explanation about Birmingham. I told you two-thirty, for I did not want you to be troubled with my friend the inspector."

This reference to a police-station and inspector would have filled Timmons with alarm early in the interview, but now he was in no fear. If this man intended to betray him, why had he not done so already? and why had he not taken the gold for evidence?

"But if you left Forbes's, how did you get away? Through the front-door in Chetwynd Street, or through the side-door in Welbeck Place?"

"Through neither. Through the door of the bakehouse into the mews."

Timmons started. This might account for Stamer's story of the ghost.

"But who wound the clock? I saw you do it, Mr. Leigh--I saw you do it, sir, and all this Birmingham tale is gammon."

"Again you are wrong. And now, to show you how far you are wrong, I will tell you a secret. I have two deputies. One I told that fool Williams about, and requested him as a great favour not to let a soul know. By this, of course, I intended that every one who enjoyed the privilege of Mr. Williams's acquaintance should know. But of my second deputy I never spoke to a soul until now, until I told you this moment. The other deputy is a man extremely like me from the waist up. He is ill-formed as I am, and so like me when we sit that you would not know the difference across

your own store. But our voices are different, very different, and he is more than a foot taller than I. You did not see the winder last night standing up. He always takes his seat before raising the gas."

A light broke in on Timmons. This would explain all. This would make Stamer's story consist with his own experience of the night before. This would account for this man, whom Stamer said he had shot, being here now, uninjured. This would make the later version of the tale about Birmingham possible, credible. But--awful but!--it would mean that the unfortunate, afflicted deputy had been sacrificed! Yes, most of what this man had said was true.

"What's the unfortunate deputy's name?" he asked, with a shudder.

"That I will not tell."

"But it must come out on the inquest, to-day or to-morrow, or whenever they find the remains."

"Remains of what?" asked Leigh, frowning heavily.

"Of your deputy. They say in the paper it was you that lost your life in the fire."

"Fire! Fire! Fire where?" thundered the dwarf, in a voice which shook the unceiled joists above their heads and made the thinner plates of metal vibrate.

"Don't you know? Haven't you seen a paper? Why Forbes's bakery was burnt out last night, and the papers say you lost your life in the fire."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WRONG MAN.

When Timmons led the almost unconscious Stamer from the threshold, and left him a few yards from the door, the latter did not go far. He had scarcely the strength to walk away, and he certainly had not the desire to go. He had borne two extreme phases of terror within the last twenty-four hours; he had suffered the breathless terror of believing he had taken human life, and he had imagined the spirit of the murdered man was pursuing him.

He had often, in thought, faced the contingency of having to fire on some one who found him at his midnight depredations, but he had not, until he formed the resolve of putting Leigh away, contemplated lying in wait for an unsuspecting man and shooting him as if he were a bird of prey.

Once it had entered his mind to kill Leigh, nothing seemed simpler than to do it, and nothing easier than to bear the burden of the deed. He had no hint of conscience, and there were only two articles in his code--first, that prison was a punishment not to be borne if, at any expense, it could be avoided; and, second, that no harm was to be allowed near Timmons. Both articles were concerned, inextricably bound up, in Leigh's life. He saw in the dwarf the agent, the ally of the police--the police, absolutely, in a more malignant form than the stalwart detective who, with handcuffs in his pockets, runs a man down. This Leigh was a traitor and a policeman together. It seemed as though it would be impossible for one human being to possess any characteristic which could add to the hatefulness of him who exhibited these two. And yet this Leigh was not only a traitor and a policeman combined, but an enemy of Timmons--a beast who threatened Timmons as well! Shooting was too merciful a death for such a miscreant. But then, shooting was easy and sure, so he should be shot.

The act itself had been very easy. There had been no more difficulty about it than about hitting the old hat in the shadow of the factory wall. But when the silent shot was sped and the air-gun disposed of by being carefully hung down the inside of a chimney and hooked to a copper-wire tie of the slate chimney-top, and he was safely down the water pipe and in the mews, the aspect of the whole deed changed, or rather it became another thing altogether.

Before pulling the trigger of the air-gun, he was perfectly satisfied that Leigh deserved, richly deserved death. That was as plain as the dome of St. Paul's from London Bridge. It had been equally plain to him that when Leigh was dead, and dead by his hand, he should never because of any compunction be sorry for his act. No sooner was he at the bottom of the water-pipe than he

found he had no longer any control over his thoughts, or more correctly that the thoughts in his mind did not belong to him at all, but were, as it might be, thoughts hired in the interest of the dead man, hostile, relentless mercenaries, inside the very walls of the citadel within which he was besieged, and from which there was no escape except by flinging his naked bosom on the bayonets of the besiegers.

It made not the least difference now whether the man merited death a thousand times or not, that man insisted on haunting him. It did not now matter in the least how it pleased him to regard the provoker of that shot, it was how the murdered man regarded him was the real question. He had always told himself that a murdered man was only a dead man after all. Now he had to learn that no man ever born of woman is more awfully alive than a murdered man. He had yet to learn that the blow of the murderer endows the victim with inextinguishable vitality. He had yet to learn that all things which live die to the mind of a murderer except the man who is dead. He had yet to learn that in the mind of a murderer there is a gradually filling in and crowding together of the images of the undamned dead that in the end blind and block up the whole soul in stifling intimacies with the dead, until the murderer in his despair flings himself at the feet of the hangman shrieking for mercy, for mercy, for the mercy of violent and disgraceful death in order to put an end to the fiendish gibes of the dead who is not dead but living, who will not sink into hell, but brings hell into the assassin's brain. The desire to kill is easy, and the means of killing are easy, but the spirit of the murdered man takes immortal form in the brain of the murderer and cleaves to him for evermore.

So that when Stamer descended from the roof and found himself in the yard of the mews, he was not alone. He had seen little of Leigh, but now all he had seen came back upon the eye of his memory with appalling distinctness. He saw each detail of the man's body as though it were cast in rigid bronze and pressed forcibly, painfully, unbearably, upon his perception. He could see, he could feel, the long yellow fingers and the pointed chin hidden in the beard, and the hairs on the neck growing thinner and thinner as the neck descended into the collar. He could see the wrinkles about the eyes, and a peculiar backward motion of the lips before the dwarf spoke. He could see the forehead wrinkled upward in indulgent scorn, or the eyes flashing with insolent self-esteem. He could see. He could see the swift, sharp up-tilt of the chin when a deep respiration became necessary. There was nothing about the dwarf that he could not see, that he did not see, that he could avoid seeing, that was not pressed upon him as by a cold, steel die, that was not pressed and pressed upon him until his mind ached for the vividness, until he turned within himself frantically to avoid the features or actions of the dwarf, and found no space unoccupied, no loop-hole of escape, no resting-place for the eye, no variety for the mind. He was possessed by a devil, and he had made that devil into the likeness of Leigh with his own hands out of the blood of Leigh.

He had run, he did not know how long, or whither, but all the time he was running, he had some relief from the devil which possessed him, for he heard footsteps behind him, the footsteps of the dwarf. But what signified footsteps behind him, or the ordinary ghost one heard of, which could not take shape in day-light, or linger after cockcrow, compared with this internal spirit of the murdered man, this awful presence, this agonizingly minute portraiture at the back of the eye-balls where all the inside of the head could see it, when the eyes were shut, when one was asleep?

At the time Leigh overtook him, he was sure Leigh was dead. But when he found himself exhausted against the wall, and saw the dwarf go by, it was with a feeling of relief. This was the vulgar ghost of which he had heard so much, but which he had always held in contempt. But he had never heard of the other ghost before, and his spirit was goaded with terrors, and frantic with fears.

Then came that night of wandering, with inexpungeable features of the dwarf sharp limned upon his smarting sight, and after that long night, which was a repetition of the first few minutes after the deed, the visit to Timmons, and the appearance of Leigh in the flesh!

No wonder Stamer was faint.

He was in no immediate fear now. He was merely worn out by the awful night, and prostrated by the final shock. All he wanted was rest, and to know how it came to be that the dwarf was about that morning, seemingly uninjured. As Leigh was not dead, or hurt, he had nothing to fear at present. He would rest somewhere from which he could watch Timmons, and go back to his friend as soon as the clock-maker disappeared. He sat down on the tail-board of an upreared cart to wait.

At length he saw the hunchback issue hastily from the store, and hasten, with pale face and hard-drawn breath, in the direction of London Road. Stamer kept his eyes on the little man until he saw him hail a cab and drive away. Then he rose, and, with weary steps and a heart relieved, hastened to the marine store.

The murdered ghost which had haunted the secret chambers of his spirit had been exorcised, by the sight of Leigh in the flesh, and he was at rest.

He found Timmons pacing up and down the store gloomily. "That's a good job, any way, Mr. Timmons," said the shorter man when he had got behind the shutters. This time he did not stand

up with his back against the wall; he sat down on the old fire-grate. He was much bolder. In fact, he sought cover more from habit than from a sense of present insecurity.

"Good job," growled Timmons. "Worse job, you mean, you fool."

"Worse job? Worse job, Mr. Timmons? Worse, after all you said, to see Mr. Leigh here, than to know he was lying on the floor under the window with a broken neck?" cried Stamer, in blank and hopeless amazement.

"Broken neck! Broken neck! It's you deserve the broken neck; and as sure as you're alive, Tom Stamer, you'll get it, get it from Jack Ketch, before long, and you deserve it."

"Deserve it for missing Leigh?" cried Stamer, in a tone of dismay. Nothing could satisfy Timmons this morning. First he was furious because he had killed Leigh, and now he was savage because the bullet had missed him!

"No, you red-handed botch! Worse than even if you killed Leigh, who hasn't been all straight. But you have killed an innocent man. A man you never saw or heard of in all your life until last night. A man that came into Leigh's place, privately, through a third door in the mews, and wound up his clock for him, in the window, and nodded to the Hanover bar people, as Leigh used to do, and who was so like Leigh himself, hump and all, barring that he was taller, that their own mothers would not know one from the other. Leigh hired him, so that he might be able to go to Birmingham and places on our business, and seem to be in London and at his own place, if it became necessary to prove he had not been in Birmingham, if it became necessary to prove an alibi. And you, you blundering-headed fool, go and shoot the very man Leigh had hired to help our business! You're a useful pal, you are! You're a good working mate, you are! Are you proud of yourself? Eh? You not only put your head into the halter of your own free will, and out of the cleverness of your own brains, but you round on a chap who was a pal after all. You go having snap shots, you do, and you bag a comrade, a man who did no one any harm, a man who was in the swim! Oh, you are a nice, useful, tidy working pal, you are! A useful, careful mate! I wonder you didn't shoot me, and say you did it for the good of my health, and out of kindness to me. Anyway, I'm heartily sorry it wasn't yourself you shot, last night. No one would have been sorry for that, and the country would have saved the ten pounds to Jack Ketch for hanging you, and the cost of a new rope!"

"Eh?" cried Stamer, not that he did not hear and understand, but in order that he might get the story re-told.

Timmons went over the principal points again.

The burglar listened quite unmoved.

"You take it coolly enough, anyhow?"

"Why not? It was an accident."

"An accident! An accident!" cried Timmons, drawing up in front of Stamer and looking at him in perplexity.

"Well, what could be plainer, Mr. Timmons? Of course, it was an accident. Why should I hurt a man who never hurt me?"

"But you did."

"They have to prove that. They can't prove I rounded on a pal. I can get a hundred witnesses to character."

"Nice witnesses they would be."

"But the coppers know I'm a straight man."

"They would hardly come to speak for you. It's someone from Portland would give you a character. But you know you fired the shot."

"At a screech-owl, my lord, at a screech-owl, my lord, that was flying across the street. You don't suppose, my lord, I'd go and round on a pal of Mr. Timmons's and my own?"

Timmons glared at him. "But the man is dead, and someone shot him."

"Well, my lord, except Mr. Timmons--and to save him I risked my own life, and would lay it down, and am ready to lay it down now or any time it may please your lordship--unless Mr. Timmons goes into the box and swears my life away, you can prove nothing against me, my lord."

"After all," said Timmons, looking through half-closed critical eyes at Stamer, "after all, the man has some brains."

"And a straight man for a friend in Mr. John Timmons."

"Yes, Stamer, you have."

Stamer stood up and approached Timmons. "You'll shake hands on that, Mr. Timmons?"

"I will." Timmons gave him his hand. "And now," he added, "I don't think you know the good news."

"What?"

"Why, Forbes's bakery was burned out last night."

