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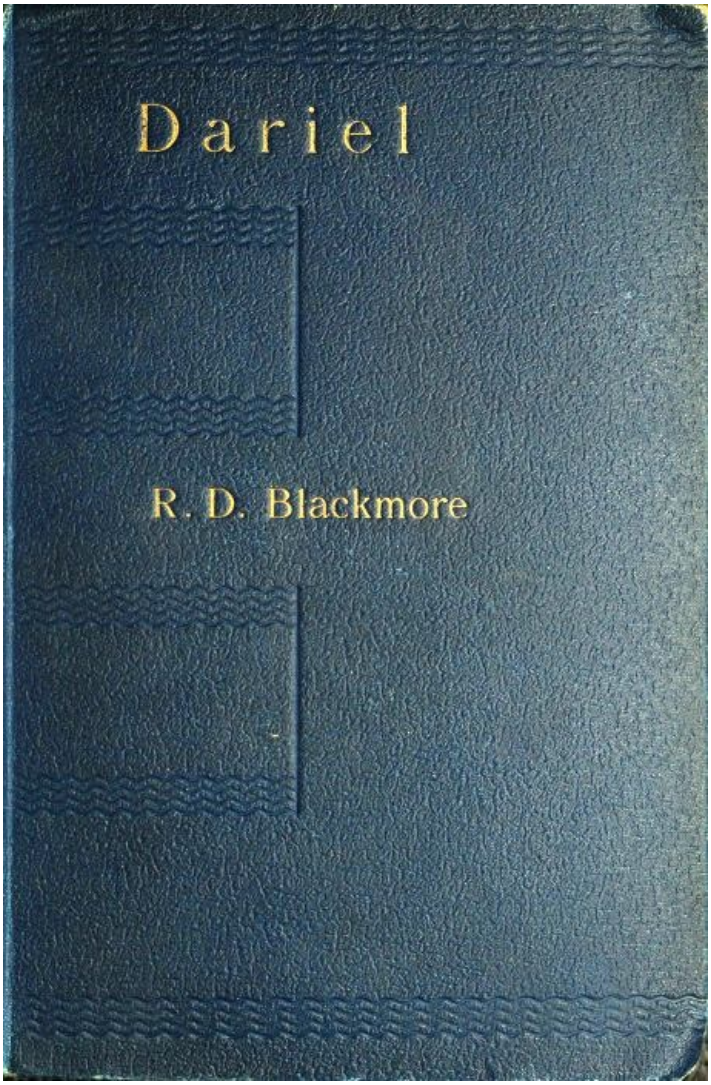

DARIEL

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"***Between whose jagged mullions flowed the silvery light.***"

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DARIEL
A Romance of Surrey

BY
R. D. BLACKMORE

AUTHOR OF "LORNA DOONE"

WITH DRAWINGS BY CHRIS HAMMOND

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
1897

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DARIEL: A ROMANCE OF SURREY

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CHAPTER I
A NIGHTINGALE

If any man came to me, and said, "You are going to tell your tale, good sir, without knowing how to handle it," I should look at him first with some surprise, and anger at his interference, yet in a very few minutes, unless he wanted to argue about it, probably he would have my confession, and a prayer for his assistance. For every one knows how to do a thing, much better than the one who does it.

In spite of all that, I will declare in a truthful manner unabashed, whatever I know concerning the strange affairs which have befallen me; and perhaps if you care to look into them, you will admit that even now, when the world supposes itself to be in a state of proud civilization, there are things to be found near its centre of perfection which are not quite up to the standard of the Lord.

Towards the middle of the month of May, in a year which I never shall forget, I happened to be riding home from Guildford in the county of Surrey, after a long but vain attempt to do a little business for my father. For we were not, as we used to be, people of wealth and large estates, and such as the world looks up to; but sadly reduced, and crippled, and hard-pushed to make a living. And the burden of this task had fallen most heavily upon me, because I was the only son at home, and my father's mind was much too large to be cramped with petty troubles. So that when he had been deprived of nine-tenths of his property, and could not procure any tenants for the rest, it became my duty to work the best of the land that still remained, and make both ends meet, if possible. [Pg 2]

To a young man this was no great hardship unless he were spoiled for country life by ambition, or sloth, or luxury; and it seemed to me at first a welcome change, to be recalled from Oxford and from Lincoln's Inn, and set to watch the earth and sky, instead of ink and paper. And although there were storms and swamps of loss and disaster, to cross continually, I was always at the point of getting on, if only there came just a little turn of luck. But that which seemed to baffle mainly my most choice endeavours, was that when I had done good work, and made good staple—as it seemed to me—never a man to whom I showed it (at the most reasonable figure) would stop to look at it for a moment in a reasonable spirit; because, whatever I had to offer was, by strange coincidence, the very thing my fellow-creatures happened not to want just then.

What had I done, this very day, but carried into Guildford market, more than twelve miles from our home, samples of as fair, and fat, and thoroughly solid grain, as ever was grown to be ground in England? And what had the dealers said to me? "Tut, tut! what call you that? Not so bad for an amateur. Try again, sir, try again. Sir Harold must grow it cheaper." And they made me not a single offer, such as I could think of twice; while the farmers looked askance, and smiled very kindly and respectfully, yet as if I had no business there, and must soon discover my sad mistake.

"Never mind what they think," I exclaimed to myself, "or how they laugh at all I can do. Wait a bit, wait a bit, my friends. We are not come to the bottom of the basket yet. Hold up, ancient Joseph."

Ancient Joseph was the only horse now remaining with us, who could get along at all, without a plough or waggon at his heels or tail. Like us, he had seen better days; and like us he did not dwell upon them. Faithful, generous, and conscientious, he kept up to his own standard still, and insisted upon his twelve miles an hour, whenever his head was homeward. It was in that pleasant direction now; and much as I longed for a gentle glide of the soft May breeze around me, and a leisurely gaze at the love of the year, now telling its tale in the valleys, that old fellow (sniffing his oats leagues away) cared for nothing but a quick stroke towards them. Much as I wanted to think about the money that I ought to have got, but couldn't, this horse between my legs was so full of [Pg 3]

what he meant to be filled with, that I was compelled to attend to his mood, instead of giving rein to my own; lest haply a ditch should be our conclusion.

Without any heed we scoured past the loveliest views in England, as people in a train are forced to do; till Old Joe's wind became a gale, more adverse now than favourable. His four legs, which had been going like two, began to go like a figure of four, and he gave me to understand through the flaps of leather, that his heart was repentant of having its own way. On the ridge of the hills at the four cross-roads, I allowed him therefore a welcome rest, having the worst of the road before us, and the shadows growing deeper.

Perhaps I had prided myself too much upon seldom indulging in whims and freaks, as my elder brother Harold did, to his great disadvantage and our own; and now at the age of twenty-five, I should have known better than to begin. But some strange impulse (which changed the whole course of my life from that hour) seized me, as I stopped to breathe my horse opposite that old direction-post.

"To Cobham and Esher" was on the left arm; the forward one pointed to a village near our home, and that was the road I had always taken. But the arm that would have pointed to the right, if it had been in its duty, was not there now, though a double mortice-hole gave token of its late existence. And the lane towards the right, of which it should have told us, seemed rather desirous of evading notice, and certainly had received very little for years from any road-surveyor. Narrow, and overhung, and sinking into sleepy shadows with a fringe of old roots and dead bracken, it afforded a pleasant sense of passing into quietude and loneliness.

Time was more plentiful than money with me, and why should I hurry to tell my father the old tale of failure, so often repeated, but none the more welcome—as an old joke is—by reason of [Pg 4] familiarity? I knew the chief outlines of the country pretty well, because an old fox had been fond of it, whom we never brought to book, when the hounds were kept at Crogate Park. How he had beaten us we never knew, beyond having fifty opinions about it, of which only two were in favour with the wise ones—the first that he sank into the bowels of the earth, and the other that he vanished into the clouds of heaven. And the place was lonely enough for him to have taken whichever course he chose, leaving nothing but negative evidence.

Knowing that if I could cross that valley I should probably strike into a bridle-lane which would take me home at leisure, I turned my old horse, much against his liking, into this dark and downhill course, away from the main road, which according to the wisdom of our forefathers followed the backbone of the ridge. Soon we began to descend steep places broken with slippery falls of rock, while branches of thicket and sapling trees shook hands overhead, and shut out the sky. My horse, who had never been down on his knees, and knew perhaps by instinct the result of that attitude in the eyes of men, was beginning to tremble exceedingly; and in fairness to him and myself as well, I jumped off and led him. He looked at me gratefully, and followed without fear, though sometimes sliding with all four feet, and throwing back his head for balance. And perhaps he observed, as soon as I did, that no horse had ever tried that descent, since the rains of winter washed it.

When I was ready to think myself a fool, and wish both of us well out of it, the sweetest and clearest note, that ever turned the air into melody and the dull world into poetry, came through the arching bowers of spring, and made the crisp leaves tremulous. Then as a bud, with its point released, breaks into a fountain of flower, the silvery overture broke into a myriad petals of sensitive song.

"What a stunning nightingale," said I, as a matter-of-fact young Briton might, with never an inkling of idea that the bird meant anything to me. But he seemed to be one of those that love mankind (as the genial robin-redbreast does), or at any rate desire to be thought of kindly, and to [Pg 5] finish well what is well begun; for he flitted before me down the hill, and enlivened the gloom with vicissitudes of love.

Listening to this little fellow, and trying to catch sight of him, I was standing with Old Joe's nose in my hand—for he was always friendly—when the music that should lead my life, in the purest strain came through the air. It was not the voice of a bird this time, but a sound that made my heart beat fast and then held me in rapture of wonder.

Dew of the morning in a moss-rose bud, crystal drops beading a frond of fern, lustre of a fountain in full moonlight—none of these seem to me fit to compare with the limpid beauty of that voice. And more than the sweetest sounds can do, that indite of things beyond us, and fall from a sphere where no man dwells, this voice came home to my heart, and filled it with a vivid sorrow and a vague delight.

Sturdy as I was, and robust, and hardy, and apt to laugh at all sentimental stuff, the force of the time overcame me, as if I had never been educated; and as soon as I rather felt than knew that I was listening to some simple hymn, I became almost as a little child inhaling his first ideas of God. The words that fell upon my ears so softly were as unknown as the tune itself, voice and verse and air combining into a harmony of heaven.

Ought any man to be called a snob, for doing a thing that is below himself, on the impulse of the moment, and without a halt of thought? It is not for me to argue that; but I hope that fair ladies will forgive me, when I confess that I stepped very gently, avoiding every dry twig and stone, across the brown hollow that is generally found at the foot of any steep fall of wood. By this time the lane was gone to grass, and I slipped Old Joe's bit that he might have a graze, while I went in

quest of my Siren.

On the further brink of the spongy trough, a dark frizzle of alder and close brushwood was overhanging a bright swift stream, which I recognised as the Pebblebourne, a copious brook, beloved of trout, and as yet little harassed by anglers. Through this dark screen I peered, and beheld a vision that amazed me. Along a fair meadow that bent towards the west, and offered a [Pg 6] slim tree here and there—like a walking-stick for evening—the gentle light of day's departure came quite horizontally. There was, as there often is in nature, some deep peace of sadness, which rebukes mankind for its petty cares, and perpetual fuss about itself. And yet there was something in front of all this, to set the heart of a young man fluttering.

On the opposite bank, and within fair distance for the eyes to make out everything, was a niche of dark wall shagged with ivy, and still supporting the grey stonework of a ruined chapel-window, between whose jagged mullions flowed the silvery light of the west and fell upon the face of a kneeling maiden. The profile, as perfect as that of a statue, yet with the tender curves of youth, more like the softness of a cameo, was outlined as in a frame of light against the black curtain of the ivied wall. Beside the kneeling figure lay a head-tire of some strange design, removed perhaps when the hymn was followed by the attitude of prayer.

The beauty and rapture of this devotion made me hold my breath, and feel as if I were profaning it. "Get away, you low intruder," said my better self to me. But it is all very well to talk. It was out of my power to go away. Under this spell I stood, until that gentle worshipper arose with a bend of her graceful neck, and gathered her pale grey robe around her. It was not such a dress as English ladies according to the fashion of the moment wear, with pumpkin sleeves, or with wens upon their shoulders, and puckers, and gathers, and frizzles and scollops, in a mangle of angles and zig-zags. What it was made of is more than I can say; I only know that it was beautiful; drawn in at the waist with a narrow belt, and following rather than trying to lead the harmony of the living form. But one thing caught my attention even so, and that was the flash of a bright red cross on the delicate curve of the bosom.

It appeared to me that tears were sparkling under the fringe of large dark eyes, as the lonely maiden glanced around, while preparing for departure. Then to my surprise—if anything could surprise me further—with a rapid movement she laid bare a gleaming shoulder, and set upon it the tip of a long straight finger. Her face was partly obscured to me by the bend of her arm, but I [Pg 7] fancied that she smiled, and was opening her lips to pronounce some words, when suddenly that horse Old Joe, who had been doing his best to lessen the burden of his maintenance, gave vent to a snort of approbation, not of the fair sight across the water—for that was hidden by bushes from him—but at the juiciness of his graze. My guilty conscience made me start, for I fully expected to be found out in a thing I had never done before; and I felt ashamed to look again, till I knew there was no suspicion. Then a breath of wind turned up a leaf; and who could help glancing under it?

I saw that the beautiful and mysterious damsel had taken some little alarm at the grunt of the greedy quadruped. From the foot of the old chapel-window she was taking something white like a crucifix—though I could not be certain about that; meanwhile she had placed on her head that strange affair which I had seen lying on the ground. To me it looked like an octagonal hat, with a long veil of gauze descending from it, resembling nothing that I had ever seen on a lady's head, to the best of my remembrance; although in bright fact they wear such strange things, and trim them anew so wondrously, that no man must be positive. Whatever it was, it looked very sweet—as the ladies themselves express it—but I grieved that I could see her face no more.

She placed that white object very carefully in the folds of her dress beneath the veil which covered her down to the waist; and then to my great disappointment she was gone, seeming rather to float on the air than to walk with a definite stride, as our ladies make their way. But the quivering points of some pendulous leafage showed that a bodily form had passed there.

I was left in a conflict of wonder, and doubt, and intense desire to know more, mingled with some self-reproach—though the worst of that came afterwards—and a hollow feeling in my heart as if I should never fill it with myself again. Something told me that the proper course, and the most manly and business-like, was to jump on my horse and make him climb the hill anew, and take the high road, and get home at full speed, and never say a word about what I had seen, nor even [Pg 8] think about it, if it could be helped.

But I assure you (and I hope again that allowance will be made for me, as a young man not much accustomed to the world, and hitherto heedless of feminine charms) that I found it impossible to do the right thing now. Instead of a lofty and resolute withdrawal, in I went for more of that, of which I had taken too much already. I stuck Old Joe's bit into the hungry leather of his most voracious mouth, and came down on his back with a ponderous swing, and girded him with a hard grip of his belly, to show me some more of what he had scared away. Much against his liking—for if ever a horse was totally destitute of romance, here he was and no mistake—with a grunt of remonstrance he plodded into the pebbly ford at the bottom of the hill.

But when we struck into the silence of the meadow, what was I the wiser? Lo, the dusk was settling down in the most indifferent manner, the sunset flush was fading into a faint and chill neutrality, the trees had no shadow, and, worst of all, no sign or even memory of any sweet passage among them. Only on the left hand some hundred yards away was a black door set in an old grey wall, which curved along leisurely as far as I could see, and offered no other entrance.

"I am not the sort of fellow to put up with this," I exclaimed to myself impatiently; and yet there

was no way to help it just now. And if it came to reason, what business had I there? Still the whole of this land had been ours not more than a century ago, and a true Briton feels that he has his rights, however long he may have lost them. But it is not in his nature to lose sight of reason, though I am not quite so certain how that was with me, as I wandered home slowly along forgotten ways, and knew that my life was changed thenceforth.

CHAPTER II
THE FAMILY

[Pg 9]

It is said, and seems worthy of belief—though denied quite lately by a great Frenchman—that there are in the world no fairer damsels than those of our own dear island. Graceful, elegant, straight and goodly, gentle—which is the first point of all—yet lively and able to take their own part, eager moreover to please, and clever to obtain what they want by doing so, they have no cause to envy their brothers, or feel ungrateful to Providence for making them fair. If any of them do that sometimes, when led astray every now and then by feminine agitators, for the most part they will come back to themselves, if left without contradiction.

My sister Grace, for instance, was one of the best and kindest-hearted English girls that ever blushed. Far in front of me, I confess, in quickness of apprehension, and perception of character, and readiness of answer, and I might almost say in common-sense; though I never quite conceded that, because I had so much need of it. Nevertheless she looked up to me, as her elder by five years, and a man. Therefore, it was my custom always to listen with much toleration to her, and often adopt her views in practice, after shaking my head for the time at them. For she always finished her orations with, "Well, brother George, you are sure to know the best."

Now, if we had none but Grace to deal with, things would have been very different. Not that we could have retrieved our fortunes—of that there was no possibility; still, we might have carried on in our humble way, and kept my father, Sir Harold Cranleigh, comfortable in his old age, and [Pg 10] even happy among his books and collection of minerals, and seals and coins. My mother also might have had all she could wish; for she was in truth a very quiet soul, bound up in her children, and fond of little else, unless it were county histories, and the fulfilment of prophecy. Sometimes she was grieved that we occupied now the old cottage in a corner of the Park, which had once been the house of our agent; also at having but a pony-cart, instead of what she was accustomed to. But the grief was not on her own account, and simply for our sake, as we knew well; and we kept on telling her that we liked it better so.

For after all, if one comes to think, those very wealthy folk have no true enjoyment, and no keen relish for anything good. In the first place, they can never feel the satisfaction of having earned, by honest work, their pleasure. It comes to them but as an everyday matter, wearisome, vapid, insipid, and dull. Many of them have a noble spirit, and that makes it all the worse for them. They see and they feel the misery of the poverty around them, but all they can do is of no avail. They are cheated and wronged in their best endeavours; if they show discernment, they are called niggards; if they are profuse, it is ostentation. And if they are large enough not to be soured by any of these expressions, they begin to feel more and more, as time goes on, that the money should stop in the family.

Remembering this, we should have regarded with delicate compassion that very wealthy individual, Mr. Jackson Stoneman. This eminent stockbroker claimed not only our sympathy for his vast riches, but also some goodwill by the relief afforded us in a cumbrous difficulty. My father had long been casting about, as matters went from bad to worse, and farm after farm was thrown up by insolvent tenants, for some one to occupy our old house, Crogate Hall, and the Park as well, for he could not bear to let them separately, and have the old place cut into patches. But there was no one left among the old families of the county, still possessing cash enough to add this to the homes already on their hands. There is much fine feeling and warmth of heart toward one another, among those who have never had much to do, from one generation to another, [Pg 11] except to encourage the good people who love order, by punishing those of an opposite turn, and to keep up the line which has always been drawn between landed estate and commerce; as well as to be heartily kind to the poor—even though they do encroach a little on preserves—and above all to be hospitable not to one another only, but to people of business who know their position.

Our family, one of the oldest in Surrey, and of Saxon lineage, requiring no mixed Norman blood of outsea cutthroats to better it, had always kept its proper place, and been beloved for its justice, generosity, and modesty. Our tenants had never made any pretension to own the lands they held of us, any more than a man to whom I had lent a thousand pounds at interest—supposing that I owned such a sum—would set up a claim to my capital. We were very kind to them as long as they could pay; and throughout their long struggle with the foreign deluge, we made every effort to keep them afloat, reducing their rent to the vanishing point, and plunging with them into poverty. But what can be done, when the best land in England will not pay for working, and is burdened as heavily as ever?

"Cut your coat according to your cloth," is a very fine old precept; and we went on doing so, as Heaven only knows. But when there is no cloth left at all, and the climate is not good enough to supply fig-leaves, wherewithal shall a man be clothed? And for a woman, how much worse—

though they sometimes exaggerate their trials. My sister Grace was as lovely a maiden as ever was born of Saxon race, which at its best is the fairest of all. To my mind she was far more beautiful than her sister Elfrida, the eldest of us, now the wife of Lord Fitzragon, who had children of her own, and very seldom came to see us, being taken up with her own world. And one of the things that grieved me most was to see my favourite sister dressed in some common blue serge, with a brown leather belt round her waist, and thick shoes on her delicate feet, like a boy elected by Twickenham parish to the Blue-coat School. For a boy it is all very well, and may lead to the highest honours of the realm; but with a maiden of gentle breed it is not so encouraging.

Notwithstanding this, I say that you might put a lady of any rank you please, and of any wealth to [Pg 12]
back it up, by the side of my sister Grace; and I know to which of them your eyes would turn. The Lord may see fit, for some good purpose, to set one of His children high and to pluck down another; but He never undoes what He did at the first, and His goodness remains in the trouble. Many girls lowered from their proper line of life, and obliged to do things that seemed hard for them, would have turned sour, and tossed their heads, or at the very least would have taken unkindly to what they were forced to do. And if anybody blamed them for it, the chances are that it would be some one who would have done the very same. But to see our Grace now, you would have thought that she had been born a small yeoman's daughter, or apprenticed quite young to a dairyman. What I mean is—unless you looked at her twice; and to fail of doing that would be quite sufficient proof that you care not for the most interesting thing in all human nature—except perhaps a loving mother—to wit, a gentle, truthful, lively, sweet, and affectionate young maid.

It is not in a man to be so good, and luckily it is not expected of him. Certainly I did speak strongly sometimes, and find fault with the luck, and the world, and the law, and above all with the Government, which every Englishman has a right to do. At such times my sister would scarcely say a word,—which alone is enough to prove her self-command,—but draw down her golden hair between her fingers, and look at me softly from her deep blue eyes, and clearly be trying to think as I thought. When any one whose opinion is at all worth having does that sort of thing, almost any man is pleased with the silence he has created; and his temper improves, as he approves of himself. And so I always felt with Grace, that she might be right, because I was right; and it helped me more than any one might think, to know that my words made a stronger impression on another mind than they left upon my own.

Happy beyond all chance of fortune would be the man who could win such a heart, and be looked at with even deeper love than a sister has for a brother, and feel himself lifted more nigh to [Pg 13]
heaven than he had any power, or perhaps even any desire of his own to go. But no man so gifted had appeared as yet, neither did we want him to turn up, for the very good reason that Grace Cranleigh was the heart and soul of our little household, just as I, George, was the hand and head, for all practical purposes, though much against my liking.

Because my elder brother Harold, heir to the title and the dwindled heritage, was the proper person to come forward, and take the lead of our forlorn hope, and stand up bravely in the gap, and encourage the elders when thus stricken down and impoverished. But as I have hinted before, we had a trouble almost as bad as mortgages, loss of invested money, and even the ruinous price of corn, and that was a Genius in the family, without any cash to support him. Truly in almost every family the seeds of genius may be found, but most of them are nipped in early days, or start in some harmless direction. But Harold's was not to be cured like this, for it started in every direction, with a force that left nothing to be desired, except the completion of something. There was no conceit in this brother of mine, neither any defect of energy. No matter what he took up, not only was he full of it for the time, but perfectly certain that nothing of equal grandeur had dawned upon the human race till now. Time would fail me to begin the list of his manifold inventions, for every one was greater than the one before it, and in justice to him I should have to go through all. While there were difficulties in the way, his perseverance was boundless. But the moment he had vanquished them, and proved that there was little more to do, as sure as eggs are eggs he would stop short, exclaim, "Oh, any fool can do that!" and turn his great powers to something even greater.

We all admired him, as no one could help doing, for he was a wonderfully taking fellow, gentle, handsome, generous, and upright, a lover of Shakespeare, a very fine scholar, as tender to animals as if he knew their thoughts, and in every way a gentleman, though not fond of society. But the worst of it was that we had to pay for him; and this was uncommonly hard to do, under our present circumstances. For inventors must have the very best material, as well as the finest [Pg 14]
tools for their work, and some one of skill to hold things in their place, and to bear the whole blame when the job miscarries. We were grieved, when instead of the untold gold which was to have set us staggering, a basketful of bills was all that came, with headings that sent us to the Cyclopædia, and footings that spelled the workhouse.

"What is all this about letting the old house?" Harold had asked me, without indignation, but still with some sadness at our want of faith, the very last time I had seen him. "You have so very little foresight, George! You forget altogether how easy it is to let a man in; but to get him out again, there's the rub; and how often the landlord is forced to take the roof off!"

"The rub has been to get him in, this time," I answered in my dry submissive way, for I never tried to reason with such a clever fellow. "The doors are scarcely large enough for a man of such substance. And as for the roof, it was taking itself off, after three years without any repairs, and no one to ask where the leaks were. I think it is a wonderful piece of luck that Mr. Jackson

Stoneman, a man of extraordinary wealth, has taken such a fancy to the poor old place. It was Grace who showed him round, for there was no one else to do it. And she says that although he may not be quite accustomed——"

"Oh, I don't wish to hear any more about him. I detest the idea of letting our old house, and the Park, and the stables, I suppose he wants them all. And just when I am at the very point of securing a patent, which must restore us to our proper position in the county; for the model is as good as finished. No lease, no lease, my dear George. If you let him in, have a binding agreement to get him out at any time, with three months' notice. And when you speak of roofing, have you quite forgotten that I have discovered a material which must supersede all our barbarous plans for keeping the sun and the rain out?"

"Oh, yes, I remember. You mean to let them in," I replied, without any attempt at sarcasm, but having a vague recollection of something.

"Undoubtedly I do, to a certain extent; and then to utilise them. Every great idea must be in [Pg 15] accordance with nature, instead of repelling her. Now the sun and the rain—but just give me that sheet of paper, and in two minutes you will see it all. It is the most simple and beautiful idea. All I fear is that some one else may hit upon it. But, George, I can trust you, because you are so slow."

With pencil and compass he was sure to be happy for an hour or more and come beaming to dinner; so I left him, and went to tell my father that his eldest son, whose consent he required, had given it to that most necessary step, the letting of Crogate Hall and Park to some eligible tenant. Not only was a very great burden removed,—for we could not bear to see the old place lapse into ruin,—but also a welcome addition was made to our very scanty income. For the great stockbroker paid a handsome rent without any demur, and began for his own sake to put everything into good order. Once more the windows shone with light instead of being grimed with dust and fog; and the Park was mown, and the deer replaced, and the broad expanse of lawn was gay with cricket colours and the pretty ways of women.

But we in our corner kept ourselves at a distance from such enjoyment. Not through any false pride, or jealousy of a condition which had once been ours; but simply because, as my father said, and my mother agreed with him warmly, it had never been the habit of our family to receive entertainment which it could not return. Our home-made bread was (for relish and for nurture) worth fifty of their snowy Vienna stuff, and a pint of the ale which I brewed myself was better than a dozen of their dry champagne, or a vintage of their Chateau this and that. But they would never think so; and if Englishmen choose to run down their own blessings, as they do their merits, let the fashion prevail, while the few who can judge for themselves hold fast their convictions.

CHAPTER III [Pg 16]
TOM ERRICKER

Mr. Jackson Stoneman was—so far as I could make him out, without having had six words with him—a very clever City-man, yet keeping two sides to his life, as he could well afford to do. At an early age he had come into the chief control of a long-established firm, one of those that venture little, but keep on rolling from age to age the ball of accumulating gold. This globe of all human delight was not at all likely to slip between such legs as his; though the wicked metal will do that sometimes, and roll away down the great hill of despair. He attended very strictly to the main chance of all humanity, the object for which we were born and die. That of course ruled his existence; but the people who met him outside the covert, or rode with him when the scent was hot, declared that he was a most excellent fellow, ready at an answer, intelligent of hounds, skilful of hand and full of pluck, neither showing off nor shirking work, and as courteous to a farmer as to the Lord-Lieutenant.

This was high praise for a man of his position. And we found before long that every one confirmed it. He took a large farm off our hands which had long been begging anybody to take it; and though his solicitor was keen enough to grind down the rent to the lowest figure, and insist upon many new conditions, we could not blame his principal for that, and were well aware that landlords nowadays must be grateful to any who will patronise them. In fact, we had no other grievance against him, except that he was rich and we were poor; and I am sure that we were not so narrow-minded as to feel any grudge on that account. My mother especially—as behoved one [Pg 17] of the most charitable of women—found many good excuses for a practice of his, which some might have taken as a proof of want of taste. Our cottage was beside the direct road from the Hall to the nearest railway station, for no line had cut up our neighbourhood as yet. Every morning, at least except on Saturday and Sunday, when we were sitting down to breakfast, a rattle of wheels and clank of silver harness would explain itself into Mr. Jackson Stoneman, sitting bolt-upright with a cigar in his mouth, and flourishing a long tandem-whip, while a couple of glittering chestnuts whirled him along the smooth road, and a groom in white buckskins and top-boots accordingly sat behind, and folded his arms in contempt of the world. Grace like a child, though she was dignity itself when any stranger looked at her, used to run to the window and exclaim, "Oh, what loves of horses! How everything shines, and how well he drives!"

"Who couldn't drive a team of circus horses?" was the first thing I said, but she took no notice.

And the next morning, when the thing came jingling by, and she stopped my sugar to stare at it —"Perhaps you long to be upon that spare cushion," I remarked; for what man can put up with his sister's nonsense? And after that, she never knew when the brilliant tandem passed, which made me feel a little ashamed of myself.

However, I will not blame the great stockbroker—"Stocks-and-Stones" was the name I gave him, without meaning harm, but the nickname spread, and gave him some trifling annoyance, I fear—what right has any man to blame another for a little bit of thoughtlessness, redressed at first perception? Somebody told Stoneman, or perhaps he found it out, for nothing escaped him, that I was displeased at his flashing by like that, not on my own account, as scarcely need be said; and the next week he took another road to the station, half a mile longer and much worse for his horses. And so we lost sight of his handsome turn-out, to which we were getting accustomed and began to set our time-piece by it.

All these things are small; but what is truly great, unless it be concerned with love, or valour, freedom, piety, or self-denial, and desire to benefit the world at large? And yet, as a rule, we care [Pg 18] most about those who dwell little upon such big matters, but carry on pleasantly, and suit us, and amuse us, and seem to be rather below than above us, in mind, and ambition, and standard of life. Tom Erricker knows that he is of that class, and I am welcome to say what I like of him, without any danger to our friendship. And if I describe him exactly as he is, he will take the better part as a compliment, and tell me that the rest is of my imagination.

As he came to and fro from his chambers in the Temple, my friend Tom was a very bright young fellow, indolent yet restless, perpetually in love, though his loves were of brief continuity, light of heart, impulsive, very eager to oblige, and gifted with a very high opinion of himself, and a profound scorn of everything that he could not understand. He was generous, bold, and adventurous, a keen judge of character according to his own idea, yet a thorough hero-worshipper, very fond of addressing himself in the mirror, and trying to give an impartial account of his own appearance and qualities.

"Well, Tom, my boy," I heard him say one day, for he was confidential to others, as well as to himself, about himself, "you are not looking quite the thing this morning. A few cigars less, Tom, would suit you better. And little crow's-feet already coming! What business have they there at five-and-twenty? It can't be reading too hard, or you would have got through, last time. Never mind, Tom, you are not a bad-looking fellow, though you mustn't suppose you are handsome. There is not enough of you; that's the great fault,—not enough of you to look dignified."

In all this he was perfectly correct, though he might have supposed himself handsome without any very great partiality; for his eyes were of a rich and lively brown, such as many a maiden might have envied. And his features quite regular enough, and short, and full of genial vivacity. He was right enough also in the observation that there was not enough of him to enforce the impression which such wisdom as his should create; for although not by any means a dwarf, he was of less than average stature, while exceedingly active and very well built. But he never said a [Pg 19] truer thing in the purest of all self-commune, than that his crow's-feet, if any there were, could not have owed their origin to excess of mental labour. Such is the sort of man one likes; because he can never put one right, when a plague of accuracy comes on.

Now what was my inducement, who shall say? And the reasons come too late to make much difference, when a man has done a very foolish thing. It may have been partly because I had never kept any secret back from Tom, after my long time at school and college with him, and I did not like to do so now; and it may have been also that I felt uneasy about my own behaviour, and longed for some encouragement. Be that as it will, when Tom Erricker came down, as he never failed to do at least once every month, to spend Saturday and Sunday with us, no sooner had I got him in my little den at the back of our cottage where the harness was kept, than I bundled old Croaker, our only stableman, away to his dinner, and with proper introductions poured forth to my friend the whole narrative of that strange affair which I had witnessed as above, but spoken of as yet to no one.

My friend's interjections and frequent questions need not be set down, for he was of the many who can never hear a story without interruption. But when I had assured him for the fiftieth time that there was nothing more to tell, his face, which had been a fine study of amazement, became equally full of oracular wisdom.

"Leave it to me," he said; "leave it to me, George. I will soon get to the bottom of it. I never speak rashly. You know what I am. There is something very deep behind all this. You, who live so near, and are only acquainted with country ways, must not move in the matter. I shall find the key to it. You can do nothing. I get about among people so much; and I know nearly all that goes on in Soho. You have never done a wiser thing than to keep this dark and consult me about it. And a wonderfully lovely girl, you say!"

"Dark let it be if you please," I answered; though I had never even thought about that before, for I do detest all mystery. "Erricker, I told you this in confidence. It looks as if I was wrong in doing [Pg 20] even that, when you begin talking in that sort of way. Is it likely that I would let you take it up? If I cannot myself, as a gentleman, pry into a thing I was not meant to see, do you suppose I would let a young fellow"—Tom was my junior by about three months—"a young fellow like you meddle with it?"

"Now don't be in a huff, George;" he spoke with a smile, as if I were making a fuss about nothing.

"I have far more important things than this to think of. It was only for your sake that I said a word. But I always try to be straightforward. Why did I go down in the last exam? They asked me to describe a contingent remainder; and I said it was a remainder that was contingent. Could anything be more correct than that? And yet the infernal old Q. C. said that I must pursue my studies. And now, if I don't get through next time, the glorious tinman will cut short my allowance. But, thank God, I have got a maiden aunt."

The glorious tinman was Tom's worthy father, the head of a great plating firm at Sheffield. Being perpetually involved in law-suits concerning trade-marks and patents, and finding silver and gold enough for a month's heavy plating sink into the long robe, this gentleman had said to his wife, "Why not keep it in the family?" And she had replied, "Oh, how clever our Tom is! None of those councillors understand the trade." Therefore was Tom at the Temple now.

When my friend once began upon his own affairs, and the ignorance of his examiners, he was ready to go on for ever; and so I cut him short with the question which had chiefly induced me to unburden my mind to him.

"The point is this, my dear boy. Ought I to feel ashamed, do you feel ashamed of me, for acting the spy upon a young lady who had no idea I was looking at her? Speak plainly, I won't be offended."

"If I ever get through, I am sure to be a judge," Tom Erricker replied, with a glance of deprecation at his rather "loud" suit of red-and-white plaid "Dittoes;" "my aunt Gertrude has said so fifty times; and I feel the making of it in me, though it takes a long time in development. And I sum up the merits thus, George Cranleigh. You had no right to begin; but when you had begun, I [Pg 21] am blowed if I can see how you could help going on. And I should like to go on a lot further with it."

My mind (which was larger then than now, for nothing loses more by wear and tear) was relieved, much more than it would be now by even some valid pronouncement.

"Tom Erricker, you are a brick," I said; "and I don't mind showing you the place. There is plenty of time before dinner yet. Only you must give me your word of honour—not a syllable about it to any one."

"Hands up. That's what we say in our corps,"—for he was a member of the "Devil's Own," and a very zealous one, for such a lazy fellow,—"but I could not walk so far without a gun."

This difficulty did not last long; for I ran to the door, and asked my sister to lend her pony Amabel to my friend Tom for an hour or two. Grace was the most obliging girl that was ever too good to be married, and although she felt some kind disdain, as it seemed to me sometimes, for Tom, her pony was heartily at his service, if he would promise not to whip her. Tom came out of our little hole, when this stipulation reached his ears, and he put on his hat for the pleasure and glory of taking it off again to my sister. Among his many tendernesses, the sweetest and biggest of all perhaps was one with our Grace at the end of it. But he knew, as we know such things by instinct, that she never would come in to share it; and though he fetched many a sigh, they were shallow, because hope had never been beneath them.

Off we set in the summer afternoon, for the month was come to June already, with everything going on as if we were nothing. Because I have not said much about it,—as behoves an average young Englishman,—if anybody reads this, he may think that nothing to dwell upon had come home to me, by reason of what I had seen that day when the millers made light of my samples. But this I can declare, and would have done so long ago except for some sense that it was my affair alone, the whole world had been quite a different thing to me, ever since I set eyes upon—well, there is but one to any man worth anything; and does he ever get her?

Tom Erricker was the last fellow in the world to whom one could offer any fine gush of feeling; [Pg 22] because he was sadly sentimental sometimes, when his veins of thought were varicose, and when something nasty had happened to himself; but when his spirits were up, you would think there had never been a tear shed in the world, except by some brat who knew not how to cut his teeth. He was now in great exaltation at having fetched me, as he thought, to his level; for I had always regarded his light flirtations with a pleasant turn of humour, and he could not see the difference between himself and me. So I rode Old Joseph, who was a good tall horse; and he on little Amabel looked up at me, with no more reverence than Sancho Panza showed to the immortal knight, who ever failed to elevate him.

"Give me an open country, not your slash and scratch-pins." There was nothing Tom loved more than talking as if he had followed hounds from his infancy, instead of growing up under a dish-cover; but romancing on such subjects would not go down with me.

"Surely you might have brought us by a better road than this, George. I have had my bad times, I don't mind them in a burst; but I'm blessed if I like being scratched to pieces, with nothing whatever to show for it."

"To talk about, you mean, Tom. Well, here we get out into as pretty a bit of firland as can be found even in Surrey; and that may challenge all England to equal it. But I never go in for the picturesque."

"To be sure, not. The ladies do it ever so much better. To own the land, or at any rate the shooting, is the chief thing for us to care about. And the shooting is worth twice as much as the

crops, in the present condition of the market. Never mind, George, I won't talk about that, for I know it is a very sore subject. Do you mean to say that all this belonged to you, not more than fifty years ago?"

"Out of the frying-pan into the fire, as regards the subject," I answered with a smile, for I knew that he never meant to vex me. "But I am sorry that we cannot give you leave even to poke about here with your gun, and pot blackbirds and magpies. There go two magpies! You don't often get so near them."

"Two for a wedding—don't they say? A good omen for you, George. But where the deuce does your nymph hang out? Aha! good hit of mine! A nymph means a bride, doesn't she, in Greek?" [Pg 23]

"Shut up!" I said, for this talk was very paltry, and perhaps Tom Erricker's appearance was not quite up to the mark of a romantic moment. My chief desire was to gaze across the valley, down the further side of which, about a mile away, I could trace pretty clearly by its fringe of bushes the windings of the brook which I had crossed that day on my return from Guildford. It seemed to be ages ago, whereas it was only four weeks; but I had thought about it enough to make a very broad space of time. And here was Tom chaffing, and eager to make fun, with his red plaid trousers forced up to his knees by his jerking about in the saddle, and his loftiest air of acquaintance with the world, and his largest smiles of superiority to women. For the moment I longed to deposit him in an ant-hill.

"Well, what can I see? Or what am I to look for?" He spoke as if he had paid me for a view and I was bound to make it worth the money. Whereas, though I did ask his opinion at a distance, it was the last thing I should think of now; and in plain truth, what business had he here at all, and spying about through a shilling eyeglass? But it was not for me to take things as he did. Let him long to enter into them.

"All right," I said. "We will come another day. This may or it may not be the place. Look at your poor legs. They are fat enough; but what a sight for a lady! What a fool you were, not to take my straps!"

"Bless the fellow! Well, you are hard hit, or you would not carry on in this style." Tom turned his eyeglass upon me in a manner which might have provoked me, if I had been capable of thinking twice about him now. "In a blue study, George? Everything looks blue, even the mist in the valley. Has she got blue eyes? Ah! there is nothing like them."

"Blue eyes have no depth. What do you know about eyes?" I spoke with some warmth, as was natural. And then, just to show him how calmly I took his childish and shallow observation, I proceeded as if he had never spoken. [Pg 24]

"You see that long mass of black ivy to the right, cutting a sort of jag, or perhaps it is a great curve out of the flat steep line of the meadow?"

"Yes, to be sure I do. Nothing could be plainer. A jag which is a curve at the same time; and a flat meadow which is also steep!"

"Never mind the meadow. You are not so stupid that you can't see the wall, and the ivy on it. Now, Tom Erricker, what do you suppose that to be?"

"How can I tell, about two miles away? Let us go on, and make it out, old chap."

"Not another step. I am not at all sure that I ought to have brought you so far as this. However, you can hold your tongue, I know; and you are upon your honour about all this. Well, that is the wall of an old monastery, more than five hundred years old, I believe, and connected with that ancient chapel on the hills. Naturally, it is all in ruins now, and there has been an attempt to set a mill up in its place."

"The best thing to be done with it," Tom replied, for his nature was not reverent. "But a mill should have paid, if it had any water. Free trade has not had time to destroy the pounders yet, although it has killed the producers. But I don't want to hear about monks and mills. The lovely nuns are more to my taste."

"What nuns could there be in a monastery, Tom? You are even more abroad than usual. But though I have not been near the place, since the time I told you of, and we have nothing to do with that valley now, I have put a few quiet questions here and there, and I find that the old place has been sold to a foreign gentleman, whose name our fine fellows cannot pronounce."

"Oho! That becomes very interesting. He's papa of the beautiful nymph, no doubt. But you never mean to say that you left off there?"

"Certainly I do. How could I go prying? What Englishman would ever think of meddling with his neighbours? And a foreigner, too, who has come here for quiet——"

"Bother!" replied Tom. "If they have lovely daughters, everybody has a right to find out all about them. I'll bet you a hat it is some wicked old conspirator, a Nihilist perhaps, or at least an Anarchist, taking advantage of our stupid hospitality, to hatch some fiendish plot, and blow up some foreign monarch, with whom we pretend to be in strict friendship. Why, only a few months ago——" [Pg 25]

"No more of that. I hoped to have found a little common-sense in you. As if it were possible that

that—that perfect——"

"Angel!" cried Tom. "You can't get beyond that. And I am blessed if I ever could have believed that a sensible, slow-going bloke like you, George——"

I took hold of his bridle, and turned Amabel homeward, and gave her such a sharp little flick behind that my friend had as much as he could do to keep in the saddle, for the best part of the way back to our cottage. For we never grudged oats to our horses.

CHAPTER IV
MR. STONEMAN

[Pg 26]

No man who has to contend with the world, and support those he loves against it, cares twopence about being taken for a fool by the people he has to contend with. Their opinion to this effect frequently is of some service to him, and very seldom hurts him, unless he wants to get into their employment, or to borrow money from them. And in the latter point it even helps him, when he has good security to give.

There is a certain worm, whose name I know not, being all abroad in natural history, whose habit it is to come out of the ground and give himself an airing late at night. And then if you moisten him from above, in September or October, so grateful is he—or, if you deny him that lofty feeling, so sensitive—that he glitters like any glow-worm.

With no less amplitude, perhaps, a man who has deep emotions, such as shy ambition, or literary yearnings, or passionate humanity, or true love of a woman, sometimes lets himself out at night, when small things are lost to the eyes, and the larger objects begin to assert themselves. For after all, what are the toys of the day, for which we sweat, and fight, and crawl, and rack our poor brains till they cry for the revolver—even if we get such gauds, what are they, to make up for the gentle delight we have lost, of the days when we loved all the world, and the moments when some one tried to do the like to us?