"Hurroo!" cried Stamer, with a yell of sudden relief and joy. "My lord, you haven't a single bit of evidence against Tom Stamer. My lord, good-bye. Mr. John Timmons and Tom Stamer against the world!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE RUINS.

The morning following Hanbury's visit to Grimsby Street saw the order of arrival of the ladies in the sitting-room reversed. Mrs. Grace was there first. Edith had been too excited when she went to bed after the young man's disclosures to sleep, and it was not until the small hours were growing big that the girl could close her eyes. As a consequence, she was late.

But when at last she did awake, how different were her feelings from the day before! She could scarcely believe she was the same being, or it was the same world. That letter from Mr. Coutch, of Castleton, had plunged her into a depth of leaden hopelessness she had never known before. Now all was changed. Then she was the last of a race of shopkeepers; now she had for cousin a man whose ancestor had been a king. Whatever fate might do against her in the future, it could never take away that consoling consciousness. At Miss Graham's in Streatham the girls used to say she ought to be a queen. Well, a not very remote relative of hers would have sat on a throne if she had lived and come into her rights! Prodigious.

She found her grandmother waiting for her. The old lady was seated in the window, spectacles on nose, reading the morning paper. All the papers of that morning had not an account of the disaster at Chelsea, because of the late hour at which it occurred. Mrs. Grace's paper was one that did not get the news in time for insertion that morning, so that the old lady and Edith were spared the pain of believing that a man who sat in this room yesterday had met with a sudden and horrible death.

But Mrs. Grace's eye had caught a paragraph headed "The Last of the Poles." Without a word or comment she handed the paper to the girl and said merely, "Read that. It ought to interest you."

Edith looked at the heading, flushed, and then read the paragraph. It ran:

"The last survivor of one of the great historical families of Europe was buried at Chone, near Geneva, four days before Christmas. The venerable Mathilde Poniatowski, the widow of Count Szymanowski, had just passed her ninetieth year. Her family gave to Poland its last king, Stanislaus Augustus, under whose reign the death-struggle of the Polish nation began, and its last hero, Prince Joseph Poniatowski, who fell as one of Napoleon's generals when bravely attempting to cover the retreat of the French at the battle of Leipzig. The Tzar Alexander, with a generosity which did him credit, allowed his corpse to be buried in the church at Cracow amongst the old Kings and heroes of Poland. Count Szymanowski, the husband of the deceased lady, took a prominent part in the rising of the Poles in 1831, since which time she has lived a quiet and uneventful life in the hospitable republic of Geneva."

"And think," said Mrs. Grace, "that she who is just dead represented only the younger branch of Mr. Hanbury's family. It is all more like an Eastern romance than anything which could take place in Europe!"

Edith could not say much. She felt choking, and merely said it was wonderful, and that Mr. Hanbury would no doubt know all about the countess.

"I don't think so. You know he said he did not know much of the family. I must cut out this paragraph and keep it for him."

The notion of cutting a paragraph out of a penny paper and giving it to the head of the house here referred to, was grotesque. Besides, he had not said that he should come again. He said his mother would call, and he expressed a vague hope that they might be better friends. Edith knew no practical importance was to be attached to this man's parentage, as far as honours went; but still it could not be that he would move about as freely now as of yore, or mingle with the people he had formerly considered his equals. He could no more destroy the stream of noble and kingly blood in his veins than a costermonger could carry the arms of a Howard or a Percy.

Edith broke bread that morning, but made little more than a formal meal. Mrs. Hanbury would of course call. When? And what would she be like? The son had been much too condescending and familiar for one in his position. Would his mother make up in stateliness what he left aside? She would drive up between three and five with powdered footmen. The arrival of the carriage, and the footmen, and Mrs. Hanbury, mother of the well-known Mr. Hanbury, would be an event in Grimsby Street. Her old resolution of not knowing rich people must be waived in this case. There was no remedy for it; for he had said his mother would come.

Neither grandmother nor grand-daughter was in humour for talk. Edith was occupied with her own thoughts. They had nothing to do that day, for Edith had made up her mind to do nothing about a new situation until Monday. It being now Saturday, there was no time to take any steps that week.

They had not sat down to breakfast until half-past nine, and by ten they had not finished. As the little clock on the mantelpiece struck the hour the landlady's daughter entered to say a lady was below who desired to see Mrs. and Miss Grace.

Both rose. Whom could it be?

Mrs. Hanbury.

"I have taken the liberty of coming up without permission," said a voice at the door, and a tall, stately lady, with white hair and dressed in black, appeared at the threshold of the door left open by the attendant.

Mrs. Grace invited her to enter and be seated.

"I need not introduce myself further," the visitor said with a smile, as she sat down, after shaking hands with the two, "than to say I am the mother of Mr. Hanbury, who had the pleasure of calling upon you yesterday evening. I am afraid my visit this morning is as inconveniently early as his last night was late. But the discovery of the relationship between us is so extraordinary, and so pleasant to me, that I could not deny myself the happiness of calling at the very earliest moment I could get away. You have not even finished breakfast. I fear you will find it hard to forgive me." Her words, and smile, and manner were so friendly and unassuming, that grandmother and grand-daughter felt at ease immediately.

Mrs. Grace said that if the visitor would forgive the disorder of the table, they should have no reason to feel anything but extremely grateful to Mrs. Hanbury for coming so soon.

Mrs. Hanbury bowed and said, "I saw my son on his return from Derbyshire yesterday and when he came back from you last night. But he had not come down when I was leaving home just now. I am a very positive, self-willed old woman, and I have to ask you as a favour to make allowances for these infirmities. I have made up my mind that the best thing for us to do is to hold a little family council, and I have grown so used to my own room I never can feel equal to discussing family matters anywhere else. I have therefore come to ask you a favour to begin with. Do humour me, please, and come with me to my place. John will be down and done breakfast by the time we get there, and we four can talk over all this wonderful story at our leisure."

There were objections and demurs to this, but Mrs. Hanbury's insistent, good-humoured determination prevailed, and the end was that the three ladies set out together on foot for Chester Square. "And now," said Mrs. Hanbury, as they walked along, "that I have tasted the delights of conquest, I mean to turn from a mild and seemingly reasonable supplicant into a rigid tyrant. Back into that dreadful Grimsby Street neither of you shall ever go again. It is quite enough to destroy one's zest for life merely to look down it!"

The protests and demurs were more vehement than before.

"We shall not argue the point now. In my capacity of tyrant, I decline to argue anything. But we shall see--we shall see."

When they reached Mrs. Hanbury's, they went straight, to her own room. She left word that she was most particularly engaged, and could see no one. On enquiring for her son, she heard with surprise that he had come down shortly after she left and gone out without leaving any

message for her.

That morning John Hanbury awoke to the most unpleasant thoughts about Dora. What ought he to do in the matter? Had he not acted badly to her in not writing the next morning after the scene in the drawing-room?--the very night?

Unquestionably it would have been much better if he had written at once. But then at the time he reached home, he was in no state of mind to write to any one, and when he read his father's letter, the contents of it drove all other matters into the background, and made it seem that they could easily wait. Now he had been to Derbyshire, and knew all that was to be learned at Castleton, and had seen Mrs. Grace and Miss Grace and told them of the discovery he had made. His mother had undertaken to go see them, and for the present there was nothing to press in front of his thought of Dora.

He had behaved very badly indeed to her. At the interview he had acted more like a lunatic brute than a sane gentleman, and afterwards his conduct had been--yes, cowardly. Curse it! was he always to behave like a coward in her eyes? She had reproached him with cowardice the other day, and he fully deserved her reproach. That is, he fully deserved the reproach of an impartial and passionless judge. But was the attitude of an impartial and passionless judge exactly the one a man expected from his sweetheart? Surely the ways of life would be very dusty and dreary if a man found his severest critics always closest to his side, if any deficiencies in the public indictment of his character or conduct were to be supplied by a voice from his own hearth, by his other self, by his wife?

John Hanbury had from his first thinking of Dora more than of any other girl he had met, looked on her as a possible wife. When he went further and made up his mind to ask her to marry him, he had regarded her as a future wife more than a present sweetheart. He had felt that she would be a credit and an ornament to him and that they should get on well together. He had never for an hour been carried away by his feelings towards her. He had never lost his head. He told himself he had lost his heart, because he was more happy in her society than in the society of any other young woman he had met.

He was an imaginative man, of good education, strong impulse, and skilful in the use of words. Yet he had not addressed a single piece of verse to her. She had not moved him to adopt that unfamiliar form of expression. He had nothing in his mind about her that he could not express in prose. This alone was a suspicious circumstance. He knew he was not a poet, and he felt it would be absurd to try to be a poet, because he was going to marry a woman he liked very much.

This was ample evidence she had not touched the inner springs of love in him. The young man who keeps his reason always about him, and won't make a fool of himself for the woman he wants to marry, isn't in love at all. There may be fifty words describing beautifully the excellence of his intentions towards the young woman, but love is not one of those words. He had felt all along that they were about to enter into a delicious partnership; not that he was going to drink the wine of a heavenly dream.

This morning he was wrestling and groaning in spirit when the servant brought the letters to his door. He recognised her writing at once, and tore the envelope open hastily.

He read the letter slowly and with decaying spirit. When he had finished he folded it up deliberately and put it back into the envelope. His face was pale, his lips were apart, his eyes dull, expressionless.

"Be it so," he said at length. "She is right," he added bitterly. "She is always right. She would always be right, and I when I differed from her always wrong. That is not the position a husband should occupy in a wife's esteem."

Then he sat down in the easy chair he had occupied two nights before, and fell into a reverie. He did not heed how time went. When he roused himself he learned that his mother had gone out. He did not want to meet her now. He did not want to meet anyone. He wished to be alone with his thoughts. Where can man be more alone than in the streets of a great city?

He went out with no definite object except to be free of interruption. His mind ran on Dora. Now he thought of her with anger, now with affection, now with sorrow. He had no thought of trying to undo her resolve. He acquiesced in it. He was glad it came from her and not from him.

Now that all was over between them, and they were by-and-by to be good friends, and no more, he became sentimental.

He passed in review the pleasant hours they had spent together. He took a melancholy delight in conjuring up the things they had said, the places they had gone to, the balls, and theatres, and galleries and meetings they had been at with one another. He thought of the last walk they took, the walk which led to the present breach between them. It was in this neighbourhood somewhere. Ah, he remembered. He would go and see the place once more.

Once more! Why it was only two days since they had come this way, she leaning on his arm. What a wonderful lot of things had been crowded into those two days!

This was the street. What was the meaning of the crowd? When she and he were here last, there had been a crowd too. Was there always a crowd here? By Jove! there had been a fire. And, by Jove! the house burned was the one against the end wall of which she and he had stood to watch the nigger.

Policemen were keeping people back from the front of Forbes's bakery, which was completely gutted, standing a mere shell, with its bare, roofless walls open to the light of Heaven. All the floors had fallen, and a fireman with a hose was playing on the smoking rubbish within.

"An unlucky place," thought Hanbury, as he stood to look at the ruins. "First that unfortunate nigger meets with an accident there, and now this house is burned quite out. An unlucky corner."

At that moment there was a cry of dismay from the crowd. Hanbury drew back. He thought the walls were falling. Presently the cry of dismay changed to a cheer, and the crowd at the corner of the Hanover swayed and opened, and through it, from a cab which had just drawn up, walked hastily towards the smoking pile, Oscar Leigh.

Where Hanbury stood was the nearest point from which the dwarf could command a view of the bakery. When he reached Hanbury's side, he stopped, looked up, dropped his stick, flung his hands aloft and uttered an awful yell of despair.

The people drew back from him.

No trace of even the floor of the clock-room remained in position, beyond a few charred fragments of joists. Everything was gone, wheels and pulleys, and levers, and shafts, and chains, and drums, and bands. Even the very frame itself, with its four strong pillars and thick cross-bars, left not a trace aloft, and its very position was not indicated in the heap of steaming rubbish.

"All gone! All gone! The work of seven years. The result of a lifetime. Gone! gone! gone!"

He reeled and would have fallen but that Hanbury caught him and supported him.

Williams appeared and between Williams and Hanbury the dwarf was led into the private bar in which his learning and occult knowledge had brought him distinction and respect.

A chair was fetched by Binns the potman and Leigh was set upon it with his back to the window, so that his eyes might not look upon the grave of his labour.

"All gone! All gone! Nothing left! Nothing left! The work of seven years day and night! Day and night! Day and night! Gone, all gone!"

"But, Mr. Leigh," said the pale-faced Williams, in a low and very kindly voice, "it might have been ever so much worse."

"Worse! How could it be worse? There is nothing saved."

"Why, thank God, Mr. Leigh, you are saved. It was said in some of the papers and we all believed you were burned in the fire."

"And what if I was? I wish I was."

"You oughtn't say that, Mr. Leigh. It is not right to say that. You ought to be grateful for being saved."

"Grateful for being saved! Who? I! Who should be grateful that I am saved? Not I, for one."

"Well, your friends are very glad, any way. Didn't you hear how the people cried out with fear first, for they thought you were a ghost, and didn't you hear how they cheered then when they saw it was you yourself, alive and well?"

"I! Who am I? What am I? My clock, sir, was all I had in this whole world. It was the savings bank of my heart, of my soul, and now the bank is broken and I am beggared."

"But, Mr. Leigh, you are not beggared indeed. You have plenty of money still," said Williams in the soft tone one uses to a reasonable child.

"Money, sir, what is money to me? I am not a pauper, but what good is mere money to me? Can I dance at balls, or ride fine horses or shoot? What good is money to me more than to get me food and drink for my body? and what a body! Who will feed my soul? What will feed my soul? How am I who am but a joke of nature to live with no spiritual food? My clock was my life, and my soul, and my fame, my immortal part and now--! Gone! gone! gone!"

"But how did you escape, Mr. Leigh? We saw you winding up after you left this, and you nodded to us as usual, when the easy part of the winding came, half-way through."

"I did. Curse my mandarin neck. If I had minded nothing but my clock it would be safe now, or I should be dead with it."

"But how did you escape, Mr. Leigh?"

"The devil takes care of his own, Mr. Hanbury," he said, speaking for the first time to the young man. "Whatever way you are going I should like to go, if you would have no objection? I have no way of my own now except the way common to us all."

"I shall be very glad to have your company," said Hanbury, who was sincerely moved at the loss and grief of the little clockmaker.

"Shall we walk or would you prefer to drive?"

"Let us drive, please. I have lost my stick. Ay, I have lost my crutch, my stick, my prop. You are very kind to let me go with you."

"Indeed I am very glad to be of any use I can."

And leaning on the arm of John Hanbury, Oscar Leigh limped out of the private bar of the Hanover.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

OPEN CONFESSION.

When the two men gained the open air no cab was in sight.

"If you will rest awhile here," said Hanbury, "I'll fetch a cab. I cannot see one up or down the street."

"No," said Leigh, a shudder passing through his frame. "Let us walk, if you do not mind. I could not bear to stay near this place any longer. Is it not strange that you should have wanted a cab in this spot forty-eight hours ago, and I should want it here now?"

"It is strange," said Hanbury, "but the world is very small, and our absolute wants in it are very closely circumscribed." The manner of Leigh had changed in a marked manner since they emerged from the door of the Hanover. His steps had become slow and more dragged, his breathing more laboured, and he had lost all swagger and bounce, and self-assertiveness.

"I know I am going very slowly. But I cannot get along quicker. I have had a great shock, and a slow step is becoming a funeral."

"Pray, do not apologise. I assure you I have absolutely nothing to do."

"Nor I, nor shall I ever have anything to do in this world again. Sir, this slow pace befits a funeral. This is my funeral."

"Oh, you mustn't say so. I am sure your clock must have been a terrible loss, but not irreparable."

"Do you mean that the clock is reparable?"

"No. I am well aware the clock is past repair, but the loss may be repaired."

"No, sir. It may not. I do not want ever to see this street or that corner again. I have lived there seven years. I have toiled and planned there night and day for seven years, and now I am going away shorn of the growth of all my labours. Men of my make are never long-lived. When they meet a great shock and a great loss such as this they die. There is a hansom, but don't call that. Call a four-wheeler. It is more like a hearse, and this is a funeral. Let us dress the rehearsal of the play, the real play, as well as we can. I am rather glad I am done with life----"

"Why, you are quite a young man yet, Mr. Leigh."

"I am rather glad I am done with life, I was saying, for I was beginning to tire of it. A man formed as I am has a weary up-hill fight. He must either play the part of the subtle beast, or go under, and a man who cannot ever stand up and fight for himself does not like to go under. It is not fair to ask a man who has never been able to put up his hands if he has had enough."

"But you will begin another great clock, even a greater one."

For a moment the little man fired up, and seemed about to regain his old insolent combativeness. "Sir, it would be impossible to design a greater."

"Well, let us say as great," said the young man soothingly. He was beginning not only to take an interest in this strange being, but to sympathise with him.

"No, sir. I shall begin no other clock. The sands in my own hour-glass are running low already. When a man of my make endures a great shock and a great disappointment he does not endure much more. He dies. I am glad to meet you again. I am glad it was your arm kept me from falling. I want you to be my friend. I have no friend on earth excepting my poor mother, who is more helpless than I myself. I know what I am asking when I say I want you for my friend. I would not ask you to be my friend the day before yesterday. I would have preferred you for an enemy then, for then I was strong and able to take care of myself. Now I am too weak to be your enemy, and I am fit only to be your friend. You will not spurn me?" He paused in their walk, and looked up anxiously into Hanbury's face.

"Assuredly not. I will do anything I can for you. Please let me know what I can do for you?"

"I may presently, I may later. I may the last thing of all. But not now. Let us walk on. My clock is gone for ever, and on the ruins of my clock I have found a friend. I would much rather have my clock, ten thousand times rather have my clock, than you, but then I knew it so long and so well. If you had made that clock as I had, and had lost it as I have lost it, you would go mad and kill someone, maybe yourself, or perhaps both."

"I am sure I should feel bitterly the loss of so many years of labour."

"Of so many years of labour and love and confidence and pride, the depository of so many hopes, the garden in which grew all the flowers of my mind. Well, while I had the clock, I had a friend in which I could confide. The clock is gone past recall. My mother cannot, poor soul, be expected to understand me. As you have promised to be my friend, I will confide in you. I know I may do so with safety."

"I think you may."

"It is past thinking in me: I know. I told you before, I never make mistakes about people." In all this talk Hanbury noticed that the old self-assertive "Hah!" had no place, nor was there any use of eau-de-cologne or reference to it. These had been nothing more than conversational fripperies, and had been laid aside with the spirit of aggression. The manner of aggression still prevailed in the form of thought and manner of expression. "You will be astonished to hear that I was attracted towards you from the moment I saw you in Welbeck Place--the attraction of repulsion, no doubt. But still you were not indifferent to me. I have had so long a life of loneliness and repression, I want a few hours of companionship and free-speaking before I die."

"Anything you may tell me to relieve your mind, I shall treat as a secret of my own--as a secret in keeping which my personal honour is concerned."

"I know. I wish I were as sure of anything else as I am of you. I tell you I never make mistakes about people. Never. I lied to you very considerably. I lied to everyone pretty considerably, partly because I have imagination, or fancy, or invention, or whatever you call the power of easily devising things that are not. I lied because I had imagination. I lied because I had vanity. I lied because people are such fools. How could a man tell the truth to a creature like Williams, the owner of that public-house? The creature could not appreciate it. Besides, lying is so amusing, and I had so little amusement. I used lies as at once a sword and buckler. I cut down a fool with a lie; I defended myself against the silly talk of fools by holding up a lie with a brazen boss the shining of which dazzled their eyes and choked their silly voices. I lied a good deal to you."

"Pray do not pain yourself by apologies. You said what you said to me merely for pastime."

"No; as an indication of my contempt for you. Did you not see I had a contempt for you? Did I not make it plain? Did you not see it?"

"Yes, I think you made it plain."

"I am glad of that, for my intention was to hurt you a good deal, and I hate to fail. I am very glad you saw I had a great contempt for you. This is my death-bed confession, and I shall keep back nothing, without warning you I am keeping something back."

"You are quite candid now, I am sure."

"Quite candid, as candid as a child is in its unspoken mind. What I said about those figures of time was mostly a lie."

"I guessed that."

"What I said about Miracle Gold was mostly a lie also."

"I knew that."

"You knew it! How could you know it? How can you know a negative any more than prove it, except by the evidence of your senses?--and then you do not know, you only fail to perceive."

"Well, let us not get into metaphysics."

"All right. Most of what I told you about Miracle Gold was a lie. All I told you about making it was a lie. I was about to enter into a league with thieves to take stolen gold, and pretend to make it. I was going to do this for the sake of the fame, not the profit."

"A very dangerous kind of alchemy."

"Yes; but very common, though not in its application to real metallic gold."

"It would be worse for us to get into a discussion on morals than even on metaphysics."

"It would. Anyway I have told you what my scheme was. I told Mrs. Ashton that my clock was independent of my hands for winding up. You heard Williams, the publican, say they saw me wind up my clock last night. Well I was not near my clock last night."

"But he said he saw you."

"He did. Now you can understand how necessary it was for me to lie."

"I candidly confess I cannot."

"Well to me it would be unbearable that a man like Williams should know of all my actions. I was not near my clock, not in the same room with it, not on the floor where it stood, from the early afternoon of yesterday. When I conceived the notion of making Miracle Gold I knew I ran a great risk. I thought it might become necessary to prove affirmatives at all events. The proposition of an alibi is an affirmative, the deduction a negative. I told you my clock was my friend. Well, I made it help me in this. I gave out in the private bar of the Hanover that my clock had now become so complicated that I had arranged to connect all the movements, which had hitherto been more or less independent, awaiting removal to a tower. I said I was going to get all my power from one force, weights in the chimney. Hitherto I had said I used springs and weights. I said this change would involve half-an-hour's continual winding every night, with a brief break of a few seconds in the middle of the half hour. The clock was to be wound up by a lever fixed near the window, at which I sat when at work, the only window in the room. Night after night I worked at this lever for half-an-hour, turning round exactly at a quarter-past twelve to nod at the landlord of the Hanover and the people in the private bar. Meanwhile, I was busy constructing two life-sized figures. One of the body of a man in every way unlike me. The other of a man who should be as like me as possible. I have skill, a good deal of skill, in modelling. The face and figure unlike mine were the first finished. Both were made to be moved by the lever, not to move it. I easily timed the head so as to turn at a quarter-past. I inserted in the neck of the figure like myself a movement which would make the head nod before turning away to go on with the winding. You now see my idea?"

"Not quite clearly. But I suspect it."

"Suppose I had to meet one of my clients about the gold, I should make an appointment with him at a quarter-past twelve in Islington, or Wapping, or Wandsworth, or Twickenham. My clock, at twelve o'clock, slowly raised the figure from the floor to the place in which I sat in my chair, turned up the gas, which had been dimmed to the last glimmer that would live, and then released the weight in the chimney and set the figure moving as if working the lever, instead of the lever working it. Thus you see I should have a dozen to swear they saw me in my room at Chelsea, if anything went wrong in my interviews with my clients, or if from any other cause it became necessary for me to prove I was in my workshop between twelve and half-past twelve at night."

"Very ingenious indeed."

"The night before I met you in Welbeck Place, that is to say Wednesday night, I tried my first figure, the figure of the man unlike me."

"May I ask what was the object of this figure? Why had you one that was not like you?"

"To give emphasis to the figure of myself. I at first intended going into the Hanover on Wednesday and declaring that I had been obliged to employ a deputy in case of anything preventing my being able to attend between twelve and half-past. I had intended spending the half hour the figure was visible in the bar, but I changed my mind. I went to the country instead, and imparted as a secret to the landlord that I was to have a deputy that night, and that he was to keep an eye on him and see he did not shirk his work. I knew Williams could no more keep a secret of that kind than fly. I did not want him to keep it. My motive in cautioning him was merely that he might watch closely, for of course I was most anxious that the delusion should be complete and able to bear the test of strict watching from the private bar. I went down to the country partly to be out of the way and partly for another reason I need not mention."

Hanbury started. The excitement of seeing the place burned out, and meeting the dwarf and listening to his strange tale, had prevented him recollecting the connection between Edith Grace and Leigh. "Go on," said Hanbury, wishing the clockmaker to finish before he introduced the name of Edith.

"There is not much more to tell. Owing to a reason I need not mention, I made up my mind on Thursday morning to go on with the production of Miracle Gold. I resolved against my better judgment, and gave the word for the first lot of the gold to be delivered at my place at midnight exactly. You know how my afternoon was spent. While at Mrs. Ashton's, my better judgment and my worse one had a scuffle, and I made up my mind to decide upon nothing that night, and certainly to commit myself to nothing that night. What you would call the higher influence was at work."

"Pallas-Athena?"