Now nothing of this kind comes in here, for verily I had been cheated too often to rush into the embrace of the universe. But for the life of me, I cannot tell how to explain the behaviour of a [Pg 27] man, keener by a thousandfold, and harder than in my worst moments I could long to be, except by such principles, or (if they are not that) such want of principle, such backsliding, such loosening of texture, and relapse into nature, as we feel even in ourselves sometimes, and are more ashamed of them in voice than heart. However, let every one judge for himself.

It must have been close upon St. Swithin's Day, for people were watching the weather as they do, to keep up the fine old legend, when after a long turn among the hay, which was very late that year, I sat in my little den after dark, considering my pipe, or perhaps allowing it to consider for me, because I was tired with a hard day's work, and fit for nothing but putting my legs up. While we were so busy with the only thing worth growing now in England, because it grows itself, the wisest plan was to dine, or at least to feed, among it, and be content. And to feed upon it is what the true Briton must come to, whenever a great war arises. The man who has shut his eyes, must also shut his mouth, as the proverb hath it.

While I was nodding at every puff, and full of the sleepy scent of hay, the sound of a step, and the darkening of my open doorway, aroused me. "Come in, Bob," I said, "anything the matter?" For some of our ricks had been carried rather green, and we were still obliged to watch them.

"Excuse me for taking you thus by surprise. If you can spare me a few minutes, Mr. Cranleigh, you will do a great favour. It is Jackson Stoneman."

Having seen this rich gentleman chiefly at a distance, and not cared much to look at him, I wondered at his coming in upon me thus, and was rather inclined to resent it. But the thought of my father and mother, and of the great help that his tenancy was to them, compelled me to drop such little points, and receive him with all civility. My snuggery was but a very little place, forming a part of the harness-room, and resigned (whenever the door was shut) to a very modest share of daylight coming through leaded diamonds, which were certainly not brilliants. So I lit my [Pg 28] candles, still having a pair, and offered him my one armchair, an ancient Windsor, with a cushion in the bottom, more cosy than most of the easy-chairs made now to be gazed at rather than sat upon. He thanked me, but took his seat upon an oaken bench, and looked at me steadily, as if to search my humour. Being of an equable and by no means rapid temper, I returned his gaze with interest, and left him to begin.

"First of all, I must have this settled,"—his voice was very clear and rather pleasant, though he showed some signs of nervousness; "it must be understood that whether I am right or wrong in coming to you like this, you will not be annoyed, and turn against me."

"Very well," I said, for the promise was a light one. What harm could I do to a man of his wealth? And if a man offends me, I let him alone, until it is cowardice to do so.

"You attach much importance, I think, Mr. Cranleigh, to questions of birth, and position in the county, and ancient family, and so on?"

"I am not at all aware that I do so. The fact is, that I am too busy now to dwell much upon such things. And their period seems to be over."

I knew that I was talking stuff, and that bitterness made me do it. One glance from his swift eyes showed me that he thought none the more of me for taking such a tone, although for the moment it was genuine.

"If you make little of such matters, I do not," said Stoneman; "neither will any one of common-sense, for many generations yet to come. At least if those who are born to such advantage have the wisdom not to overdo it. But I want to put a few plain questions to you; and from what I have heard and seen of you, I am sure that you will answer them plainly, when you know that they are not impertinent. And I give you my word that they are not that."

"Anything you please, to the best of my knowledge, of anything a stranger has a right to know."

"I am not a stranger altogether; though I have no privilege of friendship. When I tell you what I have come about, you may think that I should have gone to your father first. But I thought it better to give you the chance of saving him from annoyance. In almost every way, you act as the manager now for the family. Am I right in believing that?" [Pg 29]

"Yes, as regards all local business. My brother, Harold, would be the proper man; but he is seldom here, and he is not fond of business—business of a small kind, I mean of course."

My visitor smiled, as if he doubted that ever there could be any but small business here; and remembering what we must have been once, I regarded him rather sternly. He was tall, and strongly built, and straight, and plainly dressed, as a man should be, leaving beauty to the beautiful. Not that he was an unsightly fellow, but very good-looking in a certain way. His forehead was large and square, and gave the idea of strength and steadfastness, and his eyes, perhaps too deeply set, but full of vigour and decision. His complexion was dark for an Englishman's, and his close-cropped hair as black as jet, and so was his short moustache, the only growth allowed upon his face. A good clear countenance upon the whole, without any sign of weakness in it, neither of more hardness than a man of the world requires, to hold his own and enlarge it.

He saw that I was "taking stock" of him,—as his own phrase might have been perhaps,—and he waited the result with confidence. Then he put me to some little confusion.

"Well, Mr. Cranleigh, I hope that some of your prejudices are not confirmed. I know that my position here is not very likely to produce goodwill, especially with young men of high spirit. But I will not go into that question now, beyond asking you this as a favour. Have I done anything, since I occupied the Hall, that a stranger should not have done among—among the real owners?"

"Not that I know of. I may say more than that. I may say that you have shown us in every way very kind consideration."

"Thank you. I have tried to do so in everything round here. But now as to taking the hounds, I have given no promise, until I knew your opinion. Would it annoy Sir Harold, or any of your family?" [Pg 30]

"Not in the least; especially after you have been so kind as to ask us. They have long left our hands, as you know. My grandfather kept them on, long after he could afford it; but my father never cared for them, and gave it up as soon as possible. As for my brother, he would have nothing to do with them, if he were made of money. And my liking matters of course neither way."

"That seems hard when you do all the work. You mean, I suppose, that you would like to keep them under different circumstances."

"If I were head of the family, and could afford it handsomely. As it is, I would not, even if I could afford it. I should seem to be putting myself too forward."

"Exactly so. And shall not I appear to be putting myself too forward, if I bring them back to the old place, just because I can afford it? Your candid opinion about that."

"Then I think not. No one could take it amiss but ourselves; and we are not so small as that."

"Not even the ladies? Sometimes ladies do not see things quite as we do. They might take it into their heads—I mean, they might think, not unreasonably, that I was of the upstart order."

"There is very little fear of that," I said; "in our family the ladies are never difficult to deal with. They have always been consulted, and therefore they are shy about forming their opinions. It is not as if they had no weight, as among the less solid Norman race. They know that what they say is something; and that makes them like to hear our opinions first."

"That state of things is most interesting, as well as rather unusual." Mr. Stoneman spoke with a smile of calm inquiry, entirely free from irony, and evidently wished me to go on. But I did not see how it concerned a stranger; so I left him to his own affairs.

"He seems a very decent sort of fellow. But if he has come to pump me," thought I, "he will find that the water has gone from the sucker." And he saw that he could not pursue that subject.

"I have lately received a requisition, or whatever is the proper name for it, from several of the [Pg 31]

people about here, whose acquaintance I made last season, that I should take over the old Crogate hounds, as Lord Wiedeland has resigned them. It was signed by yourself and your brother Harold. That made me think more about it. It seems rather absurd for a busy man like me, who could never be out more than twice a-week, and very seldom as much as that. And I am not such a fool as to care two raps about random popularity; but I want to do what I ought to do; and I will, whenever I know it."

"Then I think that you ought to do this," I answered, seeing that he was in earnest. "You ride very well, you enjoy it thoroughly, and you know quite enough about it to keep things in good order. There is not a man in the neighbourhood who dares take any liberties with you. Joe Stevens, of course, will come over with the pack. He is a host in himself. The kennels are as good as they ever were. And perhaps the hounds will recognise their duty to their ancestors, who lived so happily in the old place."

"Ah, there you touch me up; although I am sure that you never meant it. And that brings me to my second point. If I undertake this affair, upon the distinct conditions which I shall make, will you join me, and be in effect the real master, although my name is used? You are here always, I am generally away. Everybody knows and values you. I am a mere interloper. If you would only help me thus, everything would go beautifully."

Not being very quick of thought, which is upon the whole a benefit, while on the other hand I am uncommonly fond of hunting, I was not far from saying yes, when luckily my pipe went out. With that I arose to get another, and as I stood by the mantelpiece a clearer waft of mind came to me, and showed me the many objections.

"Your offer is wonderfully kind and tempting, and shows more confidence in me than I have earned." I spoke with some emotion, because I felt that last point strongly, having shown no friendship towards this man. "But I cannot accept it, Mr. Stoneman. I will do all I can to make things easy, and to help you to the utmost of my power. But my first duty is to my father and [Pg 32] mother. And I could not do this without neglecting that."

"You are right. I was wrong in proposing it. My stable, of course, would have been at your service. But the inroads upon your time, and the many derangements—well, never mind, so long as you are not angry with me for proposing it. But if you will come out with us now and then——"

"Certainly I will, upon our Old Joseph. He ran away with me not very long ago. Some of your young cracks would find him not so very far behind; for he is wonderfully knowing."

"Good for you, I know how that tells up; though I am not a 'Parson Jack,' who laid £5 that he would be in at the death upon his old donkey, and won it. Very well, all that is settled—not exactly as I should wish, but as much as we ever get things. But the next thing I shall never get. And it is the only thing in life I care for."

"I should have thought that a man like you, resolute, very clear-headed, and wealthy, might make sure of everything that in reason he required. With life and health, I mean, of course, and the will of the Lord not against him."

"We never know what is the will of the Lord, until we console ourselves with it. Not that I am a scoffer or even a sceptic, Mr. Cranleigh. And in some of the greatest moments of my life—but I will not bother you with them. Only I may say that I look upon this as the very greatest of them all. I don't want to make a fool of myself—but—perhaps the Lord has done it for me."

He tried to make a little smile of this, and looked as if he wanted me to help him out. But I could only stare, and wonder whether any man ever born is at all times right in his head. For if anybody could be expected to know what he is about at all times, I should have thought that man would be Jackson Stoneman of the Stock Exchange. So I waited, as my manner is, for him to make good sense of this.

Then he got up from his bench and set his face (which had been quivering) as firm as the Funds, and looked down at me—for I was in my Windsor chair again—and his eyes seemed to flash [Pg 33] defiance at me, although his voice was tender.

"George Cranleigh, you may think what you like. I care not a rap what anybody thinks. I love your sister Grace, as no man ever loved a woman, or ever will."

My amazement was so great and sudden that I looked at him without a word. For a moment I was beaten out of time by this strong man's intensity.

"I know all the stuff that you will say," he went on with scanty politeness. "That I have not seen her more than half-a-dozen times. That I have no right to lift my eyes to her. That even a mint of money can never make up for the want of birth. That I am nothing but an upstart. That I may be a rogue for all you know. That she is a million times too good, and pure, and beautiful for such a fellow. Go on, go on; I would rather have it over."

"But I have not begun yet, and you give me no time," I answered very steadily, having now recovered myself, and objecting to have my arguments forestalled. "You seem to forget yourself, Mr. Stoneman. There is no necessity for excitement. That a man of the world like you——"

"That is the very point. That's what makes my chance so bad. There is nothing of romance or sweet sentiment about me. I don't know anything about hearts and darts. I have no poetical

ideas. I could not fling myself off a rock—if there was one. I don't know how to couch a lance. I am pretty sure, though I have never tried, that I couldn't do a sonnet, at any price. And if I did, and it leaked out, it would be the ruin of my business."

"You can buy a sweet sonnet for five shillings, as good as they make them nowadays, but a little common-sense is better than a thousand sonnets; and of that, when you are at all yourself, you must have a very large supply. Now sit down, and let us talk this out. At first it came to me as a very great surprise. It was about the last thing that I could have expected. But I think you were wise in coming first to me."

When I look back upon this interview, it often astonishes me that I should have been able so quietly to take the upper hand with a man not only my elder and of tenfold experience in the [Pg 34] world, but also before me in natural gifts, and everything that one could think of, except bodily strength and the accident of birth. Nevertheless I did at once, after that weak confession of his, take a decided lead upon him. Why? Because he was plunged into love—a quicksand out of which no man attempts to pull another, being well aware what he would get for his pains, and rather inclined to make sport of him, whenever it may be done, without harm to oneself.

"Well," I said, after waiting to see whether he would make another start; but even his vigour was unequal to that, and he felt that he had trespassed over the British bounds of self-control—"well, let us look at this affair like men, and as if there were no woman in it." He lifted his hand, by way of protest, as if I were begging the question; but seeing how judicious my view was, and desiring perhaps to conciliate me, he pulled out a large cigar and did his best to light it. "You may take it," I proceeded, with much magnanimity and some contempt, little presaging my own condition in less than a month from that very day, "that I look at these subjects sensibly. I have every reason so far to like you, because you have behaved very well to us. You behaved very handsomely and justly, long before—well, long before you could possibly have taken this strange turn."

"What a way to put it! But let everything be straight. I should never have taken the Hall unless—I mean if anybody else had been there to show me—to show me what a nice place it was."

"I see. Well, never mind how it began. But I will be as straight as you are. It is difficult for me to do that, without saying some things to offend you."

"Say what you please, Mr. Cranleigh. Say what you will, I shall not forget whose brother you are, and that you mean to do your duty to her."

"To the best of my power. In the first place, then, do you know what the character of our Grace is? She is gentle, and shy, and affectionate, and unselfish as a girl alone can be. On the other hand, she is proud, and high-spirited, and as obstinate as the very devil. Of money she never [Pg 35] thinks twice, except for the sake of those around her. She has the very loftiest ideals, which she cherishes, but never speaks of them. Can a money-maker realise them?"

This I ought never to have said; for it pained him very bitterly. He made no answer; but the expression of his face showed that I had hit his own misgivings.

"Not that I would make too great a point of that," I proceeded more politely; "for a woman is not like a man altogether, however consistent she may be. And Grace is only a girl after all, so that no one must be too certain. She forms her own opinions to some extent, and nothing will work her out of them. She takes likes and dislikes at first sight, and she declares they are always justified——"

"You don't happen to know, I suppose—I mean you have not formed any idea——"

"What she thought of you, Mr. Stoneman? No. I was rather surprised that she never said a word that day she was sent for to give you the keys. The utmost I could get out of her was, 'Oh, yes, he was very polite, very polite, I assure you.' And so it is still; as if your entire nature was politeness, and you consisted of good manners."

"Manners maketh man." My visitor spoke for the first time lightly, and the smile on his face was no small improvement. "But you will think that I cannot claim them, if I delay any longer to thank you. You have taken what I had to tell you much better than I could have expected; and for that I am very grateful. But I want to know this. I have heard a good deal of the importance attached by the Cranleighs to their very old lineage—Saxon, I believe. But my family has no such claims. We can boast no more than this—for three, or four generations at the most, we have been well educated and well off. All business men, no lords of the land, no knights with coats of mail, and legs crossed upon a slab. Now does that make you look down upon me from the height of Salisbury steeple?"

Without any knowledge of his wealth, such as most of us look up to, it would have been hard for any one to look down upon the man before me. And sooth to say, there are plenty of men in his [Pg 36] position, and of far lower birth than his, who would have considered themselves at the top, and me at the bottom of the tower. But before I could answer, a sudden flush came over his face, and he rose in haste—for I had made him sit down again—and he seemed to be trying very hard to look as if he were not where he was. Perhaps his conscience told him that he was caught in the attempt to steal a march.

But my sister Grace (who had just come in with her usual light step, to tempt me to have at least a glass of beer before despising everything), by some extraordinary gift of sight—though there never have been straighter eyes—Grace never saw that great stockbroker, who wanted her not to

look at him.

"George, this is too bad of you again," she began with a smile, almost too sweet for home-consumption only. "Work, work, all day, double, double, toil and trouble; and scarcely a morsel of nourishment!"

"Not a bit to eat, is what you generally say, and ever so much better English." I spoke in that way, because I really do dislike all affectation, and I was sure that she had espied the stockbroker.

"Never mind how I express it," said Grace, and I thought that rather independent of her, and it confirmed my conviction that she knew of some one too ready to make too much of her. "If you understand it, that is enough. But do come, darling George, you make us so sadly anxious about you. What should we do, if you fell ill? And your poor dear eyes that were so blue—the loveliest blue—oh, such a blue——"

She knew that her own were tenfold bluer, and mine no more than cigar-ash to them. Now a man can put up with a lot of humbug from a sister who is good to him; but he must be allowed to break out sometimes, or she herself will soon make nought of him. And all this unusual gush from Grace, because I had missed my supper beer. When she offered to kiss my poor lonely brow, it annoyed me, as I thought of being superseded.

"My dear child," I said, waving my hand towards the corner where Stoneman looked envious, "the light is very dim; but I really should have thought that you must have seen Mr. Stoneman there. [Pg 37] Mr. Stoneman, allow me to apologise for my sister's apparent rudeness. I fear that she over-tries her eyes sometimes."

The stockbroker favoured me with a glance, as if he longed to over-try my eyes too; and then he came forward and offered his hand to my discomfited sister, with the lowest bow I ever did behold. All this was a delight to me; but neither of them for the moment seemed to be enjoying it.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Stoneman," said our Grace, recovering herself with a curtsey, as profound as his bow, and a thousand times more graceful. "Really I must take to spectacles. But I hope, as you have heard my little lecture, you will join me in persuading my dear brother to take a little more care of himself. He works all day long; and then at night he sits all by himself and thinks—as I thought he was doing when I came so in the dark."

After a few more words she left us, departing with a dignity which showed how wrong I must have been in suspecting her of levity.

"She is—she is——" Mr. Stoneman stopped, for he could not find anything grand enough. "Oh, I wish I might only call you *George*."

"With all my heart," I replied quite humbly, perceiving a touch of bathos, which in human affairs is almost sure to mean a return to common-sense. "All over the farm they call me *George*, at any rate behind my back."

"Then, my dear George, I will leave you now. I have had a most delightful visit; and I wish to go and think about it. But do not suppose for a moment that I shall cherish any foolish hopes. I know what I am, and what she is. Did you see how she walked from the table? And my cigar was smoking on it."

"Shall I tell you what to do, my friend?" I answered rather pettishly; "you are famous for strong decision, as well as quick sagacity. Exert a little of them now, and put away this weakness."

"It is not my weakness. It is my strength."

Before I could speak again, he was gone. And verily, when I went out of doors, and saw the stars [Pg 38] in their distant gaze, and felt the deep loneliness of night, it struck me that perhaps this man was wise—to set his heart upon a constant love, some warmth and truth not far to seek, and one at least who would never fail to feel his thoughts and endear his deeds.

[Pg 39]

CHAPTER V
TICKNOR'S MEW

Some men there are whom it is a pleasure to observe at their daily work. How they swing their shoulders, and sway their arms, and strain the strong cordage of the bulky thigh, casting weight as well as muscle into the fight they are waging! And this pleasure should be made the most of, because it is growing very rare. I have heard my grandfather say, that when he was a boy, one man could do, ay and would insist on doing, more work in a day, than is now to be got out of three by looking hard at them—three men of the very same stock and breed, perhaps even that grandfather's own grandchildren. And the cause which he always assigned for this, though not a bad scholar himself, and even capable of some Latin, was the wild cram and pressure of pugnacious education. "The more a jug gurgles, the less it pours," was his simple explanation.

There is much to be said on the other side, especially as the things put into their heads are quick enough to go out again, and the Muses as yet have not turned the village-boy into a Ganymede; but the only man, on our little farm, who ever worked with might and main had never been at

school at all, and his name was Robert Slemmick. To this man nothing came amiss, if only there was enough of it. He was not particularly strong, nor large of frame, nor well put together; but rather of a clumsy build and gait, walking always with a stoop, as if he were driving a full wheel-barrow, and swinging both arms at full speed with his legs. But set him at a job that seemed almost too heavy for him, and he never would speak, nor even grunt, nor throw down his tool and [Pg 40] flap his arms, but tear away at it, without looking right or left, till you saw with surprise that this middle-sized man had moved a bigger bulk in the course of a day than a couple of hulking navvies.

But one fault he had, and a very sad fault, which had lost him many a good place ere now, and would probably bring him to the workhouse—he was what is called by those who understand such matters a "black buster." At the nearest approach I could make to this subject, sidling very carefully—for the British workman would be confidential rather to a ghost than to his own employer—it seems that there are two kinds of "busters." The white one, who only leaves work for a spree of a day or two, meaning to jollify, and to come back in a chastened vein, after treating all his friends, and then going upon trust; and the black, who is of a stronger mind. This man knows better than to waste his cash upon clinking glasses with a bubble at the top. He is a pattern for weeks and months together, pours every shilling on a Saturday night into the hands of his excellent wife—for it is his luck to have a good one—sits in a corner with his quiet pipe at home, and smiles the smile of memory when the little ones appeal to his wisdom. And so he goes on, without much regret for adventure, or even for beer, beyond the half-pint to which his wife coerces him.

Everybody says, "What a steady fellow Bob is! He is fit for a Guild, if he would only go to Church." He ties the Canary creeper up, and he sees to his cabbages, upon a Sunday morning. And the next-door lady shakes her head over the four-feet palings, with her husband upstairs roaring out for a fresher, after a tumble-down night of it. "Oh, if my Tom was like your Mr. Robert!" But Mrs. Bob also shakes her head. "Oh, yes, he is wonderful good *just now*."

Then comes the sudden break down, and breakaway. Without a word to any one, or whisper to his family, off sets Mr. Robert, on a Monday morning generally, after doing two good hours' work, before breakfast. Perhaps he has been touched on the virtuous road home, by a fine smell of beer [Pg 41] at the corner, where the potboy was washing the pewters, and setting them in the sun for an airing; perhaps it was a flower that set him off, a scarlet Geranium, who can tell? Under some wild impulse he bolts and makes away; he is in the next parish, before his poor wife has given up keeping the tea-pot warm; and by the time she has knocked at the tool-house door, in the forlorn hope that he may be ill, he is rousing the dust of the adjoining county, still going straight ahead, as if the Devil were after him. And that last authority alone can tell how Bob lives, what he thinks of, where his legs and arms are, whence his beer flows down to him, for a month, or even half-a-year, or nobody knows how long it is.