"Yes, if you think that a good name. Any way I made up my mind to do nothing definite in the interest of Miracle Gold that night. I set my dummy figure and left my house at midnight exactly, saw my client and told him I could do nothing for a week. Next day I heard from Williams that I had wound up my clock and nodded at a quarter-past twelve, right time. Last night I went into the Hanover, as you heard Williams say, and passed into my house after speaking a while to a friend in the street. But I did not go upstairs. I went through the house and out into the mews at the back. I was supplied by the landlord with keys for the doors into Chetwynd Street and Welbeck Place, but had not one for the bakehouse door into the mews until I got one made unknown to anyone. Thus the landlord and the people all round to whom I spoke freely would never dream of my going through into the mews. It was my intention they should have a distinct impression I could not do it. Thus I had the use, as it were, of a secret door. When I got into the mews I hastened to Victoria and caught the last train for Millway, the 12.15. I wanted to see my mother about business which I need not mention. I had made up mind to have nothing to do with the Miracle Gold. On my way back to town I called on my client and learned that the place was burnt down and that I was believed to be dead. The latter belief is only a little premature. I am going fast. Is there no cab? I can hardly breathe. Have you seen Miss Ashton since?"

"Since I saw you last?"

"Yes."

"I have."

"Since yesterday afternoon?"

"No."

Leigh gave a sigh of pain and stopped. "I am done," he said. "I can go no further. I shall walk no more."

"Nonsense, you will be all right again. Here is a cab at last, thank goodness!"

"You will come with me. You will not desert me. My confession is over. I shall speak of this matter no more to any man. It was only a temptation, and I absolutely did no wrong. You will not desert me. I am very feeble. I do not know what the matter is with me. I have no strength in my body. I never had much, but the little I had is gone. You will not desert me, Mr. Hanbury. I have only listened to the voice of the tempter. I have not gone the tempter's ways, and mind, I was not tempted by the love of lucre. If I had had a voice, and stature, and figure like yours I might have been able to win fame in the big and open world, as I was I could win it only in the world that is little and occult. Come with me. You promised to be my friend before you heard of my temptation. Are you less inclined to be my friend because I was tempted and resisted the tempter, than if I had never been tempted at all? Get in and come with me. See me under a roof anyway. The next roof that covers me will be the last one I shall lie under over ground."

"I own," said Hanbury, "I was a little staggered at first, but only at first. I am quite willing to go with you. Where shall I tell the man to drive?" Hanbury had assisted Leigh into the cab, and was standing on the flagway.

Leigh gave the address, and the two drove off.

The dwarf's confession had not benefitted his position in Hanbury's mind. The fact that this man had been in communication with a fence, with a view to the disposal of stolen gold, was enough to make the average man shrink from contact with the dwarf. But then Hanbury remembered that the secret had been divulged by the clock-maker in a moment of extreme excitement, and after what to him must have been an enormous calamity. To have been tempted is not to have fallen; but, the temptation resisted, to have risen to heights proportionate to the strength of the temptation, and the degree of self-denial in the resistance of it.

Yet, this was a strange companion, friend, for John Hanbury, the well-known public speaker, a man who had made up his mind to adopt the career of a progressive and reforming politician, the descendant of Stanislaus II. of Poland! Contact with a man who had absolutely entertained the notion of trading in stolen goods was a thing most people would shun. But, then, were most

people right? This man had claimed his good offices, first, because Hanbury was in his power, and now Leigh claimed his good offices, because he was in great affliction and prostration. Certainly Hanbury would be more willing to fall in with Leigh's views now, when he was supplicating, than on Thursday, when he was threatening. Who could withhold sympathy from this deformed, marred, wheezing, halting, sickly-looking man, who had just seen the work of a lifetime swept away for ever?

Then Hanbury remembered he had questions to ask Leigh, and that his motive for keeping with him was not wholly pure. How many motives, of the most impersonal and disinterested, are quite pure?

The young man did not know how exactly to introduce the subject of the Graces, and, for a moment, he hemmed and fidgetted in the cab.

At last he began, "You have not seen Mrs. Grace, since?"

"No; nor shall I ever again."

"Why, you have not quarrelled with her, have you?"

"Quarrelled with her! Not I. But I have explained to you that I am going home, that this is a funeral; my home is not in Grimsby Street. You did not say Grimsby Street to the cabman, I hope?"

"I did not. I gave him 12, Barnes Street, Chelsea. Is not that right?"

"Yes. That's right. No, I am not likely to see Mrs. Grace again. How wonderfully like Miss Ashton Miss Grace is! Oh, I may as well tell you, how I came to know Miss Grace, as she has really been the means of bringing us together as we are to-day. My mother is paralyzed, and I advertised for a companion for her. Miss Grace replied, and I engaged her. I said she should see little of me. But at the time it did not occur to me that I might like to see a great deal of her. I did not explain this before, for the explanation would have interrupted the story of my clock. Well, although you may hardly be able to credit it, I, who had, up to that time, avoided the crowning folly of even thinking of marriage, thought, not quite as calmly as I am speaking now, that I should like to marry a wife, and that I should like to marry her. She was to go to my mother on Wednesday. I was to test my automaton on Wednesday night. I ran down to my mother's place, and was at Eltham when Miss Grace arrived. My appearance there, after saying she should see me little, must have frightened her. I have often heard children call me bogie. At all events, she came back to Town next day. Ran away, is the truth. Ran away from the sight of me, of bogie. If she had staid with my mother, I should have had something to think of besides Miracle Gold. It was upon seeing her and arranging that she was to go to Eltham, that my interest in Miracle Gold began to diminish, and I grew to think that my clock alone would suffice for my fame, and that I might marry and leave London, and live at Eltham. Well, she ran away, as I said, and I came back to London the same day, and made up my mind to go on with Miracle Gold. Then I met you and Miss Ashton, and I went to Curzon Street, and I thought, If Mrs. Ashton will let me come on Thursdays, and breathe another atmosphere, and meet other kinds of people, I still may be able to live without the excitement of Miracle Gold. And so I wavered and wavered, and at last made up my mind to give up the Gold altogether, and now the clock is gone, and I am alone. Quite alone. This is the house. It belongs to Dr. Shaw. He has looked after my health for years, and has promised to let me come here and live with him, when I haven't long to live. I have your address, and you have this one. Will you come to see me again?"

"Indeed I will."

"When--to-morrow? To-morrow will be Sunday."

"Perhaps I may come to-morrow. I shall come as soon as ever I can."

They were standing at the door-step. Leigh had leaned his side against the area-railings for support. His breathing was terrible, and every now and then he gasped, and clutched his hands together.

"If you come, perhaps you may not come alone?"

Hanbury flushed. He did not want to make his confession just now.

"Perhaps I may not," he said. "Good-bye, now."

"Good-bye; and thank you for your goodness. You know whom I hope to see with you?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Pallas-Athena, of course."

"Of course."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FREE.

With a feeling of relief, Hanbury walked rapidly away. The last words of Leigh had stirred within him once more the trouble which had made him shirk meeting his mother that morning. The burning down of Leigh's place and the destruction of the wonderful clock, and the meeting with the unfortunate clockmaker, would afford a story to be told when he got home, and he might interpose that history between the first words of meeting and the ultimate announcement that the engagement between Dora and himself was at an end.

Family considerations or desires had nothing to do with the understanding which had existed between Dora and him; but to his mother, from whom he had no secret, except that of the quarrel on Thursday night, he must explain, and explain fully too. There was no good in putting off the inevitable meeting any longer. He knew his mother had great respect and liking for Dora, but she had had nothing whatever to do with bringing about the understanding between the two of them. They had been quite as free in their choice of one another as though they had been the heroine and hero of a pastoral. He had never been a fool about Dora and she had never been a fool about him. In his life he meant to be no cypher among men; it would never do for him to be a cypher in his own home. Dora and he had acted with great reasonableness throughout their whole acquaintance, and with supreme reasonableness when they agreed to separate. If he had been an ordinary man, a man with no great public career before him, he might have been disposed to yield more to Dora's opinion or judgment; but as matters stood, any man with the smallest trace of common sense must commend Dora's decision of terminating the engagement, and his acceptance of her decision.

When he got back to Chester Square he heard, with great relief, that Mrs. and Miss Grace were at luncheon in the dining-room with Mrs. Hanbury. The presence of the two visitors and the general nature of the conversation necessary to their presence and the meal, would serve as an admirable softener of the story he had for his mother's private ear.

"You see, John, I have succeeded," said Mrs. Hanbury, after greetings were over. "I went the moment breakfast was finished and carried Mrs. and Miss Grace away from that awful Grimsby Street. We have had a good long chat, and, although I have done my best with Mrs. Grace, I cannot induce her to promise not to go back to that murderous street again. I must now ask you to join with me in forbidding her to leave us."

Hanbury spoke in favour of his mother's proposal and urged many arguments; but the old woman was quite firm. Back they must and would go. Why, if no other consideration would be allowed to weigh, there was the fact that her grand-daughter had not yet received her luggage from Eltham House.

This reference brought in Leigh's name, and then Hanbury told of the fire, the destruction of the clock, his meeting that morning with the dwarf, and the conviction of the latter that he would not long survive the destruction of his incomparable machine. He noticed as he went on that Miss Grace first flushed and then paled.

The girl had hardly spoken up to this. She sat silent and timid. She did not seem to hear quickly or to apprehend accurately. She had hesitated in her answers like one afraid. The table was small, and laid for four people. Hanbury sat opposite his mother, Edith opposite her grandmother. The heat was intense.

There was a buzzing and beating in the girl's ears. She heard as through a sound of plashing water. The talk of Leigh had carried her mind back to the country, back to Millway and Eltham House, and to the unexpected and unwelcome and disquieting apparition of the dwarf at the door of the house when she arrived there.

Through this strange noise of splashing water she heard in a low far-away voice the story of her fear and loneliness and desolation on that Wednesday, separated from her old home and the familiar streets, and the sustaining companionship of her old grandmother, who had been all the world to her. She heard this story chanted, intoned in this low, monotonous voice, and she had a dim feeling that all was changed, and that she was now environed by securities through which she could not be assailed by the attentions of that strange, ill-featured dwarf.

But her sight was very dim, and she could not see anything clearly or recollect exactly where she was. Gradually her sight cleared a little, and she was under trees heavy with leaves, alone on a lonely road by night. The rain fell unseen through the mute warm air. A thick perfume of roses made the air heavy with richness. She felt her breath come short, as though she had walked fast or run. The air was too rich to freshen life to cool the fevered blood.

Now she became dimly conscious of some sound other than the plashing of water. It was not the voice, for the voice had ceased. The sound was loud and distinct, and emphatic and tumultuous.

All at once she remembered what that sound was. She hastily put one hand to her left side, and the other to her forehead and rose, swaying softly to and fro.

"I--I----" she whispered, but could say no more.

Hanbury caught her, or she would have fallen. The two ladies got up.

"She is not well," said the old woman excitedly. "She has eaten nothing for days!"

The girl reclined, cold and pale as marble, in the young man's arms. Her eyes were half closed, her lips half open.

He half led her half lifted her to a couch. Restoratives such as stood at hand were applied, but she did not quite recover. She was not exactly unconscious. This was no ordinary faint.

The women were terrified. Mrs. Grace had never seen her in any such state before. To her knowledge the girl had never fainted.

The ladies were terrified, and Hanbury ran off for a doctor. When he came back, the girl had been got upstairs. She was still in the same state, not quite conscious, and not quite insensible.

The doctor made a long examination, and heard all that was to be told. When he came down to the dining-room, where Hanbury was excitedly walking up and down, he said the case was serious, but not exactly dangerous, that is, the patient's life was in no imminent peril. She had simply been overwrought and weakened by want of food, and jarred by suppressed and contending emotions. There was no organic disease, but the heart had been functionally affected by the vicissitudes of the past few days acting on an organism of exquisite sensibility. Quiet was the best medicine, and after quiet, careful strengthening, and then the drugs mentioned in this prescription. But above all, quiet.

Could she be moved? Mrs. Grace asked.

By no means. Moving might not bring about a fatal termination, but it would most assuredly enhance her danger, and most certainly retard her recovery.

Would she recover?

There was no reason to fear she would not. All was sound, but much was weak. Her anxiety of mind, and the excitement of going to that uncongenial home, and the long walk the morning she left, and the lack of food had weakened her much, but nothing had given way or was in immediate peril of giving way, and with care and quiet all would be well.

And when this was passed would she be quite well again?

Yes. In all possible likelihood under Heaven, quite well again.

It would leave no blemish in her life? No weak place? She would be as well as ever?