This Robert Slemmick had been in our employment ever since last Candlemas, and had only broken out once as yet, in the manner above described. Excepting only that little flaw, his character was excellent, and a more hard-working, obliging, intelligent man never came on any premises. When I took him back after his escapade, I told him very plainly that it would not be done again; and he promised to stick to his work, and did so. But not a word to me, or anybody else, as to why he went away, or whither, or what he had been doing, or how he got his living. Knowing how peculiar the best men are—otherwise could they be good at all?—I tried not to intrude upon the romance of his Beerhaven, but showed myself rather cold to him, though I longed to know about it.

"Master Jarge," said this man one day, when he was treading a hayrick, and I was in the waggon with the fork below; and it must according to the times have been the very day after Jackson Stoneman came to me, "Master Jarge, what would 'e give to know summut as I could tell 'e?"

He had had a little beer, as was needful for the hay; and I looked at him very seriously; reminding him thus, without harshness, of my opinion of his tendencies. But he did not see it in that light.

"You shape the rick," I said. "I don't want to hear nothing." For you must use double negations if [Pg 42] you wish them to understand you. We were finishing a little rick of very choice short staple, with a lot of clover in it, and *Old Joe* in the shafts was likely to think of it many a winter night. At such a juncture, it will not do to encourage even a silent man.

Bob went cleverly round and round, dealing an armful here and there, for a very small round rick is the hardest of all for scientific building, and then he came back to the brink close to me, till I thought he was going to slide down upon my knees.

"What would 'e give, Master Jarge," he whispered, making a tube of his brown, bristly hand, "to hear all about the most bootifullest maiden as ever come out of the heavens?"

Although I felt a tingle in my heart at this, I answered him very firmly. "Get on with your work. Don't talk rubbish to me."

"You be the steadiest of the steady. Every fool knows that. But I reckon, Master Jarge hath his turn to come, same as every young man the Lord hath made with a pair of eyes. Oh! our Miss Grace, she be bootiful enough. But this one over yonner—O Lord! O Lord!"

He waved his hand towards the valley in the distance, whose outline was visible from where we stood. And dignified as I tried to be, he saw my glance go wandering.

"Why, you knows all about it, Master Jarge! You be clapping your eyes upon the very place! Why, ne'er a man in England hath ever seed the like. And who could a'thought it, a'standing outside!"

"Nonsense!" I said. "Why, you must have been dreaming. Who knows what comes over you sometimes?"

This reference to his "busting" weakness was not in good taste, when the crime had been forgiven, and the subject was known to be hateful to him. But this was the sure way to let his tongue loose; and when a reserved man once breaks forth, he is like a teetotaller going on the spree.

"I could show 'e the place now just, Master Jarge; the place can't run away I reckon. All over ivy-leaves the same as a church-tower. You can't deny of they, when you sees them, can 'e? And the [Pg 43] bootiful young gal—why, you've seed her, Master Jarge! By the twinkle of your eyes, I could swear to it."

"Robert Slemmick, you are off your head;" I answered with a very steadfast gaze at him, for his keen little eyes were ready to play "I spy" with mine. "I insist upon knowing where you have been, and what you have done, and what people you have met. If they knew that you were in Sir Harold Cranleigh's service, you may have done us great discredit."

With some indignation he told his tale, and finished it before the other men came back; for his tongue was as brisk as his arms and legs, which had rare gifts of locomotion. But I must fill in what he left out, for it would be neither just nor wise to expect him to inform against himself.

It seems that he was walking very fast, discharging himself from domestic bonds, and responsibility, and temperance, when he came to a black door in a big wall; and rapid as he was, this brought him up. His thoughts, if any, were always far in advance of him at such moments, and perhaps his main object was to overtake them. This he could not explain, and had never thought about it, but at any rate that door should not stop him. It was locked, or bolted, and without a bell, but he worked all his members together against it, as he alone of mankind could do, and what could withstand such progressive power? The door flew open, and in rushed Slemmick, like the London County Council.

But there are powers that pay no heed to the noblest psychical impulse. Two dogs of extraordinary bulk and stature had him prostrate between them in an instant, and stood over him, grinding enormous jaws. Dazed as he was, cold terror kept his restless members quiet, and perhaps he felt—though he did not so confess it—that conjugal law was vindicated. "I were in too terrible a funk to think," was his statement of the position.

But the two dogs appeared to enjoy the situation, and being of prime sagacity were discussing his character between them. If he had been a mere "white buster," that is to say a common tramp, [Pg 44] they would have stopped his tramp for ever. But they saw that he was a respectable man, a sound home-liver in his proper state of mind; and although they would not hear of his getting up, they deliberated what they ought to do with him. Slemmick in the meanwhile was watching their great eyes, and their tails flourished high with triumphant duty, and worst of all their tremendous white fangs, quivering if he even dared to shudder.

"Abashed I were to the last degree," he told me, and I could well believe it; "my last thought was to my poor wife Sally." A good partner, to whom his first thoughts should have been. But while he was thus truly penitent I hope, a clear sound as of a silver whistle came to his ears, and the dogs stood up, and took the crush of their paws from his breast, and one of them sat by him, in strict vigilance still, while the other bounded off for instructions.

Then, according to Slemmick, there appeared to him the most beautiful vision he had ever seen. "Straight from heaven. Don't tell me, Master Jarge, for never will I hear a word agin it. Straight from heaven, with the big hound a'jumping at her side, and him looking like an angel now. If you was to see her, you'd just go mad, and never care to look at any other maid no more."

"What was she like, Bob?" It had not been my intention to put any question of this kind, but Slemmick was in such a state of excitement, that I had a right to know the reason.

"Don't 'e ask me, sir; for good, don't 'e ask me. There never was no words in any Dixunary, and if there was, I couldn't lay to them. There then, you go and judge for yourself, Master Jarge."

"But she can't be there all by herself, my friend. Surely you must have seen some one else. And what language did she speak in?"

"Blowed if I can tell 'e, sir. All I know is, 't were a mixture of a flute and a blackbird, and the play-'em-out-of-Church pipes of the horgan. Not that she were singing, only to the ear, my meaning is; and never mind the words no more than folk does in a hanthem. Lor, to hear poor Sally's voice, [Pg 45] after coming home from that—even in the wisest frame of mind, with all the wages in her lap!"

"But you did not come home, Bob Slemmick, for I know not how long. Did you spend the whole of your time in that enchanted valley?"

"Ah, a chant it were, by gum! A chant as I could listen to—why, Master Jarge, I'll take 'e there; for two skips of a flea I would. Won't 'e? Very well. Best not, I reckon. Never look at no English maids no more."

This was nearly all that I could get from Bob, without putting hundreds of questions; for instead

of straight answers, he went off into ravings about this most ravishing young lady, who must have contrived to make out what he wanted, for after having saved him from the dogs, she led him directly to the lower door, and sped him on his way with half-a-crown. But that, as he assured me, was of no account in his estimate of her qualities. "You ask Farmer Ticknor, sir, if you think I be a'lying. Farmer Ticknor hath seed her, more at his comfort than ever I did; and Ticknor come hotter than I do. 'Hold your blessed jaw'—he say, when I goeth to ask about her, knowing as he were neighbourly—'What call for you, Bob Slemmick?' he saith, 'to come running like a dog on end down here? I'll give you a charge of shot,' he saith, 'if I catch you in the little lane again. 'T is the Royal Family, and no mistake, that knoweth all about this here. And don't you make no palaver of it, to come stealing of my mushrooms.' As if we hadn't better as we kicks up every day!"

Now all this talk of Bob's, although it may have told upon my mind a little, was not enough to set me running straight away from my home and friends, at a very busy time of year, as Slemmick was so fond of doing. But betwixt the green and yellow, as our people call the times of hay and corn, it seemed to me that I might as well have a talk with that Farmer Ticknor, who was known to be a man of great authority about the weather and the crops, and had held land under us as long as he could afford to do so. He was rather crusty now, as a man is apt to be when he lives upon a crust for the benefit of foreigners, and receives his exchange in coloured tallow. It was [Pg 46] two or three years since I had seen him now; for "Ticknor's Mew," as he called his place, was out of the general course of traffic, and as lonely among the woods as a dead fern-frond. I found him at home on a fine summer evening, and he put up my horse, and received me very kindly, for he was not a bad sort of man, though rough. And if any pleasure yet remained in Farmer's lane to workhouse, this man made the most of it by looking at the sky, as if it still could help him against the imbecility of the earth.

"Yes, I have been a fine hand at it," he said, after sending for a jug of ale, and two bell-rummers; "there never was a cloud, but I know the meaning of 'un, though without they long names they has now. Bessie, my dear, fetch *Ticknor's marks*. Don't care much to do it now—nought to lose or gain of it. Not much odds to this land of England now, what weather God Almighty please to send. 'And when they shamed the Lord out of caring to mind the harvest, the Government goeth for to hirritate Him more, with a Hoffice to tell us what sort of hat to put upon our heads, when us can't pay for none. But I'll bet my Sunday beaver against his band of gold. What say to that, Mr. Cranleigh? I stuck 'un on the barn-door every marnin' as long as there was anything to care for in the whitfields. It covereth a whole year, don't it, Bessie? Cross stands for wrong, and straight line for right."

Ticknor's marks, as he called his calendar, certainly seemed to hit the mark more often than the men of science did. On a great blackboard were pasted in parallel columns the "Daily forecasts" and Farmer Ticknor's predictions entered at noon of each preceding day. His pretty daughter Bessie, the editor, no doubt, of his oracles, displayed them with no little pride.

"If you will be pleased to observe, Mr. Cranleigh"—Bessie had been at a boarding-school—"my father's predictions are in manuscript of course,"—and much better than he could write, thought I,—"while the authorised forecasts are in type. Now the crosses on the manuscript are not quite five per cent; while those upon the printing exceed seventy-five. If there were any impartiality in politics, don't you think, Mr. Cranleigh, they would give father the appointment? And he would be [Pg 47] glad to do it in these bad times, for less than half the money. Though we must not blame the gentlemen who have to do it all through the window."

"You never hear me boast," interrupted the farmer; "there never was that gift in our family. But I'll go bail to give that Meatyard man, or whatever they calls 'un, five pips out of ten—all this reckoning by scents hath come after my time—and give 'un twelve hours longer with his arrows and his dots; and then I'll name the day agin him, for the best joint in his yard. But bless your heart and mine too, Master Jarge, what odds for the weather now? Why, even the hay, they tell me now, is to come in little blocks from foreign parts. Make a ton of it they say they can by hyderaulic something come out not a morsel bigger than the parish-Bible. Well, well! Well, well!"

Knowing that if he once began upon "Free Trade," there would be many changes of weather before he stopped, I brought him back to the other subject, and contrived to lead him as far as the margin of the wood, where the clouds by which he made his divinations could be contemplated more completely; but he told me a great deal about their meanings, although he knew nothing of their names; all of which I forget, though I tried to attend.

It was not for any knowledge of clouds, or weather, or politics, or even harvest-prospects, that I was come to see this Prophet Ticknor in the woods. My mother's favourite subject was the "Fulfilment of Prophecy;" but what I cared for now, and thought myself bound to follow out, was the vision (seen by others as well as myself) of a foreign young maiden—if it must be so—unequalled by any of English birth. The prevalence of loose commercial ideas, and the prostitution of Britannia (so highly respected while she locked her own gate), had given me a turn against things foreign, though none but my enemies could call me narrow-minded. And here I was open to conviction, as usual, with a strong prepossession against my country, or, at any rate, against her girls, however lovely.

"I suppose you don't happen to know," I said to that excellent Ticknor, while still among his [Pg 48] clouds, "whether anybody lives in that old place, where there seems to be such a lot of black stuff? What is it? Ivy it looks like. And old walls behind it, or something very old. I think I have heard of some old Monastery there; and it was part of our property long and long ago. Oh,

Farmer Ticknor, how everything does change!"

The farmer afforded me a glance of some suspicion. Narrow trade-interests had got the better of him. "You be gone into the retail line," he said. "To think of the Cranleighs coming down to that. But you don't sell milk by the quart now, do 'e?"

Though I did not see how it could bear upon the subject, I assured him that most of our milk went to London, under contract with a great man, whose name I mentioned; and the rest we kept for making butter.

"Well, then, I does a good little stroke of business there. Though not much profit out of that, of course. They takes in a gallon-can every morning. And they asked the boy whether I didn't keep no goats."

"Goats! Why then they must be foreigners," I said. "No English people care about goat's milk. At least, unless their doctor orders it."

"They ha'n't got no doctor, and don't want none. A rare strong lot according to all I hear. Toorks I call them, and I put it on the bill, 'Toork Esquire, debtor to John Ticknor.' Having raised no objection, why it stands they must be Toorks."

"But people can't live on milk alone, Mr. Ticknor. And they must have some other name besides Turks. Even if they are Turks, which I scarcely can believe."

"Well, you knows more about them than I do, sir. I never form an opinion, so long as they pays me good English money. But they never has no butcher's meat, nor no beer; and that proves that they bain't English folk. If you want to know more about them, Mr. Cranleigh, the one as can teach you is my dog *Grab*. *Grab* feeleth great curiosity about them, because of the big dogs inside the old wall. He hath drashed every other dog in the parish; and it goeth very hard with him to have no chance to drash they. Never mind, old boy, your time will come."

An atrocious bull-dog of the fiercest fighting type, who had followed us from the farmhouse, was [Pg 49] nuzzling into his master's grey whiskers. Now I love nearly all dogs, and, as a rule, they are very good to me; but that surly fellow, who is supposed to be the type of our national character, does not appear to me, by any means, adorable. Very faithful he may be, and consistent, and straightforward, and devoted to his duty. But why should he hold it a part of his duty to kill every gentle and accomplished dog he meets, unless the other dips his tail, the canine ensign, to him? And of all the bull-dogs I have ever seen, this *Grab* was the least urbane and polished. A white beast with three grisly patches destroying all candour of even blood-thirstiness, red eyes leering with treacherous ill-will, hideous nostrils, like ulcers cut off, and enormous jowls sagging from the stark white fangs. He saw that I disliked him, and a hearty desire to feel his tusks meet in my throat was displayed in the lift of his lips, and the gleam of his eyes.

"Wonnerful big hounds they furriners has, according to what my milk-boy says," the farmer continued, with a plaintive air; "but they never lets them free of the big wall hardly, to let *Grab* see what they be made of. But come back to house, and have a bit of supper with us, before you go home, Mr. Cranleigh. 'T is a roughish ride even in summer-time."

"Thank you; not a bit to eat; but perhaps before I go, another glass of your very fine home-brewed. But I see a tree down in the valley there, that I should like to know more about. I'll follow you back to the house in a few minutes. But how long did you say that those strangers have been here? It seems such an odd thing that nobody appears to know anything about them."

"Well, a goodish long while they must have been there now. And they don't seem to make no secret of it. Bakes their own bread, if they have any; never has any carriage-folk to see them, never comes out with a gun to pot a hare; don't have no fishmonger, butcher, grocer, nor any boy to call out 'papper' at the door. My boy Charlie is uncommon proud, because he have got into their 'Good-morning.' They says it like Christians, so far as he can judge, and naturally he [Pg 50] sticketh up for them. You can ask him, Master Jarge, if you think fit. Nothing clandestical about Ticknor's Mew. But none of them Inspectors to pump into our milk, and swear as we did it. That's why I keep you, *Grab*."

Farmer Ticknor made off with this little grumble, lifting his hat to me, until I should return. For he did not look down upon the "Gentry of the land," for being out at elbows. After thinking for a minute of all that I had heard, which was not very much to dwell upon, I twirled my riding-crop (which I had brought from habit, and been glad to have when I watched *Grab's* teeth), and set off with a light foot, to explore that lonely valley.

I was now on the opposite side from that by which I had entered it to the tune of the nightingale, and at first I could scarcely make out my bearings. For though I had seen it afar with Tom Erricker, something prevented me from letting him come near it. Tom was an excellent fellow in his way; but of reverence and lofty regard for women no decent Englishman could have much less. Decent I say, because if such sentiments are cast by, and scoffed at—as fools think it clever to do—the only thing left is indecency.

This valley was not like many places, that are tempting only at a distance. The deeper I found myself in it, the more I was filled with its gentleness and beauty. It has never been in my line at all to be able to convey what comes across me,—when I see things that look as if they called upon us to be grateful for the pleasure they contribute to our minds. Certain people can do this, as some can make fine after-dinner speeches, while others are more fitted to rejoice inside. And if I

were to fail in depicting a landscape, such as any Surrey man may see by walking a few miles, how would you care to follow me into the grandest scenery the Maker of the earth has made anywhere, unless it be in His own temple of the heavens?

Enough that it was a very lovely valley, winding wherever it ought to wind, and timbered just where it should be, with the music of a bright brook to make it lively, and the distance of the hills to keep it sheltered from the world. And towards the upper end where first the stream came [Pg 51] wimpling into it, that ancient wall, which had baffled me, enclosed a large piece of land as well as some length of watercourse, but gave no other token of its purpose. This was what I cared most about; for stupid and unreasonable as it must appear, a sharp spur had been clapped to my imagination by the vague talk of Slemmick and Ticknor. And not only that, but to some extent, the zeal and the ardour of Jackson Stoneman, and his downright policy, had set me thinking that poor as I was, while he was rolling in money, the right of my manhood was the same as his—to pursue by all honest means the one fair image which a gracious power had disclosed to me. Therefore, after looking at the tree to soothe my conscience, I followed the course of that wandering wall, by no means in a sneaking manner, but showing myself fairly in the open meadows, and walking as one who takes exercise for health.

The wall was on my left hand, all the way from the track (in which the steep road ended after crossing the brook) and although I would rather sink into a bog than seek to be spying impertinently, nothing could have come upon that wall, and no one could have peeped over it without my taking it in at a side-flick. But I only had sense of one thing moving throughout all my circuit, and that was but little to comfort me. Just as I was slipping by the upper door (which Slemmick had burst open), and taking long strides—for if some one had opened it and asked what I wanted there, how could I, as a gentleman, tell the whole truth?—suddenly there appeared within a square embrasure, and above the parapet among the ivy, the most magnificent head I ever saw. Mighty eyes, full of deep intelligence, regarded me, noble ears (such as no man is blest with) quivered with dignified inquiry, while a majestic pair of nostrils, as black as night, took sensitive quest of the wind, whether any of the wickedness of man were in it.

Knowing that I only intended for the best, though doubtful if that would stand me in much stead, supposing that this glorious dog took another view of it, I addressed him from below with words of praise, which he evidently put aside with some contempt. He was considering me impartially [Pg 52] and at leisure; and if I had moved he would have bounded down upon me. Luckily I had the sense to stand stock-still, and afford him every facility for study of my character. At the same time I looked at him, not combatively, but as if I felt similar interest in him, which I had excellent reason for doing. To my great relief his eyes assumed a kind expression; by the pleasant waving of his ears I could tell that his tail was wagging, and he showed a bright dimple beneath his black whiskers, and smiled with the humour which is far beyond our ken. Whereupon I nodded to him, and made off.

When I came to think of him, in that coarser frame of mind in which we explain everything so meanly, it occurred to me that those noble nostrils, curving like the shell of Amphitrite, were scarcely moved so much perhaps by the influence of my goodness, as by the fragrance of my sister's spaniel, *Lady Silky*, who had nestled in my hairy jacket, while I was casting up accounts that day. However, be his motive large or small, he had formed a friendly opinion of me, and when I disappeared among the trees, a low whine followed me as if the place had grown more lonely.

Upon the whole I had made some progress towards the solution of this strange affair. Within those walls there must be living a settlement of foreigners, an establishment of some size, to judge by the quantity of milk they used. Some of them could speak English, but they did not seem to associate with any of their neighbours, and probably procured from London the main part of what they needed. To Farmer Ticknor, as to most of the rustics round about us, all who were not of British birth were either Turks or Frenchmen. To my mind these were neither; and the possession of those noble dogs—a breed entirely new to me—showed that they were not dwelling here to conceal their identity, or to retrench from poverty. For there were at least two dogs, perhaps more, worth a hundred guineas each to any London dealer at the lowest computation, and not by any means qualified to live on scanty rations. Another point I had ascertained—that the old Mill, out of use for many years, was now at work again. This had been built, no one knows how long ago, among the monastic ruins upon the never-failing Pebblebourne. And while I was [Pg 53] counting the moments for that gigantic dog to spring down on me, I heard very clearly the plash of the wheel, and the boom and murmur of the works inside.

As a last chance of picking up something more, when I was getting on my horse, I said across his mane to the fair Bessie Ticknor, that "highly-cultured" maiden,—"A little bird has told me, though I would not listen to him, that a young lady almost as pretty as Miss Ticknor lives in a valley not a hundred miles from here." Bessie raised her jet-black eyes, and blushed, and simpered, and whispered, so that her father could not hear it:—

"Oh, I 'd give anything to know! It is such a romantic mystery! Culture does put such a cruel curb upon curiosity. But it does not take much to surpass *me*, Mr. Cranleigh."

"We are not all quite blind in this world, Miss Ticknor; though some may try to contradict their looking-glass."

CHAPTER VI
TRUE HYGIENE

[Pg 54]

Whenever my brother Harold deigned to visit us from London, we had not much time to do anything more than try to understand his last idea. If he had only been fond of society, or philosophy, or even ladies, we could have got on with him ever so much better; for he really never meant any harm at all. Pity for the pressure he was putting on his brain saddened to some extent the pride which he inspired; and when he came down to announce his last *eureka*, the first thing my mother did was to make him show his tongue. My mother did think mighty things of this the first-born child she had; and him a son—endowed beyond all sister-babies with everything. Nevertheless she did her utmost to be fair to all of us; and sometimes when her eyes went round us, at Christmastime, or birthdays, any stranger would have thought that we all were gifted equally.

I am happy to say that this was not the case. Never has it been my gift to invent anything whatever; not even a single incident in this tale which I am telling you. Everything is exactly as it happened; and according to some great authorities, we too are exactly as we happened.

But my brother Harold can never have happened. He must have been designed with a definite purpose, and a spirit to work his way throughout, although it turned to Proteus. He had been through every craze and fad,—I beg his pardon,—Liberation of the Age, Enlightenment, Amelioration of Humanity, &c. &c., and now in indignation at the Pump Court drains, he was gone upon what he called *Hygiene*.