Well, that was asking a doctor to say a great deal, but it was probable, highly probable, she would be quite as well as if this had never happened. The key to her recovery lay in the one word, Quiet. After quiet came careful nurture and, a long way from the second of these, drugs. But recollect, Quiet.

Hanbury took up the prescription and hastened off with it.

The poor girl so sensitive and fragile! It was a mercy this illness came upon her here. How would it have fared with her down in that lonely Eltham House to which she had taken such a dislike? Why, it would have killed her.

What an exquisite creature she was, and so soft and gentle in her ways. It was fortunate this illness had not overtaken her in Eltham House, or in Grimsby Street, for that matter, because the street was detestable, and to be ill in lodgings must be much worse than to be ill in a public hospital, for in hospital there was every appliance and attendance, and in lodgings only noise, and bustle, and grumbling. It was dreadful to think of being sick in lodgings. And now Mrs. Grace and her grand-daughter were poor.

How horrible it would be to think of this girl lying stricken in that other house, and requiring first of all quiet, and then cherishing, and being able to get neither! It was dreadful to picture

such things. And fancy, if these poor ladies had not enough money for a good doctor and what the poor weak child wanted! Fancy if they could not pay their rent and were obliged to leave. Oh! how fortunate it was he had come across them so soon, and how strange to think that Leigh had been the means of first bringing them together. He owed that good turn to Leigh.

On his way back from the druggist he reverted to the past of Leigh:

"Yes, I owed the introduction to him. I freely forgive him now. Indeed, I don't know what I have to forgive him of. He did not send or write that paragraph to the papers. He did not even write it, as far as I know, and although he was rough and rude, and levied a kind of blackmail on me, the price he asked me was not disgraceful from his point of view. If I had met him under happy circumstances, I might have brought him to a Thursday at Curzon Street. He was interesting, with his alchemy and clock and omniscience and insolence and intellectual swagger. Of course, I did not at the time know he was in treaty with a fence. According to his own account he never committed himself in that quarter, and as he had no need to tell me of that transaction at all, I daresay he kept pretty near the truth. How strange that when he lost his clock, he must straightway get a confidant! I wonder is there any truth in his own prophecy about his health?

"He, too, was the means of breaking off the Curzon Street affair. I must write there at once. I have behaved badly in not doing so before. I'll write the moment I get home. Yes, I must write when I get back, and then I'll put the affair out of my mind altogether, for good and ever."

Upon getting to the house, he went to the library and read over Dora Ashton's letter once more, slowly. He gathered no new impression from this second reading. Her resolution to put an end to the engagement seemed to him more strong than at first. That was the only change he noticed in the effect of the letter upon him. It was as cool and business-like and complete as could be. He was too much of a gentleman to give expression in his mind to any fault-finding with the woman to whom he had been engaged, and whom he had behaved so badly towards the other evening, but it seemed quite certain to him now that Dora Ashton was a girl of great cleverness and good sense and beauty--but no heart.

He did not at all like the task before him, but it must be done. When the letter was finished, it ran:

"My Dear Miss Ashton,

"I got your letter. It was very good of you to write to me in so kind and unrepublishing a spirit, and I thank you with all my heart for your merciful forbearance. My conduct, my violence on Thursday evening, must always be a sorrow and a mystery to me. I only indistinctly recollect what I said, but I feel and know my words were perfectly monstrous and cruelly unjust. I feel most bitterly that no apology of mine can obliterate the impression my insanity must have made on you. To say I am profoundly sorry is only to say that I am once more in my right mind. I must in the most complete and abject manner beg your pardon for my shameful violence on Thursday evening. I must not even try to explain that violence away. I ask your pardon as an expression of my own horror of my conduct and of my remorse. But I do not hope for your forgiveness, I do not deserve it, I will not accept it. I shall bear with me in expiation of my offence the consciousness of my unpardonable conduct, and the knowledge that it remains unpardoned. Even lenity could ask no more indulgent treatment of my monstrous behaviour.

"As to terminating the engagement between us I have nothing to do but accept your decision, and since you ask it as a favour, the only favour you ever asked of me, I must receive your decision as irrevocable. I will not make any unpleasantness here by even referring to the difference of the ending I had in the hope of my mind. As you very justly say, the least said now the better. I shall say not a word to anyone about the immediate subject of this letter except to my mother. On that you may rely. I must tell her. You, I suppose, will inform Mrs. and Mr. Ashton (if they do not know of it); nobody else need hear of the abandonment of our designs. Let us by all means meet as you suggest, as though we never had been more than the best of friends, and were (as I hope we shall be) the best of friends still. I also quite agree with you about the notes, &c. Burn and destroy them. I will most scrupulously burn your letters, of which I have a few. This letter will I suppose be the last of the series.

"In a little time I trust we may meet again, but not just now for both our sakes.

"Yours ever most sincerely,

"JOHN HANBURY."

When he had finished the letter he closed it without reading it over. "When one reads over a letter like this," he thought, "one grows nice about phrases and tries to alter, and finally tears up. I am satisfied that if I tried all day long I should do no better than this. I shall post it myself when I go out. That letter is a great weight off my mind, and now I am much less disinclined to break the matter to my mother. When that is over I shall feel that I am free."

He found his mother alone in her own room. Mrs. Grace was with Edith in a room which had been hastily prepared for her.

"She is just the same way," said Mrs. Hanbury. The young man had heard from a servant downstairs that there was no change. "We are not to expect much change for a while. She has quite recovered consciousness, but is very weak, and the doctor says she is not to be allowed to stir even a hand more than is necessary. There is no anxiety. With time and care all will be well."

"I am glad I found you alone, mother. I think you must have seen that I have been a good deal excited during the past few days."

"Yes, and very naturally too. That letter must have disturbed you a good deal."

The son paused in his walk and stared at her. "How did you know about that letter? Who told you? Have you seen Dora? But that is absurd. She would not speak of it."

Mrs. Hanbury looked at him in amazement and alarm. "What do you mean, John? You make me very uneasy. What has Dora Ashton to do with it? Miss Grace may, but not Dora. Surely you do not suppose I did not read your father's letter?"

"Oh!" he cried, "I did not mean my father's letter. I was referring to another letter. Upon reflection I quite agree with you and my father in attaching little or no importance to that discovery. I was thinking of a letter I had from Dora."

"Yes," said Mrs. Hanbury with a sigh of relief. For a moment she thought her son's head had been turned by the disclosure of his pedigree. "What does she say?"

He was walking up and down rapidly now. "Well, the fact is, mother, the thing is off."

"Off?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the thing is over between us, the engagement, you know. The fact is we had a scene on Thursday evening. I lost command of myself completely, and used very violent language----"

"To Dora!" cried the mother in bewilderment.

"Yes, to Dora. I don't know what came over me, but I was carried quite beyond myself and said things no gentleman, no man, ought to say to any girl----"

"John, I don't believe you--you are under some strange and miserable hallucination. You said something to Dora Ashton that no man ought to say to any girl! Impossible! Thank God, I know my son better than to believe anything of the kind," said Mrs. Hanbury, beginning in a manner of incredulity and ending in firm conviction.

"Unfortunately mother it is only too true. I need not repeat what passed, but the dispute----"

"Dispute--dispute with Dora! Why she would not dispute with you! How could she dispute with you? Dispute with you! It is nonsense. Why the girl loves you, John, the girl loves you. It is lunacy to say it!"

"I may have used an unhappy word----"

"A completely meaningless word, I assure you."

"At all events, we differed in opinion, and I completely lost my temper and told her in the end that in certain cases of importance she might betray me."

"Oh, this is too bad! I will not sit and listen to this raving. You never said such a childishly cruel thing to Dora Ashton? She is the noblest girl I know. The noblest girl I ever met."

"I was mad, mother."

"Most wickedly mad."

"Well you do not know how sorry I am I allowed myself to be carried away. But that cannot be helped now. I must abide the consequence of my folly and madness. She has broken off the engagement, for we were engaged, and I have written saying I cannot disapprove of her decision. We have agreed that as no one has known anything of the engagement no one is to hear of its being broken off. Are you angry with me, mother?"

"Angry--no; but greatly disappointed. I was as happy in thinking of Dora as your wife as if she were my own daughter, but I suppose I must become reconciled. If you and she have agreed to part no one has any right to say more than that it is a pity, and I think it is a pity, and I am very sorry."

That was the end of the interview of which the young man had stood in such dread, and now that it was over and he was going to post his last letter to Dora he felt relieved. The news had doubtless greatly surprised and shocked his mother, but this meeting had not been nearly so distressing as he had anticipated.

When he came to the post pillar into which he had dropped most of the letters he had written to Curzon Street, he felt an ugly twinge as this one slid from his fingers and he turned away--free.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

DOCTOR SHAW'S VERDICT.

Dr. Shaw, at whose house door Hanbury had left Oscar Leigh, was a fresh-coloured, light haired, baldheaded, energetic man of about fifty-five. He was always in a state of astonishment, and the spectacles he wore over his green grey eyes seemed ever on the point of being thrust forward out of their position by the large round prominent dancing eyes of their wearer. He was a bachelor and had a poor practice, but one which he preferred to hold in undisputed ownership, rather than increase at the sacrifice of liberty in taking a wife.

He had just come back from his round of morning visits and was sitting down to his simple early dinner, as Leigh knocked. When he heard who the visitor was he rose instantly and went into the small bare surgery, the front ground-floor room.

"Bless my soul, Mr. Leigh, what's the matter?"

Leigh was sitting in a wooden elbow chair breathing heavily, noisily, irregularly. "I have come," he said in gasps and snatches, "I have come to die."

"Eh! Bless my soul, what are you saying?" cried the doctor approaching the clockmaker so as to get the light upon his own back.

"I have come to die, I tell you."

"But that is an opinion, and it is I that am to give the opinion--not you. You are to state the facts, I am to lay down the law. What's the matter?"

"In this case, I am judge and jury. The facts and the law are all against me. I have had another seizure a few minutes ago," he laid his hand on his chest. "In the excitement I kept up, but I know 'tis all over. You will remember your promise about the quicklime. I never let anyone pry into the machinery of my clock, and I won't have any foolish young jackanapes prying into the works of this old carcase. You will fill up the box with quicklime?"

"Not yet anyway. What happened. Where do you feel queer?"

Leigh pointed to his chest a little at the left of the middle line.

"Shock?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"My clock, the work of seven years, has been burned, destroyed."

"Burned! That was hard. I'm very sorry to hear it. We'll have your coat off. Yes, I'll lock the door. You need not be afraid. No one comes at this time. Yes, I'll pull the blind down too. Stand up.... That will do. Put on your coat. Let me help you. Drink this. Sit down now and rest yourself."

"Rest myself? Rest myself! After standing for that half a minute?"

"Yes."

"Did I not tell you facts and law were against me?"

"You are not well."

"I am dying."

"You are very ill."

"I had better go to bed?"

"You would be more rested there."

"Would it be safe for me to go to Millway, about sixty miles?"

"No."

"How long do you think I shall last?"

"It is quite impossible to say."

"Hours?"

"Oh, yes."

"Days?"

"Yes."

"Weeks?"

"With care."

"Months?"

"The best thing you can do now is to go to bed. I'll see the room got ready. You feel very weak, weaker even than when you came in here."

"I feel I cannot walk."

"The excitement has kept you up so far. You are now suffering from reaction. After you have rested a while you will be better."

"Very good. Shaw, will you send for your solicitor, I want to make my will."

The doctor left the surgery for a few minutes to give the necessary orders about the room for Leigh and to send for the solicitor. Half an hour ago he had felt very hungry, and when the clockmaker knocked he had been thinking of nothing but his dinner. His dinner still lay untasted. He had forgotten all about it. He was the most kind-hearted of men, and the sight of Leigh in his present condition, and the fatal story he had heard through the stethoscope had filled him with pity and solicitude.

"The room will be ready in a few minutes," he said, in a cheerful voice and with an encouraging smile, when he again came into the surgery. "We shall try to make you as comfortable as ever we can. I am sorry for your sake I haven't a wife to look after you."

"If you had a wife I shouldn't be here."

"What! You! Why, that is the only ungallant thing I ever heard you say in all my life."

"I should envy you and be jealous of you."

"Then, my dear fellow, I am very glad we are by ourselves. I suppose your mother would not like to come up to nurse you?"

"She cannot move about now, except in her wheeled chair."

"Is there anyone you would wish to come to see you? This house you will, of course, consider as your own."

"Thank you, there is no one. I do not know anyone in the world, except my mother, so long as I know you. The only friend likely to call I saw to-day. There is no need for me to send for him to-day, is there?"