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"What the devil do you mean, by this blessed Hygiene?" Though by no means strong at poetry, I turned out this very neat couplet one day, with the indignation that makes verses, when I saw that he had a big trunk in the passage, which certain of us still called the hall.

"George, will you never have any large ideas?" he replied with equal rudeness, such as brothers always use. "This time, even you will find it hard to be indifferent to my new discovery. The ardour of truth has triumphed."

"Go ahead," I said, for he had had his dinner, though that made very little difference to him, his ardour of truth being toast and water now. "But if you won't have a pipe, I will. Is the smell anti-hygienic?"

"Undoubtedly it is. About that there cannot be two sane opinions. Puff away; but be well assured that at every pull you are inhaling, and at every expiration spreading—"

"All right. Tell us something new, and you are never far to seek in that—Pennyroyal, fenugreek, ruta nigra, tin-tacks hydrised, hyoscyamus, colocasia, geopordon carbonised—what is the next panacea?"

"Tabacum Nicotianum." Nothing pleased my brother more than the charge of inconsistency and self-contradiction. Seeing that he lay in wait for this, I would not let him have it, but answered with indifference—

"That is right, old fellow. I am glad that you have come to a sensible view of Tobacco. Any very choice cigars in your trunk, old chap? But I should fear that you had invented them."

No one could help liking Harold at first sight. He was simply the most amiable fellow ever seen. Amiable chiefly in a passive way, although he was ready for any kind action, when the claims of discovery permitted. And now as we were strolling in the park, and the fine Surrey air had brightened his handsome face with more "hygiene" than he ever would produce, I was not surprised at the amount of money he extracted even from our groans.

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"Would you like to know what is in my trunk?" he asked with that simple smile, which was at once the effect and the cause of his magnetism. "I have done it for the sake of the family first, and then of the neighbourhood, and then of the county. I shall offer the advantages to Surrey first. As an old County family, that is our duty. There is some low typhoid in the valleys still. Run and fetch my trunk, George. It is heavy for me, but nothing for your great shoulders. Bring it to the bower here; I don't want to open it in the house, because, because—well, you'll soon know why, when you follow my course of reasoning."

I brought him his trunk, and he put it on a table, where people had tea in the park sometimes, to watch a game of cricket from a sheltered place. "Come quite close," he said very kindly, throwing open the trunk, and then making for the door, while I rashly stooped over his property. In another minute I was lying down, actually sneezed off my legs, and unable to open my eyes from some spasmodic affection or affliction.

"That's right," said Harold, in a tone of satisfaction; "don't be uneasy, my dear brother. For at least a fortnight you are immune from the biggest enterprises of the most active Local Board. You may sit upon the manholes of the best sanitated town; you may sleep in the House of Commons; you may pay a medical fee, and survive it. It is my own discovery. See those boxes?"

"Not yet. But I shall as soon as my eyes get right!" I was able now to leave off sneezing, almost for a second. And when I had chewed a bit of leaf he gave me, there seemed to be something great in this new idea.

"You are concluding with your usual slur"—my brother began again, as soon as I was fit to receive reason instead of sympathy—"that this is nothing more than an adaptation of *Lundy Foote*, *Irish blackguard*, or *Welsh Harp*. George, you are wrong, as usual. You need not be capable of speech for that. Your gifts of error can express themselves in silence."

"Cowardly reasoner," I began, but the movement of larynx, or whatever it might be, threw me out of "ratiocination." He had me at his mercy, and he kept me so. To attempt to repeat what he said would convict me of crankiness equal to his own, and worse—because he could do it, and I cannot. But the point he insisted on most of all, and which after my experience I could not but concede, was that no known preparation of snuff without his special chemistry could have achieved this excellence. [Pg 57]

"Pteroxylon, euphorbium, and another irritant unknown as yet to Chemists, have brought this to the power needful. But this is not a merely speculative thing. You feel a true interest in it now, George."

"As men praise mustard, with tears in their eyes. But let me never hear of it, think of it, most of all never smell the like again. My nose will be red, and my eyes sore for a fortnight."

Harold tucked my arm under his, with a very affectionate manner of his own, which he knew that I never could resist. "Four pockets always in your waistcoat," he observed, "and a flap over every one to keep it dry. Now I very seldom ask a favour, do I, George, of you? Here are three hundred little boxes here, as well as the bulk of my preparation. The boxes are perfectly air-tight, made from my own design, very little larger and not much thicker than an old crown-piece. You touch a spring here, and the box flies open. Without that you never would know that it was there. Promise me that you will always carry this, and open it whenever you come to a place where the Local Boards have got the roads up. One of my best friends, and I have not many, has lost his only little girl,—such a darling, she used to sit upon my knee and promise to marry me the moment she was big enough,—but now she has gone to a better world, through the new parish authorities. Diphtheria in the worst form, my dear boy!"

His eyes filled with tears, for he was very tender-hearted, and in the warmth of the moment, I promised to carry that little box of his, as a safeguard against sanitation.

"My dear George, you will never regret it. You will find it most useful, I can assure you." He spoke with some gratitude, for he knew how much I hated all such chemistry. Little did I think how true his words would prove.

"Why, there goes that extraordinary fellow Stoneman!" I exclaimed suddenly, to change the subject. "What a first-rate horse he always rides! But there is something I ought to tell you about that great Stockbroker. I have not told the Governor yet, because I was not meant to do so, and must not, without the man's consent. But you ought to know it, and he would not object to that." [Pg 58]

"What has he discovered? I have often thought that men, who fall into the thick of humanity, ought to get their minds into an extremely active state; like mariners straining their eyes to discover—"

"The Gold Coast. There is nothing else they care for. But there I am wronging Jackson Stoneman. He is a man of the world, if there ever was one; and yet he is taken above the world, by love."

"Love of what?" asked my brother, who was sometimes hard upon people who despised all the things he cared for. "Love of gold? Love of rank? Love of dainty feeding? Love of his own fat self perhaps?"

"He is not fat. He is scarcely round enough. He is one of the most active men in the kingdom. There are very few things that he cannot do. And now he is deeply and permanently in love—"

"With filthy lucre. If there is anything I hate, it is the scorn of humanity that goes with that." Harold, in a lofty mood, began to strap up the trunk that was to save mankind.

"If filthy lucre means our Grace," I said with much emphasis, for it was good to floor him, "you have hit the mark. But our Grace has not a farthing." I very nearly added—"thanks to you." But it would have been cruel, and too far beyond the truth.

"Ridiculous!" he answered, trying not to look surprised, though I knew that I had got him there. "Why, his grandfather kept a shoe-shop."

"That is a vile bit of lying gossip. But even if it were so, the love of humanity should not stop short of their shoes. I am afraid you are a snob, Harold, with all your vast ideas."

"I am a little inclined to that opinion myself," he answered very cordially. "But come, this is very strange news about Grace. Has she any idea of the honour done her?"

"Not the smallest. So far as I know at least. And I think it is better that she should not know. Just at present, I mean, until he has had time." [Pg 59]

"But surely, George, you would not encourage such a thing. Putting aside the man's occupation, which may be very honourable if he is so himself, what do we know of his character, except that he gives himself airs, and is rather ostentatious?"

"He gives himself no airs. What you call ostentation is simply his generosity. You forget that in right of his wealth he stands in the place we have lost through our poverty. That makes it a

delicate position for him, especially in his behaviour to us. And do what he will, we should scarcely do our duty to ourselves, unless we made the worst of it."

"How long have you turned Cynic? Why, you put that rather neatly; I did not think it was in you, George." It should be explained that my brother Harold could never be brought to see that it was possible for me to do anything even fairly well; unless it were in manual labour, or sporting, or something else that he despised. And this was all I got for my admiration of his powers!

"Never mind about me," I replied; "I am not a Cynic, and I never shall be one. And when I spoke thus, I had not the least intention of including my father, who is above all such stuff. But mother, and you and I, and no doubt Grace herself, although she thinks so well of everybody,—it would be against all human nature for us to take a kind or even candid view of our successor's doings. And as for his station in life, as you might call it, you must live entirely out of the world, even in the heart of London, not to know that he is placed far above us now. Everywhere, except among the old-fashioned people who call themselves the County families, a man of his wealth would be thought much more of, than we should have a chance of being. What good could we do to anybody now? you must learn to look up to him, Harold my boy."

"Very well. I'll study him, whenever I get the chance. I can't look up to any man for his luck alone; though I may for the way he employs it. But he must not suppose that his money will buy Grace. If ever there was a girl who tried to think for herself and sometimes succeeded, probably it is our [Pg 60] Grace. She cannot do much. What woman has ever yet made any real discovery, although they are so inquisitive? But she has a right to her own opinion."

"At any rate as to the disposal of herself." Here I was on strong ground; though I never could argue with Harold upon scientific questions. But I knew my dear Grace much better than he did; and she always said that she liked me best, whenever I put that question to her; not only to make up for mother's preferences in the wrong direction, but also because she could understand me,—which did not require much intelligence,—not to mention that I was much bigger and stronger than Harold, though nothing like so good-looking, as anybody could see with half an eye.

"Leave it so," said Harold; for he liked sometimes to assert himself, as he had the right to do, when he cast away scientific weaknesses. "Let such things take their course, old fellow. If Grace takes a liking to him, that will prove that he is worthy of it. For she is uncommonly hard to please. And she never seems to care about understanding me; perhaps because she knows it would be hopeless. I want to go on to Godalming to-morrow. There will be a meeting of Sanitary Engineers—the largest minds of the period. I speak of them with deference; though as yet I am unable to make out what the dickens they are up to. Can you get me the one-horse trap from *The Bell*?"

"Most likely. I will go and see about it by-and-by. Old Jacob will always oblige me if he can. But you won't take away your sneezing trunk? You owe it to your native parish first."

"My native parish must abide its time. In country places there is seldom any outbreak of virulent diseases, until they set up a Local Board. I shall leave a score of Hygioptarmic boxes in your charge. The rest are meant for places where the authorities stir up the dregs of infection, and set them in slow circulation. And the first thing a Local Board always does is that."

I did not contradict him, for the subject was beyond me. And fond as I was of him, and always [Pg 61] much enlarged by his visits, and the stirring up of my dull ideas, it so happened that I did not want him now, when so many things had to be considered, in which none of his discoveries would help me. In fact it seemed to me that he thought much more of his hygienic boxes, than of his and my dear sister.

When he was gone in the old rattle-trap from *The Bell*, with his trunk beneath his feet, my mother seemed inclined at first to think that no one had made enough of him.

"All for the benefit of others!" she exclaimed, after searching the distance for one last view of him, if, haply, the sun might come out for the purpose of showing his hat above some envious hedge; "Does that poor boy ever think of himself? What makes it the more remarkable is that this age is becoming so selfish, so wedded to all the smaller principles of action, so incapable of taking a large view of anything. But Harold, my Harold"—no words of the requisite goodness and greatness occurred to my dear mother, and so she resorted to her handkerchief. "It seems as if we always must be parted. It is for the good of mankind, no doubt; but it does seem hard, though no one except myself seems so to regard it. It was five o'clock yesterday before he came. It is not yet half-past ten, and to think of the rapidly-increasing distance—"

"I defy him to get more than five miles an hour out of that old screw," I said. "Not even with one of his Hygioptarmic boxes tied beneath the old chap's tail. Why, you can hear his old scuffle still, mother."

She listened intently, as if for a holy voice; while Grace looked at me with a pleasant mixture of reproach and sympathy. For who did all the real work? Who kept the relics of the property together? Who relieved the little household of nearly all its trouble? Who went to market to buy things without money, and (which is even harder still) to sell them when nobody wanted them? Who toiled like a horse, and much longer than a horse—however, I never cared to speak up for myself. As a general rule, I would rather not be praised. And as for being thanked, it is pleasant [Pg 62] in its way, but apt to hurt the feelings of a very modest man; and, of course, he knows that it will not last. After such a speech from my dear mother, no one could have blamed me very severely, if

I had put my fishing-rod together and refused to do another stroke of work that day.

CHAPTER VII
KUBAN

[Pg 63]

That evening we stuck to our work, like Britons, and got all the ricks combed down so well, and topped up ready for thatching, that the weather was welcome to do what it pleased, short of a very heavy gale of wind. Not a mowing-machine, nor a patent haymaker, had been into our meadows, nor any other of those costly implements, which farmers are ordered by their critics to employ, when they can barely pay for scythe and rake. All was the work of man and horse, if maids may be counted among the men—for, in truth, they had turned out by the dozen, from cottage, and farm, and the great house itself, to help the poor gentleman who had been rich, and had shown himself no prouder then than now.

For about three weeks, while the corn began to kern, and Nature wove the fringe before she spread the yellow banner, a man of the farm, though still wanted near at hand, might take a little change and look about him more at leisure, and ask how his neighbours were getting on, or even indulge in some distractions of his own. Now, in summer, a fellow of a quiet turn, who has no time to keep up his cricket, and has never heard of golf,—as was then the case with most of us,—and takes no delight in green tea-parties, neither runs after moths and butterflies, however attractive such society may be, this man finds a riverbank, or, better still, a fair brook-side, the source of the sweetest voices to him. Here he may find such pleasure as the indulgence of Nature has vouchsafed to those who are her children still, and love to wander where she offers leisure, health, and large delights. So gracious is she in doing this, and so pleased at pleasing us, that she [Pg 64] stays with us all the time, and breathes her beauty all around us, while we forget all pains and passions, and administer the like relief to fish.

Worms, however, were outside my taste. To see a sad creature go wriggling in the air, and then, cursing the day of its birth, descend upon the wet storm of the waters, and there go tossing up and down, without any perception of scenery—this (which is now become a very scientific and delicate art in delusion of trout) to me is a thing below our duty to our kin. A fish is a fellow that ought to be caught, if a man has sufficient skill for it. But not with any cruelty on either side; though the Lord knows that they torment us more, when they won't bite on any conditions, than some little annoyance we may cause them—when we do pull them out—can balance.

Certain of the soundness of these views, if, indeed, they had ever occurred to me, but despairing to convince my sister of them,—for women have so little logic,—I fetched out a very ancient fly-book, with most of the hackles devoured by moth-grubs, and every barb as rusty as old enmity should grow. Harold never fished; he had no patience for it; and as for enjoying nature, his only enjoyment was to improve it. Tom Erricker, who was lazy enough to saunter all day by a river, while he talked as if examiners were scalping him, not an atom did he know of any sort of fishing, except sitting in a punt, and pulling roach in, like a pod of seedy beans upon a long beanstick. Therefore was everything in my book gone rusty, and grimy, and maggoty, and looped into tangles of yellow gut,—that very book which had been the most congenial love of boyhood. If I had only taken half as well to Homer, Virgil, Horace, I might have been a Fellow of All Souls now (Bene natus, bene vestitus) and brought my sister Grace to turn the heads of Heads of Houses, in the grand old avenue, where the Dons behold the joys that have slipped away from them.

But perhaps I should never have been half as happy. To battle with the world, instead of battening in luxury, is the joy of life, while there is any pluck and pith. And I almost felt, as a man is apt to feel, when in his full harness, and fond of it, that to step outside of it, even for a few [Pg 65] hours, was a bit of self-indulgence unworthy of myself. However, I patched up a cast of two flies, which was quite enough, and more than enough, for a little stream like the Pebblebourne, wherein I had resolved to wet my line.

This was a swift bright stream, as yet ungriddled by any railway works, and unblocked by any notice-boards menacing frightful penalties. For although the time was well-nigh come when the sporting rights over English land should exceed the rental in value, the wary trout was not yet made of gold and rubies; and in many places any one, with permission of the farmers, was welcome to wander by the babbling brook, and add to its music, if the skill were in him, the silvery tinkle of the leaping fish. And though all this valley was but little known to me, a call at a lonely farm-house on the hill, a mile or two further on than Ticknor's Mew, made me free of the water and them that dwelled therein.

Now why should I go to this Pebblebourne, rather than to some other Surrey stream, fishful, picturesque, and better known to anglers? Partly I believe through what Robert Slemmick said, and Farmer Ticknor after him, and partly through my own memories. There can be no prying air, or pushing appearance about a gentle fisherman, who shows himself intent upon the abstract beauties of a rivulet, or the concrete excellence of the fish it holds. My mother liked nothing better than a dish of trout, my father (though obliged to be very careful about the bones) considered that fish much superior to salmon, ever since salmon had been propagated into such amazing rarity. So I buckled on a basket, which would hold some 50lb., took an unlimited supply of victuals, and set forth to clear the Pebblebourne of trout.

My mother had no supper except toasted cheese that night, although I returned pretty early; neither did my father find occasion to descant upon the inferiority of salmon. And the same thing happened when I went again. I could see great abundance of those very pleasing fish, and they saw an equal abundance of me. They would come and look at my fly, with an aspect of gratifying approval, as at a laudable specimen of clever plagiarism, and then off with them into the sparkles and wrinkles of the frisky shallows, with a quick flop of tail, and yours truly till next time. And yet I kept out of sight and cast up-stream, and made less mark than a drop of rain on the silver of the stream. [Pg 66]

I was half inclined to drop any third attempt, having daintily treated some meadows of brook, without any token of fish to carry home, or of human presence to stow away in heart, although I had persisted to the very door, which had swallowed that fair vision, in the twilight of the May. Her little shrine and holy place I never had profaned, feeling that a stranger had no business there; neither could I bring myself to hang about in ambush, and lurk for the hour of her evening prayer and hymn. But my dear mother seemed to lose her fine faith in my skill; for ladies are certain to judge by the event; moreover to accept a beating lightly was entirely against my rules. So I set forth once again, saying to myself—"the third time is lucky. Let us have one more trial."

On that third evening of my labour against stream, I was standing on the bank, where the bridle-track came through, and packing up my rod, after better luck with fish, for I had found a fly which puzzled them, and had taken a good dozen—when who should come up gambolling round my heels, and asking, as it seemed to me, for a good word, or a pat, but that magnificent and very noble dog who had reviewed, and so kindly approved of me, from the battlements near the upper door? "What is your name, my stately friend?" I said to him, not without some misgivings that he might resent this overture. But he threw up his tail like a sheaf of golden wheat, and made the deep valley ring, and the heights resound, with a voice of vast rejoicing, and a shout of glorious freedom.

But was it this triumph that provoked the fates? While the echoes still were eddying in the dimples of the hills, a white form arose on the crest of the slope some fifty yards behind us. A vast broad head, with ears prickled up like horns of an owl, and sullen eyes under patches of shade, regarded us; while great teeth glimmered under bulging jowls, and squat red nostrils were quivering with disdain. It was *Grab*, Farmer Ticknor's savage bull-dog; and hoping that he would be scared, as most dogs are, when they have no business, by the cast of a stone, I threw a pebble at him, which struck the ground under his burly chest. He noticed it no more than he would heed a grasshopper, but began to draw upon us, as a pointer draws on game, with his wiry form rigid, and his hackles like a tooth-brush, and every roll of muscle like an oak burr-knot. [Pg 67]

I drew the last loops of my line through the rings, and wound up the reel in all haste, and detaching the butt of my rod stood ready, for it looked as if he meant to fly at me. But no, he marched straight up to my noble friend, with blazing eyes fixed on him, and saluted him with a snarl of fiendish malice. Clearly my dog, as I began to consider him, had no experience of such low life. He was a gentleman by birth and social habits, not a coarse prize-fighter; so he stood looking down with some surprise at this under-bred animal, yet glancing pleasantly as if he would accept a challenge to a bout of gambols, as my lord will play cricket with a pot-boy. Nay, he even went so far as to wag his courtly tail, and draw his taper fore-legs, which shone like sable, a little beneath the arch of his body, to be ready for a bound, if this other chap meant play. *Grab* spied the mean chance, and leaped straight at his throat, but missed it at first, or only plunged his hot fangs into a soft rich bed of curls. My dog was amazed, and scarcely took it in earnest yet. His attitude was that of our truly peaceful nation—"I don't want to fight, but, by Jingo, if I must, it won't be long before this little bully bites the dust."

"At him, *Grab*, at him, boy! Show 'un what you be made of! Tip 'un a taste of British oak. Give 'un a bellyful. By the Lord in Heaven, would you though?"

I stretched my rod in front of Ticknor, as he appeared from behind a ridge, dancing on his heavy heels at the richness of the combat, and then rushing at the dog, my friend, with a loaded crab-stick, because he had got the bull-dog down and was throwing his great weight upon him. He had tossed him up two or three times as if in play, for he seemed even now not to enter into the deadliness of the enemy.

"Fair play, farmer!" I said sternly. "It was your beast that began it. Let him have a lesson. I hope the foreign dog will kill him." [Pg 68]

No fair-minded person could help perceiving the chivalry of the one, and bestiality of the other; while the combat grew furious for life or death, with tossing and whirlings, and whackings of ribs, and roars of deep rage on the part of my friend, while the other scarcely puffed or panted, but fought his fight steadily from the ground, and in deadly silence.

"Furriner can't hurt 'un much," said the farmer, as I vainly strove to get between them; "made of iron and guttaperk our *Grab* is. I've been a'biding for this, for two months. I sent 'e fair warning, Master George, by that fellow Slemmick, that you might not lose it. Fair play, you says; and I say the very same. Halloa! our *Grab* hath got his hold at last. Won't be long in this world for your furriner now. Well done, our *Grab*! Needn't tell 'un to hold fast."

To my dismay, I saw that it was even so. My noble foreign friend was still above the other, but his great frame was panting and his hind-legs twitching, and long sobs of exhaustion fetching up his golden flanks. The sleuth foe, the murderer, had him by his gasping throat, and was sucking out

his breath with bloody fangs deep-buried.

"Let 'un kill 'un. Let 'un kill 'un!" shouted Farmer Ticknor. "Serve 'un right for showing cheek to an honest English dog—"

But I sent Ticknor backwards, with a push upon his breast, and then with both hands I tugged at his brutal beast. As well might I have striven, though I am not made of kid gloves, to pull an oak in its prime from the root-hold. The harder I tugged the deeper went the bulldog's teeth, the faster fell the gouts of red into his blazing eyes, and the feebler grew the gasps of his exhausted victim. Then I picked up my ashen butt and broke it on the backbone of the tyrant, but he never even yielded for the rebate of a snarl. Death was closing over those magnificent brown eyes, as they turned to me faintly their last appeal.

A sudden thought struck me. I stood up for a moment, although I could scarcely keep my legs, and whipping out of my waistcoat my brother's patent box, I touched the spring and poured the whole contents into the bloody nostrils of that tenacious beast. Aha, what a change! His grim set visage puckered back to his very ears, as if he were scalped by lightning; the flukes of his teeth fell away from their grip, as an anchor sags out of a quicksand, he quivered all over, and rolled on his back, and his gnarled legs fell in on the drum of his chest, while he tried to scrub his squat nose in an agony of blisters. Then he rolled on his panting side, and sneezed till I thought he would have turned all his body inside out. [Pg 69]

As for me, I set both hands upon my hips, though conscious of some pain in doing so, and laughed until the tears ran down my cheeks. My enjoyment was becoming actual anguish when the pensive Ticknor stooping over his poor pet inhaled enough of the superfluous snuff to send him dancing and spluttering across the meadow, vainly endeavouring between his sneezes to make an interval for a heartfelt damn.

But suddenly this buffoonery received a tragic turn. From the door in the ivied wall came forth a gliding figure well known to me, but not in its present aspect. The calm glory of the eyes was changed to grief and terror, the damask of the cheeks was blurred with tears, the sweet lips quivered with distress and indignation.

"Ah, *Kuban, Kuban*, Daretza, Dula, *Kuban*!" This, or something like this, was her melancholy cry, as she sank on her knees without a glance at us, and covered that palpitating golden form with a shower of dark tresses, waving with sobs like a willow in the breeze.

"Ah, *Kuban, Kuban*!" and then some soft words uttered into his ear, as if to speed his flight.

I ran to the brook and filled my hat with water, for I did not believe that this great dog could be dead. When I came back the young lady was sitting with the massive head helpless on her lap, and stroking the soft dotted cheeks, and murmuring, as if to touch the conscience of Farmer Ticknor, "Ah, cruel, cruel! How men are cruel!"

"Allow me one moment," I said, for she seemed not even to know that I was near. "Be kind enough to leave the dog to me. I may be able yet to save his life. Do you understand English, Mademoiselle?" [Pg 70]

"*'Allow me one moment,' I said.*"

"His life, it is gone?" Another sob stopped her voice, as she put her little hand, where she thought his heart must be. "Yes, sir, I understand English too well."

"Then if you will be quick, we may save his life yet. I am used to dogs; this noble fellow is not dead; though he will be very soon, unless we help him. There is a wound here that I cannot bind up with anything I have about me. Bring bandages and anything long and soft. Also bring wool, and a pot of grease, and a sponge with hot water, and a bowl or two. I will not let him die, till you come back!"

"If that could be trusted for, when would I come back?" She glanced at me, having no time to do more, with a soft thrill of light, such as hope was born in; and before I could answer it she was gone, leaving me unable to follow with my eyes; for it was the turning-point of *Kuban's* life—if that were the name of this high-souled dog. The throttling was gone, and the barbed strangulation, and devil's own tug at his windpipe; but the free power of breath was not restored, and the heart was scarcely stirring. Lifting his eyelids, I saw also that there was concussion of the brain to deal with; but the danger of all was the exhaustion.

Luckily in the breast-pocket of my coat was a little silver flask with a cup at the bottom, Tom Erricker's present on my last birthday. I had filled it with whiskey, though I seldom took spirits in those young days, but carried this dram in case of accidents, when fishing. Instead of dashing cold water out of my hat on the poor dog's face, as I had meant to do,—which must in such a case have been his last sensation,—I poured a little whiskey into the silver cup, and filled it with the residue of water that was leaking quickly from my guaranteed felt. Then I held up the poor helpless head, and let the contents of the cup trickle gently over the black roots of the tongue. Down it went, and a short gurgle followed, and then a twitch of the eyelids, and a long soft gasp. The great heart gave a throb, and the brown eyes looked at me, and a faint snort came from the flabby nostrils, and I shouted aloud, "*Kuban* is saved." [Pg 71]

There was nobody to hear me, except the dog himself, and he was too weak to know what I meant. Ticknor was gone, with that beast at his heels, for at the end of the meadow I saw *Grab*, the British champion, slouching along, like a vanquished cur, with his ropy stomach venting heavy sneezes; and to the credit of his wisdom, I may add that even a lamb in that valley ever after was sacred from a glance of his bloodthirsty goggles.

With his long form laid between my legs, while I sat down on the sod and nursed him, my wounded dog began more and more to recover his acquaintance with the world, and to wonder what marvel had befallen him. He even put out his tongue, and tried to give me a lick, and his

grand tail made one or two beats upon the ground; but I held up my hand, for he had several frightful wounds, and he laid down his ears with a grateful little whine. For the main point was to keep him quite still now, until the dangerous holes could be stopped from bleeding.

So intent was I upon doing this, that before I was at all aware of it, three or four people were around me. But I had eyes for only one, the lovely mistress of the injured dog; while she for her part had no thought whatever of anything, or any one, except that blessed *Kuban*. That was right enough of course, and what else could be expected? Still I must admit that this great fellow rose even higher in my estimation, when he showed that he knew well enough where to find the proper course of treatment, and was not to be misled even by the warmest loyalty into faith in feminine therapeutics.

"He has turned his eyes away from me. Oh, *Kuban, Kuban*! But I care not what you do, beloved one, if only you preserve your life. Do you think that he can do that, sir, with all these cruel damages?"

Now that she was more herself, I thought that I had never heard any music like her voice, nor read any poetry to be compared to the brilliant depths of her expressive eyes. And the sweetness of her voice was made doubly charming by the harsh and high tones of her attendants, who were jabbering in some foreign tongue, probably longing to interfere, and take the case out of my [Pg 72] management.

"If they would not make such a noise," I said, "it would be all the better for my patient. Can you persuade them to stand out of my light, and let the fresh air flow in upon us? Oh, thank you, that is a great deal better. There! I think now if we let him rest a minute, and then carry him home, he will be all right. How clever you must be, to bring the right things so well!"

For this bit of praise I was rewarded with a smile more lovely than I should have thought possible, since the fair cheeks of Eve took the fatal bite, and human eyes imbibed Satan. But she was truthful, as Eve was false.

"Without Stepan I could have done nothing. Stepan, come forth, and receive the praise yours. You must now take *Kuban* in your arms, and follow this gentleman into the fort. Understand you? He has very little English yet. He can do everything except learn. Stepan is too strong for that. But he has not the experience that I have. Nevertheless, he is very good. I am praising thee, oh, Stepan. Lose not the opportunity of thanking me."

Stepan, a huge fellow, dressed very wonderfully according to my present ideas, stood forth in silence, and held up his arms, to show that they were ready for anything. But I saw that a hard leather bandoleer, or something of that kind, with a frill of leather cases, hung before his great chest, and beneath the red cross which all of them were wearing. "Stepan is strong as the ox," said the lady.

That he might be, and he looked it too. "Can he pull off that great leather frill?" I asked, seeing that it would scrub the poor dog sadly, as well as catch and jerk his bandages.

"He cannot remove it. That is part of Stepan." His young mistress smiled at him, as she said this.

"Then put him up here," I said, holding out my arms, though not sure that I could manage it, for the dog must weigh some twelve stone at least, and one of my arms had been injured. Stepan lifted him with the greatest ease; but not so did I carry him, for he must be kept in one position, and most of his weight came on my bad arm. So difficult was my task indeed, that I saw nothing of the place they led me through, but feared that I should drop down at every rough spot—which [Pg 73] would have meant the death of poor *Kuban*. And down I must have come, I am quite sure of that, if I had not heard the soft sweet voice behind me—"It is too much for the kind gentleman. I pray you, sir, to handle him to the great Stepan."

When I was all but compelled to give in, by the failure of the weak arm, and the fear of dropping my patient fatally, a man of magnificent appearance stood before me, and saw my sad plight at a glance.

"Permit me," he said, in a deep rich tone, yet as gentle as a woman's voice. "This is over-trying your good will. I see what it is. I have only just heard. I will bear him very gently. Take *Orla* away."

For another dog was jumping about me now, most anxious to know what on earth had befallen that poor *Kuban*, and displaying, as I thought, even more curiosity than sympathy. But when the weight was taken from me, and my companions went on, I turned aside with pains and aches, which came upon me all the worse.

"I have done all I can. I am wanted no more; the sooner I get home the better."

Thinking thus I made my way towards the black door of our entrance, now standing wide open in the distance; and I felt low at heart through the failure of my strength, and after such a burst of excitement.

"I am not wanted here. I have no right here. What have I to do with these strange people?" I said to myself, as I sat for a moment to recover my breath, on a bench near the door. "I have quite enough to do at home, and my arm is very sore. They evidently wish to live in strict seclusion; and as far as concerns me, so they may. If they wanted me, they would send after me. A dog is

more to them than a Christian perhaps. What on earth do they wear those crosses for?"

I would not even look around, to see what sort of a place it was; but slipped through the door, and picked up my shattered rod and half-filled creel, and set off, as the dusk was deepening, on the long walk to my father's cottage.

CHAPTER VIII
THROUGH THE CORN

[Pg 74]

According to Farmer Bandilow (who was now our last old tenant, striving to escape from the wreck of plough, by paddling with spade and trowel), the London season begins with turnip-tops, and ends with cabbage-grubs. But this year it must have lasted well into the time of turnip-bottoms; otherwise how could my sister, Lady Fitzragon, have been in London? Not that we knew very much about the movements of her ladyship, for she found our cottage beyond the reach of her fat and glittering horses; only that she must have been now in town, because our Grace was with her. And this was a lucky thing for me; for if Grace had been at home, she must have known all about my wounded arm, and a nice fuss she would have made of it. But my mother, though equally kind and good, was not very quick of perception; and being out of doors nearly all the day now, and keeping my own hours, I found it easy enough to avoid all notice and escape all questions. For the people at the cottage very seldom came to my special den, the harness-room; and I kept my own little larder in what had once been a kennel close at hand, and my own little bed up a flat-runged ladder, and so troubled none but a sweetly deaf old dame. And this arrangement grew and prospered, whenever there was no Grace to break through it.

However, there is no luck for some people. One night, when I felt sure that all the cottage was asleep, I had taken off the bandages, and was pumping very happily on my left forearm, where the flesh had been torn, when there in the stableyard before me, conspicuous in the moonlight, [Pg 75] with a blazing satin waistcoat, stood the only man who could do justice to it. For this gallant fellow had a style of his own, which added new brilliance to the most brilliant apparel.

"Why, Tom," I cried, "where on earth do you come from? I can't shake hands, or I shall spoil some of your charms. Why, you must have been dining with the governor. New togs again! What a coxcomb it is!"

"Never would I have sported these, and indeed I would never have come down at all, if I had known Grace was out of the way."

He was allowed to call her *Grace* to me.

"How slow it is without her! But I say, old chap, what a frightful arm you've got! Pitchfork again, I suppose"—for I had received a scratch before—"only ten times as bad. Why, you mustn't neglect this. You'll have it off at the elbow, if you do. Why, even by this light—By Jove, what a whacking arm you've got! Why, it is twice the size of mine. I could never have believed it. Let me pull off my coat, and show you."

"But you cannot want one the size of mine"—I answered with a laugh, for it was thoroughly like Tom to fetch everything into his own person; "you could never put it into a waistcoat like that."

"George, you are an ass," was his very rude reply, and it seemed to ring into me far beyond his meaning. "My dear fellow, you will be, in your own parish, what nobody has seen anywhere,—a dead jackass,—if you go on like this. There is a black stripe down your arm; the same as you see on a 'mild-cured-haddy' when he shines by moonlight. What does that mean? Putrefaction."

"Rot!" I replied, meaning his own words. "I'll pump on you, waistcoat and all, my dear Tom, if you go on with this sort of rubbish." And yet I had some idea that he might be right. But the worst—as I need not tell any strong young fellow—of the absurdities our worthy doctors try to screw into us now—that a man must not draw the breath the Lord breathed into him, for fear of myrio-mycelia-micro-somethings, neither dare to put his fork into the grand haunch of mutton which his Maker [Pg 76] ordered him to arise and eat—of all such infantile stuff the harm is this, that it makes a healthy man deride the better sense that is in them.

"Come to my hole, and have a smoke," I said to my dear friend. "And mind you, not a word about this scratch to my good people. To-morrow we shall cut our first field of wheat. Though it won't pay for cutting and binding, Tom, the sight is as glorious as ever. What a pity for our descendants, if we ever have any, to get no chance of ever seeing the noblest sight of Old England! Come to this gate, and take a look. In a few more years, there will be no such sight."

"Poetry is all very fine in its way," replied Tom, who had about as much as I possess, although he could make a hook and eye of rhyme sometimes. "But the moon will go on all the same, I suppose; and she does most of our poetry."

She was doing plenty of it now, in silence, such as any man may feel, but none can make another feel. We waited a minute or two by the gate, till a white cloud veiled the quivering disc, and then all the lustre flowed softly to our eyes, like a sea of silver playing smoothly on a shore of gold.

"After all, love is rot," said Tom, carried away by larger beauty, after some snub of the day

before. "I should like to see any girl who could compare with that. And a man must be a muff who could look at this, and then trouble his head about their stupid little tricks. Look at the breadth of this, look at the depth of it! Why, it lifts one; it makes one feel larger, George; that is the way to take things."

"Especially when some one has been making you feel small," I answered at a venture, for I understood my friend; and this abstract worship of beauty was not so satisfactory to me now. "But come into my place, and tell me all about it, my dear Tom. You were so mysterious the other day, that I knew you were after some other wild goose."

"I am happy, most happy," Tom went on to say, after pouring forth the sorrows of his last love-tale, through many a blue eye and bright curl of smoke; "I feel that I cannot be thankful enough [Pg 77] at the amount of side that girl puts on. And the beauty of it is, that she hasn't got a rap, and her husband would have to help to keep her mother. How lucky for me she never can have heard of the glorious Tinman, or my oofy maiden-aunt; wouldn't she have jumped at me, if she had? A fellow can't be too careful, George, when you come to think. But you'll never make a fool of yourself. Not a bit of romance about you, Farmer Jarge; and a fellow of your size and family has a right to go in for ten thousand a-year. How about those gipsies in the valley, though? You mustn't go on with that, even if you could, my friend. Great swells, I daresay, but no tin."

"What business of yours? What do you know about them? I'll thank you to hold your tongue upon subjects that are above you."

"Ha, ha! Ho, ho! Tinmen must look up to tinkers, must they? How dare I call them tinkers? Well, it is just like this. These people are gipsies, all gipsies are tinkers, therefore these people are tinkers. But don't get in a wax, George. I was only chaffing. It may be Cleopatra herself, for all I know, come to look after her needle—would not look at it, while her own, will look at nothing else, when lost. Oh, I know what women are."

"And I know what idiots are," I answered with a superior smile; not being quite such a fool, I trust, as to pretend to that knowledge which even the highest genius denies to man. "And an idiot you are to-night, Tom."

"Well, I may be a little upset," said he, striking his glorious waistcoat, and then stroking it to remove the mark. "I confess I did like that girl. And she liked me; I am sure of that. Why, bless her little heart, she cried, my boy! However, it was not to be. And when I told her that I must look higher (meaning only up to heaven) for gradual consolation, what a wax she did get in! Never mind. Let it pass. There are lots of pretty girls about. And no man can be called mercenary, for I am blest if any of them have got a bit of tin. I thank the Lord, every night of my life, that my old aunt never was a beauty. And that makes her think all the more of me. Sir, your most obedient!"

Behind my chair was an old looking-glass, which Grace had insisted upon hanging there, to make [Pg 78] the place look rather smart; and Tom, who had not seen himself for some hours, stood up before it in the weak candle-light, and proceeded in his usual manner. "Tom, my friend, you don't look so much amiss. If your heart is broken, there is enough of it left to do a little breaking on its own account. Don't be cast down, my boy. You may not be a beauty, though beautiful girls think better of you than your modesty allows you to proclaim. But one thing you may say, Tom; whoever has the luck to get you, will find you a model husband."

This I thought likely enough; if only he should get a wife with plenty of sense and love to guide him. But what was the opinion of a tall, hard man who stood in the doorway with a long gun on his arm, criticising Erricker's sweet self-commune with a puzzled and yet a very well-contented gaze?

"Mr. Stoneman!" I exclaimed, giving Tom a little push, for he stood with his back to him, in happy innocence of critics. "We did not expect this pleasure so late at night. This is an old friend of mine —Mr. Erricker. Allow me to introduce you, Tom, to Mr. Jackson Stoneman." My old friend turned round, without a symptom of embarrassment, and bowed almost as gracefully as he had been salaaming to himself.

"I have heard of Mr. Erricker, and have great pleasure in making his acquaintance," our new visitor replied, and I saw that the pleasure was genuine, and knew why; to wit, that he was thinking in his heart, "That little fop to make up to Grace Cranleigh!" For no doubt he had heard of Tom's frequent visits, and the inference drawn by neighbours. "But I must beg pardon," he continued, "for daring to look in at such a time. It was only this, I have been down to the pond at the bottom of the long shrubbery, to look for some shoveller ducks I heard of, and see that no poachers are after them. I don't want to shoot them, though I brought my gun; and going back, I happened to see your light up here."

"Sit down, Mr. Stoneman," said Tom, as if he were the master of the place. "I have often wished to see you, and I will tell you why. I am a bit of a sportsman, when I can get the chance. But this [Pg 79] fellow, Cranleigh, is so hard at work always that he never will come anywhere to show me where to go."

"And he has not many places to take you to now." I spoke without thinking, for to beg permission from this new landowner was about the last thing I would do. And I was vexed with my friend for his effrontery.

"Of course I should never dream," proceeded Tom, for he had some reason in him after all, "to

ask leave to shoot on any land of yours, or where you have taken the shooting rights. But there is a little warren with a lot of rabbits, on Bandilow's farm, where Sir Harold gives me leave. But I must go a mile round to get at it, unless I may cross the park with my gun. May I do so, without firing, of course?"

"To be sure. As often as you like. Any friend of Mr. Cranleigh may do much more than that. And I am come to ask a favour, too. I have three fellows doing next to nothing. They have just finished bundling a lot of furze. Capital fellows with a hook, I believe; and so I don't want to turn them off. I hear you intend to begin reaping to-morrow. Can you find a job for them, just for a few days?"

This was a very pretty way to put it. I knew that he had plenty of work for the men, but wanted to help us with our harvest labour, having heard, no doubt, that we were short of hands. I thanked him warmly, for these men would be of the greatest service to us. And then he turned upon me severely, as if my health were under his superintendence, and I was trying to elude it, by keeping my arm from his notice.

"You are doing a very stupid thing. You have a shocking wound in your left arm, caused by the tooth or the claws of a dog; and instead of having it treated properly, all you do is to pump upon it."

"Halloa!" cried Tom Erricker, "a dog. I wouldn't have that for a thousand pounds. George, how could you play me such a trick? You told me it was a pitchfork."

"I told you nothing of the kind. I simply said nothing whatever about it. It can concern nobody but myself. And I will thank Mr. Stoneman, and you, too, to attend to your own business." [Pg 80]

"It may be no business of mine, perhaps," the stockbroker answered severely; "but it is the undoubted business of any intimate friend of yours, and most of all that of your family. Such behaviour of yours is not true manliness, as I daresay you suppose, but foolhardy recklessness, and want of consideration for your friends. And what does that come to but selfishness, under one of its many disguises?"

Tom chimed in to the same effect, even going so far as to ask me what my father and mother could do without me, even if they survived the trial of seeing me smothered under a feather-bed. But when both my friends had killed me of rabies to their entire satisfaction, I showed them in very few words how little they knew about what they were talking of. For I had done for myself all that could be done, as well as any doctor could have managed it, and now there was nothing for it but cold water, and an easy mind, and trust in Providence.

As soon as Tom Erricker heard of Providence, he began to yawn, as if he were in church; so I begged him to go to bed, for which he was quite ready, while I had a little talk with our tenant.

"How did you hear of this affair?" I asked, hoping for some light upon other matters; "none of our people know it. They make such a fuss about a dog-bite, that I was obliged to keep it close. I will beg you to do the same, if you wish to oblige me."

"There is nothing I wish for more than that." Stoneman drew his chair over as he spoke, and offered me one of his grand cigars; and I was not above accepting it, with my knowledge of his feelings. "I have your permission to call you *George*. I will do so, now that your bright young friend is gone. When I think of the reports that reached me—but I will say no more. A fine young fellow, no doubt, or he would not be a friend of yours." The vision of Tom Erricker at the mirror brought a smile to his firm lips; but for my sake he suppressed it. "Now I want to talk to you seriously, George. And you will not take it as a liberty, knowing my very warm regard for—for you." [Pg 81]

"You may say what you like. I shall take it kindly. I am well aware that you know a thousand times as much of the world as I do."

"And a very poor knowledge it is," he replied, gazing at a cloud of his own smoke. "When the question is of deeper matters, the wisdom of the world is a broken reed. And yet I want to bring it into play just now. In the case of another, that is so much easier; just as any fool can pass judgment on the labour he has never tried with his own hand. Excuse me, George, if I speak amiss, I do it out of good-will, as some of them do not, but to show their own superiority. To cut the matter short—I know all about—no, not all, but a lot about your new friends down in the valley."

"They can scarcely be called my friends, if I require to be informed about them." My mind had been full of them, although it was clear that they cared not to hear any more of me.