"Need, no. You will be much better when you have rested a while. You know cheerful company is always very useful to us doctors, and we like to have all the help we can. But I daresay we shall get on famously as we are." He would like to have heard all about the fire and the destruction of the clock, but he refrained from asking because he feared the excitement for his patient.

It happened that Dr. Shaw's solicitor lived near, and was at home, so that he came back with the boy before the room was ready. Shaw withdrew from the surgery, and for half-an-hour the lawyer and the clockmaker were alone. Then Leigh was carried upstairs and went to bed, and felt, as Shaw said he would, better and easier for lying down.

"I have no trouble on my mind now, Shaw, and my body cannot be a trouble to me or anybody else long. I never say thanks or make pretty speeches, but I am not ungrateful all the same. I don't think we have ever shaken hands yet, Shaw. Will you shake hands now?"

"With the greatest pleasure, my dear fellow," said Shaw, grasping the hand of the little man, and displaying his greatest pleasure by allowing his large dancing green-grey eyes to fill up with tears behind his unemotional spectacles.

"That clock would have made my fame. I don't know how the fire arose. I had the clock wound up last night by a mechanical contrivance, and before leaving for Millway I lit the faintest glimmer of gas. Some accident must have happened. Some accident which can now never be explained. I left the window open for the first time last night. I had put up a curtain for the first time last night. If any boy had thrown a stone, and the stone got through the curtain, there is no knowing what it might not do among the machinery; the works were so close and complicated, it might have brought something inflammable within reach of the flame of the gas, for the gas would not be quite out. At all events, the clock is gone. It was getting too much for me. Often of late, when I was away from it, the movements became reversed, and all the works went backwards, and I often thought that kind of thing would injure my brain."

"It was a sure sign injury was beginning, and I think it is a good thing for you the clock is burned," said Shaw soothingly.

"But the shock! The shock you will say, by-and-by, killed me. How, then, do you count the loss of the clock good?"

"I mean if you had told me there was no way of stopping this involuntary reversal of the movement I should have advised you to smash the clock rather than risk the brain."

"And I should have declined to take your advice."

Shaw laughed. "You would not be singular in that. I can get ten people to take my medicines for one who will take my advice."

"What an awful mortality there would be, Shaw, if people took both!"

"There now," said Shaw, with another laugh, "you will do now. You are your old self again. I must run away. I shall see you in an hour or two, and have my tea up here with you. If you want anything, ring."

So Leigh was left alone.

"The clothes," he thought, "of the figure must have in some way or other come in contact with the gas-jet. If they once caught fire the wax would burn--the wax of the head, and then there would be plenty of material for a blaze.

"Ah, me; the clock is gone! Even if that survived, I should not mind. I was so jealous of it. I never let anyone examine it, and the things it could do will not be credited when I am dead, for I often, very often, exaggerated, and even invented, a little.

"Ay, ay, ay, the clock is gone, and the Miracle Gold, too. I am glad I never had anything really to do with it. I am sorry I was not always of the mind I was yesterday--my last day at my bench. All the time I was burying in my own grave my own small capital of life, I was missing the real gold of existence. I sought to build up fame in my clock and in that gold. Fame is for the dead. What are the dead to us? What shall I be when they bury me to myself, who walked in the sunlight and saw the trees and the flowers, and the clouds and the sea, where there were no men to remind me of my own unshapeliness? Nothing. Why should a man care for fame among people he has never seen, among the dim myriads of faces yet to come out of the womb of time, when he could have had an abiding place in the heart's angle among those whom he knows and whose hands he can touch? What good to us will the voices of the strange men of the hereafter be? What a fool I was to think of buying the applause of strange, unborn men out of gold rent from living men, whose friend I might have been.

"I told Hanbury I was making a dying confession to him. I suppose this is a death-bed repentance. Very well. But I sinned only in thought. In order to show other men I was better than they, I was willing to be worse. Shaw is right. I am much easier here. I feel rested. I feel quiet. I have really done nothing harmful to any man. It will be a relief to get out of this husk. I will try to sleep. My poor old mother! But we cannot be separated long. It is easier to die in a body like this than to live in it."

He was very weak, and life fluttered feebly in his veins. He closed his eyes and ceased to think. The calm that comes with the knowledge that one is near the end was upon him. He did not think, he did not sleep. He lay simply gathering quiet for the great sleep. He was learning how to rest, how to lie still, how to want not, how to wait the sliding aside of the mysterious panel that the flesh keeps shut against the eyes of the spirit while the two are partners in life.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

PATIENT AND NURSE.

Mrs. Hanbury was greatly shocked by the news her son had given her that day about his relations with Dora. She had a conviction that it would be to John's advantage to be married. She held that, all other things being reasonably taken care of, a young man of twenty-six ought to marry and settle down to face the world in the relations and surroundings which would govern the remainder of his life. There had never been any consideration of John's sowing wild oats. He had always been studious, serious, domestic. He was the very man to marry and, in the cheerful phrase of the story book, live happy ever after.

And where could he find a wife better suited to him than in Curzon Street? Dora had every single quality a most exacting mother could desire in the wife of an only son, and Mrs. Hanbury was anything but an exacting mother. Dora's family was excellent. She was one of the most beautiful girls in London, she was extremely clever, and although she and he did not seem fully in accord in their views of some things, they agreed in the main. She was extremely clever and accomplished, and amiable, and by-and-by she should be rich. In fact, Mrs. Hanbury might have doubled this list without nearly exhausting the advantages possessed by Miss Ashton, and now it was all over between the pair. This really was too bad.

She idolized her son, and thought there were few such good young men in the world; but she was no fool about him. She had watched his growth with yearning interest from infancy to this day. She knew as well, perhaps better than anyone, that he was not perfect. She knew he was too enthusiastic, that sometimes his temper was not to be relied on. She knew he was haughty, and at rare times even scornful. She knew he had no mean estimate of his own merits, and was restive under control. But what were these faults? Surely nothing to affright any gentle and skilful woman from uniting herself with him for life. Most of his faults were those of youth and inexperience. When he was properly launched, and met other men and measured himself against them, much of his haughty self-satisfaction would disappear. Most young men who had anything in them were discontented, for they had only vague premonitions of their powers, and they felt aggrieved that the world would not take them on their own mere word at their own estimate.

What Mr. and Mrs. Ashton would say she could not fancy. Perhaps they would imitate for once the example of younger people, and say nothing at all. They could not, however, help thinking of the matter, and they would be sure to form no favourable estimate of John's conduct in the affair. The rest of the world would be certain to say that John jilted the girl, and anyone who heard the true history of the Hanbury family, just come to light, would say that John kept back in the hope of making a more ambitious marriage.

He was, every one allowed, one of the most promising young men in England, and now the glamour of a throne was around him. All the philosophy in the world would not make him ever again the plain John Hanbury he was in the eyes of people a few days ago, in the eyes of every one outside this house still. Stanislaus II. may have been everything that was weak and contemptible, and been one of the chief reasons why his unfortunate country disappeared from the political map of the world, but John Hanbury was the descendant of King Stanislaus II. of Poland, and if that monarchy had been hereditary and the kingdom still existed, her son would be the legal sovereign, in spite of all the Republicans and revilers in Europe.

She herself set no store by these remote and shadowy kingly honours, but even in her own heart she felt a swelling of pride when she thought that the child she had borne and reared was the descendant of a king. A pretender to the throne of England would be put in a padded room and treated with indulgent humanity. But on the Continent it was not so. Sometimes they put him in prison, and sometimes they put him on the throne he claimed. She knew that her son would no more think of laying stress upon his descent from the Poniatowskis than of asking to be put in that padded room. But others would think of it and set value on it. Exclusive doors might be closed against the clever speaker, plain John Hanbury, son of an English gentleman, who for whim or greed went into trade, when he was rich enough to live without trade; but few doors would be closed against the gifted orator who was straight in descent and of the elder line of the Poniatowskis of Lithuania, and whose great grandfather's grandfather was the last King of Poland.

After all, upon looking more closely at the affair, the discovery was of some value. No one now could think him over ambitious for his years if he offered himself for Parliament. Younger men than he, sons of peers, got into Parliament merely by reason of a birth not nearly so illustrious as

his, and with abilities it would be unfair to them to estimate against his.

There was something in it after all.

If now he chose to marry high, whom might he not marry? Putting out of view that corrupt, that forced election to the throne of Poland, he was a Poniatowski, _the_ Poniatowski, and few English families of to-day could show such a pedigree as her son's.

There was certainly no family in England that could refuse an alliance with him on account of birth.

And now vicious people would say he had been guilty, of the intolerable meanness of giving up Dora Ashton either in order that he might satisfy his ambition by a more distinguished marriage, or that he might be the freer to direct his public career towards some lofty goal. She knew her son too well to fancy for a moment any such unworthy thought could find a home in his breast; but all the world did not know him as she did, and no one would believe that the breaking-off came from Dora and the cause of it arose before the discovery of Stanislaus' secret English marriage.

When the doctor made his second visit, he pronounced Edith Grace progressing favourably. She was then fully conscious, but pitifully weak. There was not, the doctor said, the least cause for uneasiness so long as the patient was kept quite free from excitement, from even noise. A rude and racking noise might induce another period of semi-insensibility. Quiet, quiet, quiet was the watchword, and so he went away.

Mrs. Grace had protested against a hired nurse. She herself should sit up at night, and in the daytime the child would need no attendance. Mrs. Grace had, however, to go back to their lodgings to fetch some things needed, and to intimate that they were not returning for the present. Mrs. Hanbury volunteered to sit in Edith's room while the old woman was away. Protests were raised against this, but the hostess carried her point. "I told you," she said, with a smile, "that I am very positive. Let this be proof and a specimen."

So the old lady hastened off, and Mrs. Hanbury sat down to watch at the bedside of the young girl. Speaking was strictly forbidden. Mrs. Hanbury took a book to beguile the time, and sat with her face to the patient, so that she could see that all was right by merely lifting her eyes.

The young girl lay perfectly still, with her long dark hair spread out upon the pillow for coolness, and her white face lying in the midst of it as white as the linen of the sheet. Her breathing was very faint, the slight heaving of her breast barely moving the light counterpane. The lips were slightly open, and the eyes closed.

Edith was too weary and too weak to think. Before she had the fainting fit or attack of weakness (she had not quite fainted), she heard the story of the dwarfs misfortunes in a confused way through that sound of plashing water. She was quite content now to lie secure here without thought, in so far as thought is the result of voluntary mental act or the subject of successive processes. But the whole time she kept saying to herself in a way that did not weary her, "How strange that Leigh should lose everything and I gain so much, and that both should be lying ill, all in so short a time!" This went on in her mind over and over again, more like the sound of a melody that does not distress one and may be listened to or not at will, than an inherent suggestion of the brain. It was the result of the last strong effort of the brain at memory blending with the first awakening to full consciousness. "How strange that Leigh should lose everything and I gain so much, and that both should be lying ill in so short a time!"

Mrs. Hanbury raised her eyes from her book and gazed at the pallid face in the sea of dark hair. "She might be asleep or dead. How exquisitely beautiful she is, and how like Dora. How very like Dora, but she is more beautiful even than Dora. Dora owes a great deal to her trace of colour and her animation. This face is the most lovely one I ever saw, I think. How gentle she looks! I wonder was Kate Grace that Poniatowski married like her. If so I do not wonder. Who could help loving so exquisite a creature as this?"

Both of the girl's hands were stretched outside the counterpane.

Mrs. Hanbury leaned forward, bent and kissed the one near her, kissed it ever so lightly.

The lids of the girl trembled slightly but did not open.

Mrs. Hanbury drew back afraid. She had perhaps awakened her.

Gradually something began to shine at the end of the long lashes, and a tear rolled down the sweet young pale face.

"Have I awakened you?"

"No. I was awake."

"Are you in pain?"

"No. Oh, no!

"You are weeping."

"That," she moved slightly the hand Mrs. Hanbury had kissed, "that made me, oh, so happy."

"Thank you, dear."

No more words were uttered, but when Mrs. Hanbury looked down upon her book her own eyes were full.

The touch of the lips upon that hand had brought more quiet into the girl's heart than all the muffling in the house or the whispered orders to the servants or the doctor's drugs.

"She believed I was asleep and she kissed my hand," thought the girl. No quiet such as this had ever entered her bosom before.

CHAPTER XL.

THE TWO PATIENTS.