"You are surprised, perhaps, at my knowledge of what occurred the other day. That was by the purest accident; for I am not the sort of man to play the spy. You know that, I hope. Very well, I took the liberty then of inquiring for my own sake, and that of the neighbourhood, who these mysterious settlers were, and I knew where to go for my information. Like most things, when you get nearer to them, there is no real mystery at all. The only wonder is that they can have been there so long, without attracting notice. If the country had been hunted, as it used to be, when people could afford to keep up the pack, they would never have been left so quiet. The parson of the parish, as a general rule, routs up every newcomer for church purposes, no matter what his creed may be; and I know that they seldom give much start even to the tax-collectors. But the parson of that parish is a very old man, and has no one to look after him, and the country is very thinly peopled. Well, they seem to have bought the place for an old song, so that nobody can

interfere with them. And they soon put it into better order—"

"But who are they? And what are they doing there? And how long do they mean to stop?" [Pg 82]

"Don't be in a hurry, my good friend. There is plenty of time for another cigar. Pipes you prefer? Very well, fill again. However, for fear of being knocked on the head, I will resume my parable. Nothing can be done without paying for it. That is the golden rule in England, and everywhere else upon this planet. And wherever money passes, it can be followed up. The strange thing is that these people seem to care very little about concealment, though they are not sociable. What their native language is, we do not know, though they seem to be great linguists. French, German, Russian, Arabic, and I don't know what else, and some of them very good in our beloved tongue, the hardest to learn of all the lot. They are of Eastern race, that appears quite certain, though neither Jews, Turks, nor Armenians. But what they are here for seems pretty plain—forgery!"

"Ridiculous!" I exclaimed, though without showing any wrath. "They are people of high rank, I am sure of that. Political exiles, refugees, Anarchists, or even Nihilists—though I cannot think that. But as for forgers—"

"It scarcely sounds nice; and yet I have little doubt about it; and the police have come to that conclusion, and are keeping a sharp eye upon them. For what other purpose can they want a mill? And a mill which they have set up themselves, to suit themselves. The old water-wheel they had, and the cogs and all that, left from the old corn-grinding time; but they have refitted it for quite a different purpose, and done almost all of it with their own hands. What for? Plain as a pikestaff—to make their own paper, and get stamping power, and turn out forged notes, foreign of course, Russian rouble, the simplest of all."

He had made up his mind. He was sure of this solution. He had no doubt whatever. Ah, but he had never seen the majestic man who met me, much less that beautiful nymph of the shrine!

"Stoneman, all this sounds very fine." I met his smile of confidence, and as it seemed to me of heartless triumph, with a gaze of faith in humanity—which some people might call romance. "But [Pg 83] there is not a word of truth in it. What inference does a policeman draw? The worst he can imagine—grist for his own mill. They make the world a black chapter, to suit their own book. But I have no motive. What motive could I have, to make out that people are better than they seem? I tell you, and you may take my word for it, that this little colony, of whatever race it may be, has no evil purpose in coming among us. I might even go further and say that I am sure of their having an excellent object, a noble object, some great discovery, perhaps surpassing all my brother's, and something that will be of service to entire humanity."

"Money, to wit. You know what the last great forger who was hanged, before we left off that wise plan, what he said when exhorted to repentance, 'You make money for yourself, sir, I make it for the good of the public.' No doubt they take that view of the case."

"Very well, you take a lesson from them, and improve the morals of the Stock Exchange."

The stockbroker smiled very pleasantly, as one who was thoroughly at home with that old joke; then he took up his gun, and marched off for the Hall, leaving me to make the best of things.

Feeling how small are the minds of mankind, even the best of them, when they listen to the police, and knowing that I could not sleep as yet, I went once more to the gate at the top of the yard, and gazed over the wheat which was to lie low on the morrow. Although I had just received proof of friendship, from two very nice fellows better than myself, which should have encouraged me to think the best, sadness came into my heart, and a sombre view of life depressed me. There are two things only that can save a man from deep dejection occasionally. One of them is to have no thought whatever, except for affairs of the moment; and the other and surer is to believe with unchangeable conviction that all is ordered by a Higher Power, benevolent ever, and ever watchful for those who commit themselves to it. That atom of humanity, which is myself, has never been able to sink to the depth of the one condition, or soar to the height of the other. So [Pg 84] there must be frequent ups and downs with ordinary mortals, gleams of light, and bars of shade; and happy is the man who can keep the latter from deepening as his steps go on. But who am I to moralise?

Enough that any fellow worth his salt must be grieved and lowered, when suspicions arise, concerning those of whom he has formed a high opinion. How much worse, when his own judgment owns that things look rather black, and memory quotes against his wishes more than one such disappointment. If it were so, if those who had made so deep an impression on me were skulking rogues and stealthy felons, no wonder they had not cared to ask what became of the stranger, who by remarkable presence of mind had saved the life of their valued warder, and then with a modesty no less rare, had vanished before they could thank him, if they ever had the grace to intend it. "All the better," I said to myself, with the acumen of the wisest fox that ever entered vineyard, "even if all had been right, it never could have led to any good; and see what a vast amount of work is coming on all at once, with no one else to do it! And all the time is there any one but myself to see to my young sister's doings? Here is this fellow Stoneman sweet upon her, wonderfully sweet, quite spoony—who could have believed it of a stockbroker? What do I know about him? Nothing, except that he has endless tin, and spends it certainly like a brick. Is he worthy of her, and if he is, will she even look at him? Rather a romantic girl, too fond of her own opinions, and yet a little prone to hero-worship. She might fall in love with some hero in London who hasn't got a half-penny—halloa, what can that be, winding in and out so, through the

wheat?"

The moon, now very nearly full, was making that low round of the sky which is all it can manage in August, and seemed rather to look along the field than heartily down upon it. The effect was very different now from that which Tom and I had watched. For the surface of the luxuriant corn, instead of imbibing and simpering with light, was flawed and patched (like a flowing tide) with [Pg 85] flittings and hoverings of light and shade. And along a sweep of darkness near the shadow of a tree, there was something moving stealthily like the figure of a man.

For a moment or two, I did not enjoy that calmness of mind which is believed (by Britons) to be the prerogative of Britons. The period of the night, and the posture of the moon, and peculiar tone of things not to be told, as well as some dread of a mischief to my brain—through what had befallen me recently—took away from me that superior gift which had enabled me to beat the bull-dog. However, I might just as well not have been afraid—as we generally find out afterwards—for the other apparition, whatever it might be, was ever so much more afraid of me.

"What on earth are you about there?" I shouted bravely, when this welcome truth came to my knowledge. "Can't you stand up like a man, and say what you are about?"

In reply to my challenge an undersized figure scarcely any taller than the corn arose, showing a very strange head-dress and other outlandish garments, and a loose idea generally of being all abroad. "You are the little chap I saw the other day," said I.

He nodded his head, and said something altogether outside of my classical attainments; and then he pulled forth from a long coat, whose colours no moon, or even rainbow could render, a small square package, which he lifted to his eyes. With a rush of my heart into the situation, I seized him by his collar, or the thing that represented it, and twisted him over the gate; and he looked thankful, having some fear perhaps of English five-bars.

In half a minute, I had this little fellow in my den, where he trembled and blinked at the light, and then grinned, as if to propitiate a cannibal. And I was pleased to see that he had pluck enough to put one hand upon the hilt of a little blue skewer which he wore in his belt, and then he looked at me boldly. With a smile to reassure him, I offered to take the missive from his other hand. But that was not the proper style of doing business with him. He drew back for a pace or two, and made the utmost of his puny figure, and then with a low bow stretched forth both hands, and behold there was a letter in the end of a cleft stick! Where he found the cleft stick is more than I [Pg 86] can tell. At the same time, he said *Allai*, which turned out afterwards to be his own name.

"Sit down in that corner, little chap," I said as graciously as if he knew English. "And make yourself at home, while I get on with this." Perhaps he was out of practice in the art of sitting down, for instead of accepting the chair I offered, he clapped himself in some wonderful manner upon a hassock. But it was impossible for me to attend to him much, until I knew what he had brought.

Now there was nothing particularly foreign about this. It looked like an ordinary English letter, except that the paper was not like ours, and the envelope was secured with silk, as well as sealed. But the writing was the daintiest that ever I did see; and I longed to get rid of that "darkie" in the corner, whose eyes flashed at me from the gloomy floor. And his hand was playing with his *kinjal* all the time, for so they call those deadly bits of steel, without which they never think their attire complete. Being unaccustomed to be looked at so, I could not enter into my fair letter as I wished; though that little fellow would have flown up to the slates, before he could get near me with that hateful snakish thing. And to tell the truth, I did him wrong by any such suspicion; for there could never be a more loyal, honest, and zealous retainer than Allai. "Here you are," I said, addressing him in English, though well aware now that he was none the wiser; "here's a drop of good beer for you, young man. You take a pull at that, while I write my answer. Ah, you won't get such stuff as that in—well, I don't know where you hail from; but all over the world I defy you to get anything like it."

Allai gave a grunt which I took for acquiescence; and leaving him to enjoy himself, I wrote a few lines and enclosed them in a cover. Then I found a bit of sealing wax, and sealed it very carefully, and fixed it in the cleft wand, and handed it to Allai.

"You go straight away, quick-sticks, with this, and don't you lose it, or I'll break your neck. Why, I'm blest if the pagan has drunk a drop of his beer! Can such a race ever be brought up to date? [Pg 87] Why, he takes it for virulent poison!"

The young savage had poured my good ale upon the floor, and was soaking the point of his dagger in it. He had put the glass to his lips no doubt, and arrived at the sage conclusion that here was swift death for his enemies. However, he possessed some civilisation as to the meaning of a broad crown-piece, which in the fervour of my joy I set before him. To a rich man it would have been well worth the money, to see the glad sparkle of those black eyes, and the grin upon those swarthy cheeks. Suddenly with a deep salaam his slender form turned and was gone like a shadow.

And then I was able at last to dwell upon this very beautiful letter, which might to the outward eye appear to convey not a token of anything more than "Miss Mary Jones presents her compliments;" but to my deeper perception, and hopes higher than any telescope may carry, it showed the sky cast open at the zenith, like a lily, and a host of golden angels letting down a ladder for me. For no longer could I hide my state of mind, or disguise it from myself. Henceforth

I shall be open about it, though hitherto ashamed to say half of what I thought, while I had such a little to go upon. But here is my key to Paradise. Let every man judge for himself, bearing in mind that he never can be wise until he has been a fool seventy times seven.

> "SIR,—My dear father, Sûr Imar, of Daghestan, has been injured very greatly by your alien conduct to him. Your actions were of high bravery, and great benevolence to us. But when we desired very largely to inform you of our much gratitude, we could not discover you in any place, and we sought for you vainly, with great eagerness of sorrow. And then, for a long space of time, we made endeavour to find out the name of the gentleman who had done us so great a service, but would not permit us to thank him. We are strangers here, and have not much knowledge. After that, a man who possesses three goats pronounced to us that he understood the matter. According to his words, I take the liberty of letter, entreating you, if it is right, to come, and permit us to [Pg 88] see to whom we owe so much. And my father is afraid that the gentleman was injured in the conflict with a furious English beast. If, then, this should have happened, he can remedy it, as perhaps you cannot in this country. I desire also, if it is right, to join my own entreaties. I am, Sir, Yours very faithfully, DARIEL."

CHAPTER IX [Pg 89]
STRANGE SENSATIONS

"Yours very faithfully." Oh, if that were only written in earnest, instead of cold convention! To have, faithfully mine, the most lovely, and perfect, entrancing, enslaving, poetical, celestial—tush, what word is there in our language? None of course; because there has never been anything like it until now. Gentleness, sweetness, gracefulness, purity, simplicity, warmth of heart, gratitude for even such a trifling service—all these were very fine things in their way; but away with them all, if they want to tell me why I love my darling! Because I cannot help it, is the only reason. It must be so, because it is so. Surely this is their own fair logic, and they must feel the force of it.

All this jumped with reason well, and was plainer than a pikestaff. But the path of true love still was crossed by one little bar, without a sign-post. In the name of the zodiac, where was Daghestan?

Man had not quite hatched board-schools yet; though already, under the tread of Progress, incubating of them. Having been only at a public school, and then for two years at Oxford, no opportunity had I found for hearing of Modern Geography. That such a thing existed, I could well believe, from the talk of undergraduates, whose lot it was to cram for competition of a lower kind. I had been a prefect at Winchester, and passed my little-go at Oxford, and might have gone in for honours there, though very likely not to get them. But in all this thoroughly sound education, I had never dreamed of Modern Geography. I could have told you, though it is all gone [Pg 90] now, the name of every village in Peloponnese, and of every hill in Attica, and the shape of every bay and island, and a pestilent lot of them there was, from the Hellespont to Tænarus. But if you had asked me the names and number of the counties of England, and other wild questions of that sort, I should have answered, as a friend of mine did, who got an open scholarship at Oxford, and then went in for something in London, "There are about half a hundred, more or less; but Parliament is always changing them." And this man got the highest marks in the geography of that year; because the examiner was a Welshman, and therefore laid claim to Monmouth.

But wherever Daghestan might be, I felt sure of its being the noblest country (outside the British dominions) of all the sun could shine upon. Moreover, it sounded as if it had no little to do with the Garden of Eden. Ispahan, and Teheran, and other rhymes for caravan, had a gorgeous oriental sound, as of regions of romance, inhabited by Peris, and paved with gold and diamonds. And the glow that flickered through the wheat that day, as the mellow fountains danced before the blue half-moon of sickle, was warmer than an English sun can throw, and quickened with a brilliance of heavenly tints, such as Hope alone, the Iris of the heart, may cast.

"Farmer Jarge, here's nuts for you. What do you suppose I have found out now?"

This was that lazy fellow Tom, sprawling in the yellow stubble, with his back against a stook, and a pipe in his mouth, and a dog's-eared novel on his lap. We had knocked off work for half an hour in the middle of the day, just to get a bit to eat; and I was not best pleased with Erricker, because of the difference between the noble promise of the breakfast table, and the trumpery performance in the field.

"*Sprawling in the yellow stubble.*"

"Get away," I said; "you can talk, and nothing else. All you have found out is where the beer-can is; you are not even worthy of your bread and cheese." However, I gave him some, and he began to munch.

"Won't you laugh, when I tell you about this? And it upsets all your theories that you are so wonderfully wise with. I must have heard you say a thousand times, that it is only a fool that ever falls in love." [Pg 91]

"You never understand a thing that anybody says. There are limitations, and conditions, and a whole variety of circumstances, that may make all the difference; otherwise a man would be a fool to talk like that."

"Fool to do it? Or fool to talk about it? You seem to be getting a bit mixed, friend George. It's the stooping that has done it. By Jove! I couldn't stand that. Nature never meant me for a reaper, George. And you may thank the Lord that I did not cut your legs off. But what do you think 'Stocks and Stones' has done? And you can't call him a fool altogether. Head over heels, 'Stocks and Stones' has fallen in love with our Grace!"

"*Our Grace*, indeed! Have you a sister of that name? If you should happen to refer to my sister, I will thank you to call her 'Miss Cranleigh'! Is there anything this fellow does not meddle with?"

"Mr. George Cranleigh, Mr. Jackson Stoneman aspires to the hand of Miss Grace Cranleigh, daughter of Sir Harold Cranleigh, Bart. Is that grand enough, Mr. Cranleigh? And if so, what do you think of it?"

What I thought of it was that there scarcely could have been a more unlucky complication than was likely now to be brought about by Tom's confounded discovery. It was not in his nature to hold his tongue; and if he should once let this knowledge escape him, in the presence of my father and mother, or worst of all in that of my sister, it would be all up with Stoneman's chance of marrying Grace Cranleigh. And as to binding Tom to secrecy, as well might one blow the kitchen bellows at a dandelion ball, and beg it not to part with a particle of its plumage. On the spur of the moment, I said more than facts would bear me out in, when they came up at leisure.

"Don't tell me, you stupid fellow. How many more mare's nests must come out of your eyes, before you see anything? But if you must take in such rubbish, just do this, Tom, will you? Keep your eyes wide open, my boy. You know how sharp you are, Tom. But not a word to any one, or it would spoil your game altogether. By the by, where is Daghestan, Tom? You are such a swell at geography." [Pg 92]

"Daghestan! I seem to have heard of it, and yet I can't be certain. Persian, I think. No, that is Ispahan. Tut, tut, what a fool I am!—of course I know all about it. Why it's in the United States, a prime place for scalping and buffaloes."

"No, you old muff, that is Dakota. Quite another pair of shoes. I don't want to disturb the Governor, or I could find out in a moment. Never mind, it doesn't matter; and here we go to work again. Now what is the sweetest smell, do you think, in all the world of farming? Not a great over-powering scent, but a delicate freshness through the air."

"I should say the hay on an upland meadow, when it begins to make. Or perhaps a field of new bean-blossom. I never knew that till this year; but upon my word it was stunning."

"No, the most delicate of all scents is from the clover first laid bare among the wheat where it was sown. No blossom of course; but the fragrance of the leaf, among the glossy quills that sheltered it. But come along; if you can't swing hook without peril of manslaughter, you can bind, or you can set up stooks, or earn your keep some little. Why, Grace is worth a score of you! Poor Tom, is your finger bleeding? You must come harvesting in kid gloves."

"I will tell you what it is," said Tom, after keeping his place among the binders for about five minutes. "I am a thoroughgoing countryman, and I know a lot about farming; and you know how I can jump and run, and a good light weight with the gloves I am; but this job beats me altogether. 'Pay your footing, sir, pay your footing!' You'll have to pay for my headstone, George, if you keep me on much longer. How you can go on all day long—but I want you to do something for me, and by the Powers, I have earned it."

He wanted me to promise, in return for all his labours, to give up my plans for the evening, and present myself at dinner-time for the ceremony at the cottage. This, though a very simple business, must be done in the proper form; and then it would be my duty perhaps to offer to take [Pg 93] a hand at whist, and be ready for the wearisome wrangle, which even well-bred people make of it. But I had nobler fish to fry.

"Tom, I can't do it. You like that sort of thing; and my mother is delighted with your sprightly little tales. Go and put your brave apparel on. Everybody admires you; and you love that."

He knew that he did. Why should he deny it? The happiness of mankind is pleasure, though it passes without our knowledge, because we never can stop to think of it,—as a man in a coach sees the hedges race by; and if it comes to that, where may you find true bliss so near at home, as in being pleased with your own good self? Our Tom had a happy time. Nothing long tormented him. He carried a lofty standard with him, and flopped its white folds joyously at little gnats and buzzing bees; and he never failed to come up to it, because that standard was himself. "What else could it be?" he says to me. "And that is why everybody likes me."

CHAPTER X [Pg 94]
UPON THE GROUND

Alas! to come down from those pleasant heights, if ever I did attain to them, to the turbulent dissatisfaction with oneself, and contempt of every creature in the world, save one, which lonely love engenders! Never had I seemed to myself so low, so awfully prosaic and unpicturesque, as when I was trying to make myself look decent that very evening. Since then I have learned that even pretty girls, who are roses to thistles in comparison with us, are never quite certain at their looking-glass that another touch might not improve them. And what did I behold? A square-built fellow, with a stubby yellow moustache, and a nose fit for the ring,—or to have a ring through it,—a great bulky forehead, like Ticknor's bull-dog, and cheeks like a roasted coffee-berry. The only thing decent was the eyes, firm and strong, of a steadfast blue, and the broad full chin that kept the lips from drooping in a tremble even now. Proud as I was of my Saxon breed, and English build and character, in the abasement of the moment I almost longed for a trace of the comely Norman traits. "As if any girl could love you!" I exclaimed, in parody of that handsome Tom's self-commune.

In for a penny, in for a pound. Without a trial, there's no denial. Handsome is that handsome does. Beauty is only skin-deep. And so on—I laboured to fetch myself up to the mark, but it was a very low one. The neap of the tide, or the low spring water,—which goes ever so much further out,—was ebbing away on the shores of self-esteem as I entered the glen of St. Winifred. Tom Erricker would have descended, as if the valley and its contents belonged to him. Heaviness of [Pg 95] heart may sometimes visit even a healthy and robust young man, living the life intended for us, working in the open air all day, and sleeping on a hard palliasse at night. Heaviness and diffidence, and clownish hesitation, and fear of losing precious landmarks in a desert-dazzle. Surely it were better to turn back before they can have seen me, set the sheepish face to the quiet hill, and thank my stars that not one of them yet has turned into a comet.

Sadly was I perpending this, slower and slower at every step, while the shadows of the trees grew longer, and the voice of birds was lower, and the babble of the brook began to sink into the lisping of a cradled child, as the draught of the valley hushed it; and falling into harmony with all these signs, my breath was beginning to abate me, when along a trough of sliding mist like a trysting track for the dusk, appeared the form of my friend *Kuban*. Courage at once arose within

me, and spirit of true patronage. To men and women I may be nought, but to him I am a hero. Lo, how he licks my hand, and whines, as if he had never seen my like, and would never believe it, if he did! He longs to roll upon his back, and offer himself a prostrate sacrifice. But he knows that I should be vexed at that, because it would not be safe for him. The labour of his great heart is to show me all his damages, and make me understand that, but for me, he could not display them. What with love, and what with fear, and the utter unsettlement of my mind, down I went on the grass beside him, and took him paw by paw, to feel how much of him was still existing.

Now if I had thought of it in the coldest blood—if there still were cold blood in me—there was nothing in the world I could have done so wise as this abasement. What says Ovid in the "Art of Love"? Many low things, I am afraid, that no Englishman would stoop to. But if that great Master arose anew, to give lessons to an age of milder passion, probably he would have said to me, "Water those wounds with your tears, my friend."

My eyes, being British, were dry as a bone; but upon them fell, as they looked up, the lustre of a very different pair, like bright stars extinguishing a glow-worm. And the glory of these was [Pg 96] deepened by the suffusion of their sparkle with a tender mist of tears. No blush was lurking in the petal of the cheeks, no smile in the brilliant bud of lips; pity and gentle sorrow seemed to be the sole expression.

I dropped the dog's great legs, and rose, and with all the grace that in me lay—and that was very little—took off my hat, and made a bow, the former being of the bowler order, and the latter of the British.