Day followed day in Chester Square, bringing slowly, almost imperceptibly, health and strength back to the exquisite form of Edith Grace. The spirituality lent by illness still more refined the delicate beauty of the girl, and when the colour came back to the lips, and the cheeks lost their pallor she seemed more like a being new-born of heaven to earth than a mortal of our homely race.

At the end of a week she was still restricted to her room, although allowed to sit up. The fear was not so much of physical weakness as of mental excitement. There was now no need to watch her by night. She seemed in perfect health, in that cool seraphic health of man before the Fall.

And what a change had taken place in the young girl's spirit! Her grandmother had told her that Mrs. Hanbury had insisted on making good the loss they had sustained in the failure of the bank, and more beside.

"I am very rich," said Mrs. Hanbury, "for a woman, I have only a life interest in most of the money my late husband left, and on my death it all goes to John. But I have never spent anything like my income, and John has an income of his own since he came of age. It is not that I will listen to no refusal, but I will hear no objection. I put it to you in this way: Do you suppose if my husband were making his will at this moment and knew of the misfortune which had come upon you and the child, he would insert no provision for you in his will? And do you mean to say that I am to have no regard to what I know would be his wish if he were alive? Remember, you represent the English side of his house. The child is the last of the English side, as John is the last of the Polish side. So let me hear no more of the matter. John has a sufficient income. I have large savings with which I do nothing. Am I to give my savings to an hospital or a charity or to the people of my husband, who left the money?"

Then Mrs. Grace told Edith that Mrs. Hanbury had taken a great liking to her.

"She always calls you 'the child' when she speaks of you, and indeed it seems to me she cares for you nearly as much as if you were her own daughter. She told me she never had a sister or a daughter, and that she barely remembers her own mother, and that all her married life she prayed for a girl-baby, but it was not given to her. And now that she has found you, dear, and me, she says she is not going to be lonely for womenfolk ever again, for although we are not of her own blood we are of John's, and we are the nearest people in the world to her except her brother, Sir Edward Preston. She says she has a right to us, that she found us, and means to insist upon her right by keeping us to herself."

And all this helped to make the quiet greater in the girl and helped to heal her.

Then the old woman told Edith that Mrs. Hanbury wondered if she were like that Grace of more than a hundred years back. She said this at dinner one day, and there and then Mr. Hanbury conceived the notion of trying to find out if, in that great portrait-painting age, any portrait had been painted of the beautiful Kate Grace who had fascinated the king. Mrs. Grace always spoke of Poniatowski as though he were a king while he lived in England in the days of George II.

The young man hunted all London to find out a portrait, and behold in one of the great houses within a mile of where she lay, a house at which Mr. Hanbury had often visited, was a portrait of "Mrs. Hanbury and child," believed to be one of the Hanbury-Williams family. Mr. John Hanbury had gone to see the portrait, and came back saying one would fancy it was a portrait of Edy herself, only it was not nearly so beautiful as Edy.

This all helped to cheer and heal the girl greatly. The notion that this Mr. John Hanbury had gone to a great house to see the portrait of her relative, the beautiful Kate Grace, that married the man afterwards a king, opened up fields for speculation and regions of dreams so different from those possible when she was fronting decaying fortune in Miss Graham's, at Streatham, or face to face with poverty in Grimsby Street, that it was enough to pour vital strength into veins less young and naturally healthy.

She now breathed an atmosphere of refinement and wealth. Her mind was no longer tortured by the thought of having to face uncongenial duties among strange people. She had all her life denied herself friendships, because she could not hope for friends in the class of people whom she would care to know.

Now all this was changed, as by a magician's wand. If in the old days she might have had the assurance of Mrs. Hanbury's friendship, she would have allowed her heart to go out to her, for Mrs. Hanbury, although she was rich, did not think of money as those girls Edith met at Streatham. The girls she met were, first of all, the daughters of rich fathers, and then they were people of importance next. Mrs. Hanbury was, first of all, intensely human. She was a woman first of all, and a generous, kind-hearted, large-natured, sympathetic woman. As her son had said of her, the greatest-hearted woman in the world. Princes and peasants were, to her mind, men, before anything else.

This was a revelation to Dora, who had always heard men measured by the establishment they kept up, and the society in which they moved. There had been only one retreat for her from feeling belittled in the presence of these plutocrats. She would set all store by pedigree, and make no friends. A beggar may have a pedigree equal to a Hapsburg, and a peasant who has no friends, and goes into no society, cannot have his poverty impressed upon him from without, however bitterly he may suffer from within.

And this Mrs. Hanbury, who was so kind and gentle, and who had manifested such an interest in her, belonged to a class of society in which no girl she ever met at Miss Graham's moved, in which any girl she had ever met there would give anything she possessed to move. Mrs. Hanbury's father had been a baronet, and her forefathers before him as far as baronets reached back into history, and her father's family had been county people, back to the Conquest, if not beyond it.

And Mr. Hanbury, who was the son of this woman, had a pedigree more illustrious still, a pedigree going back no one knew how far. The family had been ennobled for centuries, and in the eighteenth century one of them had sat on the throne of Poland, a crowned king.

She was now under the roof of these people, not as the humble paid companion of Mrs. Hanbury, which would have been the greatest height of her hope a week ago, not as an acquaintance to whom Mrs. Hanbury had taken a liking, but as a relative, as a distant relative of this house, as one of this family!

Oh, it was such a relief, such a deliverance to be lifted out of that vulgar and squalid life, to be away from that odious necessity for going among strange and dull people as a hired servant! There was no tale in all the Arabian Nights equal to this for wonders, and all this was true, and referred to her!

Youth, and a mind to which are opening new and delightful vistas, are more help to the doctor when dealing with a patient who is only overworn than even quiet, and day by day, to the joy of all who came near her, Edith Grace gained strength. The old stateliness which had made her schoolfellows say she ought to be a queen, had faded, and left scarcely a trace behind. There was no need to wear an air of reserve, when there was nothing to be guarded against. She was Mrs. Hanbury's relative, and to be reserved now would seem to be elated or vain. There was no longer fear of anyone disputing her position. There was no longer any danger of exasperating familiarity. She was acknowledged by Mrs. Hanbury and Mr. Hanbury, who would be a nobleman in Poland, and whose forefather had been a king.

She did not try or desire to look into the future, her own future. The present was too blessed a deliverance to be put aside. Up to this there had been no delightful present in her life, and she was loath to go beyond the immediate peace.

While the young girl was slowly but surely mending in Chester Square, the invalid under the care of Dr. Shaw, of Barnes Street, not very far off, was slowly yielding to the summons he had received. The kind-hearted and energetic doctor saw no reason to alter his original opinion of the case. The end was approaching, and not very far off. On the fifth day after the morning examination, Shaw said, "You arranged everything with the solicitor? There is nothing on your mind, my dear friend?"

"I understand," said Leigh. "How long have I?"

"Oh, I only wanted to know if your mind was at rest. Anxiety is always to be avoided."

"I tell you, Shaw, I understand. How long do you think this will last?"

"My dear fellow, if all your affairs are in order, and your mind is quite free, your chance is improved, you know. That only stands to reason."

"I am sorry I cannot go to Eltham. But that cannot be helped now. She, poor thing, will notice little change, for I have not been with her much of late. Shaw, the last time I was there I promised her a daughter-in-law, and straight-backed grandchildren, and soon she will not have even a cripple son! Poor old woman. Well! well! But, Shaw, send to Chester Square for my friend, Mr. John Hanbury, the man who brought me here, you know. I want to see him alone, privately. He is the only person who knows all my affairs." There was a flicker of the old boasting spirit in the way he gave Hanbury's name and address, and spoke of him as his friend.

Hanbury came at once.

"I sent for you because I have something on my mind; and, as you are the only man who knows all the secret of Mystery Gold, and my deputy winder, I want you to do me a service. Will you?"

"Any thing that an honest and honourable man may do, I will do for you with pleasure, if I can possibly," said Hanbury, shocked and subdued by the change in the clock-maker's appearance.

"That man, Timmons, who was to get me the gold, has a place in Tunbridge Street, London Road, across the river. He believes that a man was burned in that fire. He believes my deputy winder lost his life in the miserable fire that destroyed my clock. Go to Timmons, and tell him that no one was lost in that fire, that the winder of the clock is alive, that I am dying, and that the best thing he can do is to leave the country. He will understand, when I am dead, no secrets will be kept. I do not want to give him up. I have no conscience. But the country may as well be rid of him and me together."

"But, need I go? Can I not send?" asked Hanbury, not liking the idea of such a message from such a man to such a man. It looked like shielding a criminal. Leigh had, according to his own account, coquetted with crime, but kept clear of it.

"No, it would not be nearly so good to me, for you know the secrets, and if he showed any disposition to rebel, you could drop a word that would convince him you were authorized by me, and knew what might be dangerous to him."

"You are asking me too much. I cannot do it."

"Where is your promise of a moment ago?"

"No honest man would assist the escape of this thief."

"Hush! Let me think awhile."

"It is not clear to me, that I ought not to give this villain up to the police, and that you are not bound to give him up. I would do anything I could, in reason, for you; but is it reasonable to ask me to carry a message from you to a man who, you tell me, or hint to me, is a thief, or receiver of stolen goods?"

"I did not regard it in that way. I fancied you would like to rid the country of such a man."

"Yes, by locking him up. I think you are in duty bound to denounce him."

"But, in honour, I am bound not; and honour is more binding on a man than any law."

"But you cannot have any honourable bond with a man like that."

"What about honour among thieves? Even they recognize honour."

"But, are you a thief, that you want to shield yourself under their code?"

"No. I am no thief. I haven't a penny that isn't fairly mine. I told you I have no conscience, at least nothing that people are accustomed to call conscience; but do you think honour does not bind a man to a thief?"

"Surely not about the fruits of his theft."

"I have not looked at it in that way. When a man has no conscience, what binds him?"

"Nothing, except the law of the land, or handcuffs."

"Ah, that is your view. Well, it is not mine. Of course, I have not given you the man's real name or address. I gave you merely a fictitious name and address. Whom did I say? The Prince of Wales, was it, and Marlborough House, or the Prime Minister, and 10, Downing Street? Which

was it? I forget."

"Well," said Hanbury, "can I do anything for you?"

"Are you going to Curzon Street on Thursday?"

"No." Hanbury reddened, but he was standing with his back to the light. "The family are leaving Town suddenly."

"Are you going too?"

"No." Hanbury was anything but pleased with all this, but who could be angry with a dying man, and such a dying man too?

"If you were going I should like to send a message. But of course you cannot be going if they are leaving town. I told you I have some money of my own. I have made my will since I saw you. After my mother's death all will go, I mean the yearly interest of all will go in equal shares to any hunchbacks that apply for shares. The conditions will be advertised in the papers."

"I think you could not have done better with it," said Hanbury, cordially.

"Yes. When you see her next, tell her I gave up all thought of making Miracle Gold, because she said she wished me. What a wonderful likeness there is between Miss Grace and Miss Ashton. I had not begun to model those figures of time. That clock was getting too much for me. Often when I was away from it, and when I was in bed, the movement was reversed, and all went backwards until the weights were wound up so tight against the beam, that something must give way if the machinery did not stop. Then, all at once, the machinery would stop, and suddenly begin running in the ordinary manner, and I used often to shout out and cry with relief. You don't know all that clock was to me. And yet it would have killed me. It has killed me."

"The strain must have been very great. I wonder it did not break you down."

"Yes."

"In reality, though, it was the Miracle Gold did the mischief. Only for it I should not have been away from my clock, or left the gas lighting. I know it is not fair of me to keep you here. You want to go. Say good-bye to her before she leaves town. This is Wednesday. You must not stay here any longer. Will you say good-bye to me also? Two good-byes in one day. One to her and one to me."

Hanbury rose and held out his hand, saying "Good-bye."

Leigh did not stir.

"Are we not to shake hands?"

"Yes, in a moment."

Hanbury waited a while. "I am going now. You have nothing more to say?"

He had not.

He had nothing more to say. He would say no more to anyone. He was dead.

CHAPTER XLI.

FUGITIVES.

Hanbury had, during the past few days, carefully avoided meeting friends or acquaintances. He went near no club and kept in the house a good deal. When he went abroad he drove. He did not wish to be asked questions of the most ordinary kind respecting the Ashtons.

The discovery of his foreign extraction had not yet got abroad, but, although Mrs. Grace and her grand-daughter were under his mother's roof, and they were the only persons besides his mother in whom he had confided, he felt as though every one must know. Such things got about in most unaccountable ways.

That morning he had seen in a newspaper that Mr., Mrs., and Miss Ashton were leaving for a tour in Norway and Sweden. That was all the paragraph said.

At the very moment Hanbury was speaking to Oscar Leigh, the Ashton family were leaving Curzon Street.

When Dora Ashton sat that afternoon in her own room, after writing to her lover, she knew the engagement was at an end, and realized the knowledge. But she had not said anything of it. When she got his answer all was over beyond any chance whatever. He had apologized amply for his offence, and accepted her decision.

His letter had a bracing effect upon her. She had been perfectly sincere in writing her letter and she had never wavered in her resolution of breaking off the engagement, yet deep down in her nature was a formless hope, which she would not acknowledge to herself for a moment, that he might disregard her request and insist upon her re-consideration. But with the advent of his letter, that hope vanished wholly, and she felt more firm and secure. Now all was plain. She should tell her mother, and tell her, moreover, in an easy and light manner. The letter had been a tonic. If he were so easily dismissed, he had not been very much in earnest.

She went to Mrs. Ashton at once, and said, "Of course, mother, you knew that there was something between John Hanbury and me."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Ashton in surprise that grew as she looked at the girl.

"Well, I have come to say that we have decided it would be better to put an end to it; we have come to the conclusion it would not be for our happiness it should go on any further. It is all over."

"All over! my dear! All over! But I thought it was fully arranged that you were to be married as soon as he had made a beginning in the world."

"I am sure, mother, you do not want me to say more than I wish to say, and I don't think speaking about the affair can do good to anyone. He and I understand each other fully. This is no mere quarrel. At my suggestion the affair has been broken off. I wrote to him, saying I desired it broken off, and gave him my reasons, and he wrote me back saying that he is very sorry, and that it is to be as I wish."

"But, my dear, although I judge by your manner you are not very much distressed, I cannot help feeling a good deal of concern about you."

"Oh," said the girl with a smile, "you must not imagine I am desperate. I am not, I assure you. The breaking off has been done in two very sensible letters, and we have arranged to be fast friends, and to meet one another as though there never had been anything but friendship between us. You see, mother, there are a great many things upon which we don't agree, and most likely never should, and it would never do to risk life-long bickering. I assure you we behaved more like two elderly people with money or something else practical in view, than two of our age. You know I am not a sentimental girl, and although the thing is unpleasant I shall I am certain never regret the step I have taken in putting an end to what could not otherwise end well for either of us. And now mother do me one favour, will you?"

"Oh, yes, my darling. My darling Dora. My own poor child."

For a moment the girl was compelled to pause to steady her lips and her voice. "Do not speak to me again about this until I speak to you, and--and--and don't let father speak to me either."

"It will kill you, child. It will kill you, my Dora."

Again the girl was compelled to pause. "No. It will not. And mother, don't treat me in any other way than as if it had not occurred. Be just the same to me."

"My darling."

"And," again she had to stop, "above all don't be more affectionate. That would break my heart. Promise."

"I promise."

The girl threw her arms round her mother's neck and kissed her, and the mother burst out crying, and the girl hushed her and petted her, and tried to console her, and asked her to bear up and not to cry.

"I'll try, child, I'll try; but it's very hard, darling."

"Yes, mother, but bear up for me, for my sake."

"I will, dear! I will indeed. We shall not stop here. We shall go away at once."

"Very well. Just what you please, mother."

"I couldn't bear to stay here and see you, my child."

"If you wish it, mother, let us go away at once. Look at me how brave I am. Do not give way. Do not give way, for my sake."

"I will try--I will try."

The grief seemed to be all the mother's, and the duty of consolation all the daughter's duty.

It is the sorrows of others that most hurt noble natures, and the natures of noble women most of all.

That night it was settled that the Ashtons should go to Norway and Sweden for three months. Norway and Sweden had been put into Mr. Ashton's head by the announcement of Sir Julius Whinfield months ago that he was making up a party for his yacht to go north that summer, and that the Dowager Lady Forcar and Mrs. Lawrence, Sir Julius's married sister, and her husband, Mr. James Lawrence, had promised to be of the party. "We can arrange to meet somewhere," said Mr. Ashton, and so the expedition was arranged.

When John Hanbury left Dr. Shaw's, he thought that now, all being over with Leigh, he was bound in common rectitude to disclose the source of the gold which Leigh had intended passing off as the result of his imaginary discovery in chemistry or alchemy. The simplest course would be to go to Scotland Yard and there tell all he knew. Against this course prudence suggested that perhaps the name and address given were imaginary, and that there was no such man or street. He was not anxious to pass through streets in which he was known, and he was glad of anything to do. How better could he employ an hour than by driving to London Road and trying to find out if any such man as Timmons existed? He did not like the whole thing, but he could not rest easy while he had the name of a man whom Leigh said dealt largely in the fruit of robberies and thefts. At all events, supposing the whole story told him by the dwarf was fiction, no harm could come of a visit to Tunbridge Street.

He jumped into a hansom and was rapidly driven to London Road, and alighted at the end of Tunbridge Street.

Yes, sure enough, there was the name and the place: "John Timmons, Marine Store Dealer." But how did one get in, supposing one wanted to get in? The place was all shut up, and he could see no door.

A man was busy with one of the many up-ended carts. He had the wheel off and was leisurely greasing the axletree.

"Has Mr. Timmons left this place, please?" he asked of the man.

"I think so. Ay, he has."

"Do you know how long?"

"A few days. Since Monday, I think. Anyway, the place hasn't been open since Monday, and I hear that he is gone since Saturday night."

"Have you any notion where he's gone?"

The man stopped greasing the wheel and looked up curiously. "Are you from the Yard too?"

"What yard?"

"Why Scotland Yard, of course."

"No, I am not. Have people been here from Scotland Yard?"

"Ay. And if you was in with Timmons and that crew, you'd better show a clean pair of heels. There's something wrong about a dwarf or a cripple that's missed down Chelsea way, burned up in a fire. Timmons and a cracksman was seen hanging about that place, and they do say that if they're caught they'll be hanging about somewhere else. So if you're in with that lot, you'd better clear out too. They say Timmons has got out of the country, but they'll ketch him by Atlantic cable, and hang him with British rope." The man laughed at his own wit, and resumed his work upon the axle. Hanbury thanked him and turned away. He had nothing to do here. The police had information already.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE END.

"Well," he said, "what is the matter? Oh, breakfast." He put down his newspaper. "I see," he added, "they have given this fellow Timmons five years, and serve him very right."

"John, you have forgotten something!" she said, stopping him on his way to the breakfast table and laying one of her delicate white hands on his shoulder.

"Eh? Forgotten something? Have I? What? I have a lot of important things on my mind," said he, looking down on the clear sweet, oval face, turned up to his.

"Whatever is on your mind, sir, you ought not to forget the duties of your lips. I have not had my good-morrow kiss, sir."

"I never had anything so important on my mind, or on my lips, Edy, as your kiss, dear." He took her in his arms and kissed her fondly.

"You grow better at compliments as the days go by."

"No dear, deeper in love."

"With such a commonplace kind of thing as a wife?"

"With the most un-commonplace sweetheart--wife in all the world."

"John, I am already beginning to feel quite a middle-aged wife, and my ring where it touches the guard is getting worn."

"That's a desperately serious thing--about the ring, I mean. Gold was too easily--worn a metal to marry you with, Edith. It should have been a plain band of adamant, and even that would not last long enough, dear."

"Are you practising a speech to win a constituency?"

"No. I am speaking out of my heart to keep what I have won."

"Do you know I envy you only for one thing?"

"And what is that?"

"All the love that you give me."

"But we are quits there, for I give all, you give all."

"But yours seems so much richer than mine."

"Does it, sweetheart? Then I am glad of that. For what I give is yours and you cannot help yourself but give it all back to me again."

"Oh, but what pains me is that I never seem to be able to give you any of mine. All you have got from me seems to be only your own going back and I long--oh, my darling, I do long--to show you that when all you gave me is given back to you I never could exhaust my own. Indeed, I could not, and keeping so much as I have is like a pain."

"Then what must I do to soothe my sweetheart's pain?"

"I do not know. I often think few people know what this love is."

"There is nothing worth calling love that is not such as ours. Love is more than content, more than joy, and not delusive with rapture. It is full and steady and unbroken, like the light of day."

"It is a pain, a pain, a pain! A secret pain. And do you know it is no less when you are away, and no greater when you are near? And it often seems to me that it is not exactly you as you are I love, but something that is beyond speech and thought, and the reason I want you is that you may hold my hand and love it too."

"My Sibyl! My Seer!"

"You and I are, as it were, waiting, and I should not wait if you were not with me."

"But I am with you, and always shall be. You are not afraid of my leaving you?"

"In the vulgar sense? Oh, no! Afraid of your going away and caring for some one else? Oh, no! That could not be."

"No, indeed. No, indeed."

"For I should call you back and show you my heart, and how could you leave me when you saw that there was nothing in all my heart but you? Your pity would not let you do that. You might take something else away, but you could not take away all that I had in my heart."

"You dreamer of holy dreams."

"It is by the firmness of the clasp of our hands we may know that we shall be together at the revelation. I think people coarsen their minds against love. I have heard that people think it is a sign of foolishness. But it can't be. Where, I think, the harm is that people harden their natures against it before it has time to become all--before it has time to spiritualize the soul. It seems to me that this love of one another that Christ taught is the beginning of being with God."

"Surely child, my child, my dear, you have come from some blessed place, you have come to us from some place that is better than this."

"No," she said softly. "No. There is no better place for me. I am where God placed me--in my husband's arms."

They had been married a couple of months, and it was June once more. Not a cloud had arisen between them for these two months, or during the months before. John Hanbury's mother said that Edith Grace had the same witchery in appearance as that village beauty of the days of George II., and that some quality of the blood which flowed in his veins made him succumb at once to her; for otherwise how could it be that he should almost immediately after parting from Dora Ashton fall helplessly in love with a girl so extraordinarily like Dora as Edith? How else could the fascination be accounted for?

Edith herself could give no reason except that things of the kind invariably arranged themselves independently of reason. All she knew was that at first she was disposed to worship him because of his illustrious origin, and gradually she lost this feeling and grew to love him for himself. And with that explanation and him she was content.

He, being a man, could not, of course, admit he did anything without not only a reason but an excellent reason too. He began by saying that she was even lovelier than Dora herself, which was a thing more astonishing in one at all like Dora that it counted for more than an even still more wonderful beauty of another type. Then he had been chiefly drawn towards the girl during her tardy convalescence because of her weakness and dependence, and the thousand little services he could render her, which kept him always watchful and attentive when near her, and devising little pleasures of fruit or flowers, or books, when not by her side.

"I do not believe," he would say to himself, "that I was ever in love with Dora. I do think we should never have got on well together, and I am certain when she and Whinfield are married, there will not be a happier couple in England excepting Edith and me. When I heard that Dora was to be one of the party on the homeward cruise of Whinfield's yacht, I knew all would be arranged before they saw England again. They are most admirably suited to one another."

"But she and I were not. I was always thinking of what I should like her to do and what I should not, and her political views had a serious interest for me, and I was perpetually trying to get her to adopt this, and modify that, and abandon the third. Nice way of making love, indeed!"

"I never went forth to her with song and timbrel and careless joy. My mind ran more on propositions and principles. If at any time she said what I did not approve, I was ready to stop and argue the point. I did not know what love was then, and if I married Dora, I should have worn down her heart and turned into a selfish, crusty old curmudgeon in no time."

"But with Edith all was different. I never thought for a moment of what I should like her to do or say or think. I only thought of what the girl might like. I lost hold of myself, and did not care for searching in the mirror of the mind as to how I myself looked, or how she and I compared together. I did not pause to ask whether I was happy or not, so long as I saw she was happy. There was no refinement in the other feeling. It was sordid and exacting. With Edith a delicate subtlety was reached, undreamed-of before. An inspired accord arose between us. She leaned upon me, and I grew strong enough to support the burden of Atlas. I flung myself aside, so that I might not be impeded in my services to her. And I was welcomed in the spirit I came. She would take what I had to give, and she would like to take it. And so she accepted me, and all I had, and I had no care in my mind of myself or any of the gifts or graces which had been mine and now were hers. So I had enough time to think of her and no care to distract me from her."

That was his way of putting it to himself when he was in a very abstract and figurative humour. When he was not quite so abstract or figurative, he would say to himself, "It is sympathy, nothing more than sympathy. That is the Miracle Gold we should all try to make in the crucible of our hearts."

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MIRACLE GOLD: A NOVEL (VOL. 3 OF 3) ***

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