"No, no. Please not to do that," she said, "it is so very grievous. Forgive me, if I am sad to look at. It always comes upon me so, when I behold things beautiful."

"But," I replied, being quite unable to consider myself of that number, even upon such authority, "it is I that should be shedding tears; it is I that behold things beautiful."

"It was of the dog I meant my words,"—this was rather a settler for me,—"and the beautiful tokens he manifests of gratitude to the kind gentleman. And we have been desiring always; but the place we could not find. It is my father who will best speak, for he has great talent of languages. He was hoping greatly that you would come. I also have been troubling in my mind heavily, that we must appear so ungrateful. It is now ten days that have passed away. But we could not learn to what place to send; neither did we know the name of Mr.—but I will not spoil it, until you have told me how to pronounce."

"*Cranleigh, Cran-lee*; as if it were spelled with a double e coming after the letter l," said I to her. While to my all abroad self I whispered, "May the kind powers teach her to spell it, by making it her own, while she looks like that."

For sometimes it is vain to think, and to talk is worse than lunacy. Her attitude and manner now, and her way of looking at me,—as if I were what she might come to like, but would rather know more about it,—and the touches of foreign style (which it is so sweet to domicile), and the exquisite music which her breath made, or it may have been her lips, with our stringy words—I [Pg 97] am lost in my sentence, and care not how or why, any more than I cared how I was lost then, so long as it was in Dariel's eyes.

If Dariel's eyes will find me there, and send me down into her heart, what odds to me of the earth or heaven, the stars, the sun, or the moon itself—wherein I am qualified to walk with her?

Possibly that sweet Dariel saw, but could not comprehend my catastrophe. She drew back, as if from something strange, and utterly beyond her knowledge. Then she cast down those eyes, that were so upsetting me; and I felt that as yet I had no right to perceive the tint, as of heaven, before the earth has glimpsed the dawn, which awoke in welcome wonder on the wavering of her face. See it I did however, and a glow went through me.

Who can measure time when time acts thus? *Kuban* arose, as if his wounds were all a sham, or as if we at least were taking them in that light, and hating—as a good dog always does—to play second fiddle, turned his eyes from one to the other of the twain, in a manner so tragic that we both began to laugh. And when Dariel laughed, there could be nothing more divine, unless it were Dariel crying.

"Oh, how he does love you, Mr. Cran-lee!" she exclaimed with a little pout, pretending to be vexed. "What a wicked dog he is to depart from his mind so! Why, he always used to think that there was nobody like me."

"If he would only think that I am like you, or at any rate try to make you like me, what a blessed animal he would be!" This I said with pathos, and vainly looking at her.

"I am not very strong of the English language yet. It has so many words that are of turns incomprehensible. And when one thinks to have learned them all, behold they are quite different! To you I seem to speak it very, very far from native."

"To me you seem to speak it so that it is full of music, of soft clear sounds, and melody, that no English voice can make of it. It is like the nightingale I heard when first—I mean one summer [Pg 98] evening long ago; only your voice is sweeter."

"Is it? Then I am glad, because my father hears it always. And he knows everything I think,

before I have time to tell him. And he can speak the English well,—as well as those who were born in it. Seven different languages he can speak. Oh, how he is learned! To hear me talk is nothing—nothing—folly, trifles, nothing more than deficiency of wisdom, and yet of himself he thinks no more, perhaps not so much as you do."

"I think nothing of myself at all. How can I, when I am with you? Yet a great many different people think highly of me, and I do my best to deserve it." This was no vain word, although it is not like my usual manner to repeat it.

"I am glad of that," she answered simply, looking with kind approval at me; and I saw that her own clear nature led her to believe everything she heard. "That is the proper way for people, and as the good Lord intended. But how long we have been discoursing, without anything to be said, while the dusk of the night is approaching! It is my father beyond all doubt whom you have come by this long road to see. And he has been desiring for many days to obtain the privilege of seeing you; not only that he may return his thanks, but to learn that you did not receive a wound; for he says that the wound of a dog is very dangerous in this country."

"Yes, I did receive a wound, and a bad one rather,"—how mean of me it was to speak like this! Although I was telling the simple truth, for there was a deep gash all down my left forearm. "But I would gladly receive a hundred wounds, for the sake of anything that you loved. For what am I? Who could find any good in me, compared with you, or even with *Kuban*?"

But this fine appeal to the tender emotions did not obtain any success that time. If the pity, so ignobly fished for, felt any tendency to move, it took good care not to show itself in the fountains watched by me.

"Mr. Cran-lee speaks much from his good-will to please. For there must be good in him, even to compare with *Kuban*, if a great many people think highly of him, and he does his best to deserve it. But is it not the best thing to hasten at once with this very bad wound to the one who can cure it? Let us waste no more time, but go at once to meet my father." [Pg 99]

There was no getting out of this; and I said to myself that Miss Dariel was not quite so soft after all. What had she told me about herself? Nothing. How much about her father? Very little. And here was I being towed off to him, when I wanted to talk with her, study her, make way with her, find out whether there was any other villain in pursuit of her marvellous attractions,—in a word, make my best love to her.

But this was the very thing she would not have at present; and I felt like a man tumbling out of a tree, through making too lofty a grab at the fruit. So I fell into the opposite extreme of manner, to make it come home to her that I was hurt. This was another mistake; because, as I came to understand long afterwards, the feminine part of mankind is never struck all of a heap, as we are. If you will only think twice, you will see that it never could be expected. For drop as we may—and the ladies too often call upon us now to drop it—the sense that is inborn in us, of a purer and higher birth in them, which they kept and exalted by modesty—even if at their own demand we let fall every atom of that, and endeavour to regard them as bipeds on a wheel, with limbs rounder than our own,—I say that we ought to try still to regard them as better than ourselves, though they will not have it so. And what could say more for their modesty?

I looked at Dariel, and saw that she was not thinking of me at all, except as a matter of business. And fearing to have gone too far, I tried to behave in every way as a well-conducted stranger. This put her into a friendly state of mind, and even more than that. For it was now her place to be hospitable; and I displayed such bashfulness, that believing her father to be the greatest man on earth, she concluded that I was terribly afraid of him.

"You must not be uneasy about meeting him;" she spoke in a voice as gentle as the whisper of the wind in May, when it tempts a young lamb to say "Ba!" "I assure you, Mr. Cran-lee, although he can be very stern with persons at all wicked, to those who are upright and good, he is a great deal less austere and rigid than even I am. And I am afraid that you have discovered much harshness in my character, for you appear to dread a walk with me." [Pg 100]

I had fallen behind as we approached the door, partly to show my humility, and partly to admire the grace and true perfection of her slender figure in motion. English girls may have lovely figures, but none of them can walk like that.

"No," I said after some delay, to make her turn her head again, and repeat that look of penitence; "you have been as kind as I could expect, perhaps more kind than the ladies of your country are to a mere stranger."

If ever I deserved a good hearty kick, and too often that has been my merit, here was a solid occasion for it. She stopped and spread both hands to me, and looked at me with her clear chin raised, and trembling lips, and soft dark eyes, whose radiant depths appeared to thrill with tender sorrow and self-reproach. What eyes to tell the tale of love, to the happy man who shall inspire it!

No dawn was there now of any warmth, but light alone, the light of kindliness and good-will, and the tranquil beams of gratitude. What more could I expect as yet, though myself in such a hurry?

"What a beautiful place! I had no idea that it would be like this."

I spoke as we stood within the wall, for the maiden now seemed timid. "Why, I must have lost my

wits altogether, when I was here the other day, for I do not remember a bit of this. What a wonderful man your father is! What taste, and skill, and knowledge! But it must have taken him many years to bring it into this condition. It was nothing but a pile of ruins, inside an old ruinous wall, at the time when I used to come home from Winton. And how beautifully it is laid out! I should like to know who planned it. Why you must have quite a number of men to keep it in such order. It is almost like a dream to me. But how rude I must appear to you! Though really if the light were good, I could sit here for an hour together and like to look at nothing else but all this perfect loveliness."

She had come quite close to me as I spoke, with a bright smile of pleasure on her face,—for I warmed my description knowingly,—and as I said *perfect loveliness*, I think she knew where I found it. For she turned away, as if to look at the distance I was praising; and being in rapid chase of ever so trifling a thing to encourage me, after the many mistakes I had made, I tried with the greatest delight to believe that she did that to rob me of a conscientious blush. But the wonder of all these zig-zag ways, when a straight solid man tumbles into them, is that they tussle him to and fro, a hundred times as much as they upset a slippery fellow whose practice is to slide in and out at pleasure. "Oh, for the wits of Tom Erricker now!" was the only thought of things outside, that came to me in this crisis. Then again in a moment I scorned that wish. For a strong heart from its depth despises surface gloss and frothy scum. [Pg 101]

"What is the proper expression for me? I see your noble father in the distance. How shall I accost him?" That I used such a word as *accost*—which I hate, but no better word would come to me—shows the state of mind I had fallen into; not about him, but his daughter. For the great Sûr—whatever they might mean—I did not care a fig as yet, and in fact felt rather annoyed with him. But it was of the utmost moment now to make her prize my deference. That she did, far beyond the value, and smiled at me with a superior light.

"In his own land he is a prince," she said; "not as those Russians call everybody; but a Prince of the longest generations. He, however, makes lightness of that; for he must have been the same without it. I have read that you are proud of your English race, which comes down to you naturally. But my father is purer than to dwell upon that. He allows no one to call him *Prince*. And I never call him anything but Father. We have not many names in our country. He is Imar; and I am only Dariel."

Before I could go further into that important subject, I found myself looking up at the most magnificent man I ever saw.

CHAPTER XI
SÛR IMAR.

[Pg 102]

Although it may seem very wonderful to those who have never been in that state, nevertheless it is quite true, that in this condition of my feelings, the magnitude of no man was a question that concerned me. Let him be taller than the son of Kish, or wiser than Solomon the son of David, with supreme indifference I could scan the greatness of his body, or even of his mind. If Shakespeare had marched up to me, at that moment, with "Hamlet" in his right hand, and the "Tempest" in his left, I should only have said to him—"My good sir, are you the father of Dariel?"

But the beauty of goodness has some claim too, although more rarely recognised, because so rarely visible. Sûr Imar's face invited love as well as admiration, not only when his glance was resting on his gentle daughter, but even when he had his eyes on me, who was longing all the time to steal her. And I put on a manner whence he might conclude that it had never occurred to me to look at her.

But Dariel was above all thoughts of that, as much as I wished him to be.

She rose on her purple sandals, which I had not observed till then, and kissed her dear father, as if she had not seen him for a month; but I suppose it is their fashion, and he glanced at me as if he meant to say—"Nature first; manners afterwards." Then he looked again with some surprise; and her face, which could tell all the world without a word, seemed to say to me—"Now be on your very best behaviour."

I was afraid she would use some foreign language, but her breeding was too fine for that.

"Father, at last we have the pleasure to see and know the kind gentleman who was so very brave, and who did us that great benefit. You behold him; and his name is Mr. Cran-lee. Mr. Cran-lee, you behold Sûr Imar." [Pg 103]

Being still in the skies to a certain extent, I longed for a hat of greater dignity, to make a better bow withal; but still I stood up as an Englishman should, in the presence of the biggest foreigner, until he knows more about him. I have thought sometimes that as every player at chess, golf, or billiards, knows almost at the first contact when he has met his better, so we (without any sense of rivalry, and without being ever on the perk about ourselves) by some wave of Nature's hand along the scale of her gifts to us, are aware, without a thought, when we come into converse with a larger mind. Not of necessity a quicker one, not peradventure a keener one, possibly one that we could outdo, in the game of chuck-farthing, now the highest test we have.

This foreigner made me no bow at all, though I expected a very grand one; he took me quietly by both hands, and said, "I am very glad to know you. Will you do me the favour of coming to my room?"

The light of my eyes, and of his as well,—for that could be seen in half a glance,—vanished with a smile; and I followed my host through a narrow stone-passage to an ancient door, studded with nails and iron fleurs-de-lis. That solid henchman was standing on guard, whom I had seen before, and known as Stepan; and inside lay that other mighty dog, of whom I had seen but little as yet, *Orla*, the son of *Kuban*. The room was not large, but much loftier than the rooms of an old dwelling-house would be, and the walls were not papered nor painted, but partly covered with bright hangings, among which mirrored sconces were fixed, with candles burning in some of them. Stepan soon set the rest alight, so that the cheerful and pleasant aspect of the whole surprised me. But against the walls were ranged on shelves, betwixt the coloured hangings, metallic objects of a hundred shapes, tools, castings, appliances, implements unknown to me, and pieces of mechanism, enough to puzzle my brother Harold, or any other great inventor. But although they were not in my line at all, I longed to know what they were meant for. [Pg 104]

"One of the great and peculiar features of the English nation," my host said, with a friendly smile, and slow but clear pronunciation, "according to my experience is, that they never show much curiosity about things that do not concern them. A Frenchman, a German, an Italian would scarcely have cast his eyes round this room, without eager desire arising in his bosom to know what the use of all these things may be. Even if he were too polite to enquire, he would contrive to fill me with some conclusion of a duty to him—the duty of exposing to him my own affairs. With you it is entirely different. You do not even entertain a wish, you are free from all little desires to learn what could not in any way be your own business."

All this he put not as a question, but a statement of facts long proven. Whereas I was pricked internally with a very sharp curiosity. Could he be chaffing me? I almost thought he must be, so far were his words from describing my condition. But on the other hand it would be too absurd, for a foreigner to attempt to chaff an Englishman in his own language, and at the first conversation. So I tried to look as if I deserved the whole of his compliments, and more. For I never like to think that a man is chaffing me; not even one of my own nation, and of proper rank to do it. Two bad turns of mind at once ensue, contempt of myself for being slow, and anger with him for discovering it.

"That is all a trifle," continued Prince Imar; for so I felt inclined to call him now, to console myself for having such a cut beyond me—"But I did not bring you here for a trifle, Mr. Cranleigh. You Englishmen think very little of yourselves. Not in comparison with foreigners, I mean; for when it comes to that you have much self-respect. I mean with regard to your own bodies. You detest what you call a fuss about them, such as the gallant Frenchman makes. But, as this has happened to you on our behalf, you will not deny my right to learn what it is. I am not a man of medicine, but I have been present among many wounds. Will you do me the favour of allowing me to see what has happened?"

It would not be right for any one to say that I had fallen under this man's influence. No doubt I did that, when I came to know him better. But as for any abject prostration of will, on the part of any healthy and sane man to another, at first sight, and through some occult power, some "odylic force," and so on—let the people believe in that, who can do, or feel it. Nevertheless I showed him what had happened, because that was common sense. [Pg 105]

And he took it strictly as a thing of common sense. "You have done the very best that could be done," he said, after looking at it carefully; "it is a bad rent, even worse than I expected, and there will always be a long scar there. But it will not lessen the power of the arm, if there is no other mischief. One thing is very important to know. Of the two dogs, which inflicted that wound?"

I told him that I could not pretend to say, having been in the thick of it between the two. And it had not occurred to me to think it out since then. But remembering all I could of the ups and downs, I thought it more likely that his dog had done it, having been so much more up in the air, while the bull-dog fought low, and was striving to grip upward. Probably *Kuban* was making a rush at his foe, while I tried to get him by the neck.

"I hope with all my heart that it was so," my host replied very cheerfully; "for then we need have no fear of any bad effects. There is no venom in the teeth of our noble mountain breed. But you will leave yourself to me."

This I did with the utmost confidence, and while he was using various applications carefully and with extraordinary skill, I ventured to ask in a careless tone—"Of what mountain race is *Kuban*?"

"Is it possible that you do not know? He is of the noblest race of dogs from the noblest mountains of the earth. A wolfhound of the Caucasus."

Sûr Imar's voice was very sad, as he dropped for a moment the herb he was using, and fixed his calm dark eyes on mine. For the first time then I became aware that the general expression of his face was not that of a happy man, but of one with a sorrow deeply stored, though not always at interest in the soul. He was very unlikely, in his proud quiet way, to enlarge upon that; but of the common grief he spoke, with less heat and much greater resignation, than we feel about a railway overcharge. [Pg 106]

"I am banished from the land where I was born. Of that I have no complaint to make. If I had been on the victorious side, perhaps I should have done the like to those who fought against me. Perhaps I should have been obliged to do so, whether it was just or otherwise. That question cannot have any interest for you; and I owe you an apology for speaking of it. But I am so grateful to the hospitable land which receives me as if I belonged to it, and allows me to go anywhere without a passport, that I wish every Englishman to understand that I shall never make mean of their benefit. Will you do me the favour of tasting this? You have borne much pain without a sign. It is Kahiti, the choice wine of the Caucasus, made within sight of Kazbek."

Where Kazbek was, or what Kazbek might be, I had not the least idea then, though I came to know too well afterwards; but in fear of hurting his feelings, and perhaps his opinion of myself, I looked as if I knew all about it. And as he began to pour out a pinkish liquid from an old black bottle, with a fine smile sparkling in his quiet eyes, I could not help saying to myself—"He deserves to be an Englishman." He was worthy also of that crown of bliss, and came uncommonly near to it, when he praised his liquor, as a good host does, with geniality conquering modesty.

"If you could only make this in England!" he exclaimed, after drinking my health most kindly; and I answered, "Ah, if we only could!" with a smack of my lips, which meant—"I hope we never should."

"Is this scratch likely to require further treatment? Or can I manage it myself now?" My question recalled him from some delightful vision, perhaps of grapes blushing on the slopes of some great mountain, perhaps of the sun making a sonnet of beauty, perhaps of his own honeymoon among them, with the lovely mother of Dariel. It was rude of me to disturb him; but why, if he wanted true politeness, why not send for a certain nymph to taste her native Helicon? [Pg 107]

"*Orla*, come and show your teeth," he said; "now, Mr. Cranleigh, his teeth are the very similarity of his father's. That is the one that inflicted the wound, the right canine; quite different would have been that of the bull-dog. You need have no alarm. Shall I give you a—what call you it—written testimony, to set your family at ease? What? Have you never told them? Ah, but you take things with composure. It is therefore all the more necessary for me to administer the proper measures. I shall require to see you in three days from this, and then at least once a week for the following two months."

Oh, what a chance, what a glorious chance of improving my acquaintance with Dariel! Of course I could not expect to meet her every time, still now and then—and as for that big Stepan, I warrant he knows what a crown-piece is, as well as little Allai. With admirable self-denial, I contended that such visits never could be needful, and that it was out of the question to spare so much time, etc., etc. But the great Caucasian stopped all that, by declaring that unless I trusted him entirely, and obeyed him implicitly, he should consider it his duty to inform my friends, that they might place me under strict medical treatment. Thereupon, what could I do but consent to everything he required? Till with many directions as to my own conduct, he led me as far as the door of *Little Guinib*, as he playfully called his snug retreat, and showed me before closing it behind me, how to obtain entrance at any time by pressing my hand against an upper panel, and he gave me leave to do so, as he said "Good-night."

"No stranger would dare to enter thus, with *Kuban* and *Orla* loose inside, but you have made them both your faithful slaves. Good-night, and the Lord be with you."

Now, though a Briton may be, and generally is, a very loose-seated Christian, only gripping on his steed when he is being taught to ride, or when he has to turn him into Pegasus, he is able to stand up in his stirrups high enough to look down upon every other pilgrim. When the Prince opened that bottle of wine, I said in my heart, "Hurrah, this great father of Dariel cannot be a thoroughgoing Islamite;" and now when he committed me to the Lord, instead of any Anti-British Allah, a strong warmth of the true faith—which had been languishing, until I should know what Dariel's was—set me quite firmly on my legs again. Thus I went upon my way rejoicing, and the beautiful ideas that flowed into my mind were such as come to no man, except when deep in love, and such as no man out of it deserves or cares to hear of. [Pg 108]

CHAPTER XII
IN THE BACKGROUND

[Pg 109]

Surely as the world of night goes round, with clusters of stars thronging after one another, and loose wafts of vapour ever ready to flout them, and the spirit of dreams flitting over us, without any guidance of mind or matter, so surely will the dawn of our own little days bring new things to us, which we cannot understand in the clearest light of our wits beneath the sun. And of this I must give an instance now, sorry as I am to do it.

My sister Grace (the very sweetest girl, always excepting one of course, that ever tied a hat-string), what did she do but take a little touch of Cupid, without knowing anything about it? She denied it strongly, and hotly even; as a Swiss hotel-keeper abjures scarlet fever. But I insisted the more upon it; because it was quite picturesque to see Grace Cranleigh in a passion. I found it worth while to go as near the brink of a downright lie as a truthful man can step, without falling over, in order to rouse and work up this dear girl, till she actually longed to stamp her feet. There

was a vivid element—the father calls it gold, and the brother calls it carrots—in her most abundant locks; and if you could only hit upon a gentle strain of chaff, which must have a little grain left in it, and pour it upon her with due gravity, she became a charming sight to a philosopher.

Her affection was so deep, and her character so placid, that a sharp word or two, or a knowing little sneer, produced nothing better than a look of wonder, or sometimes a smile that abased us. She made no pretence to any varied knowledge, or power to settle moot questions,—though she [Pg 110] would have known where Daghestan was,—and as for contradiction, her tongue was never made for it, though her mind must have whispered to her often enough that brother George's words outran his wits. In spite of all this, it was possible to put her in a very noble passion, when one had the time to spare. And it certainly was worth while for the beauty of the sight, as well as for increase of perception concerning the turns of the feminine mind. The first sign of success for the most part was a deepening of the delicate and limpid tint that flitted on the soft curves of cheek; and then if one went on with calm aggravation, that terrible portent, lightning in the blue sky of the eyes, and a seam (as of the finest needlework of an angel who hems her own handkerchief), just perceptible and no more, in the white simplicity of forehead. And after that (if you had the heart to go on), no tears, none of that opening of the dikes, which the Low Country quenches an invasion with, but a genuine burst of righteous wrath—queenly figure, and all that sort of thing, such as Britannia alone can achieve, when unfeeling nations have poked fun at her too long.

Filled with a spirit of discontent, and a longing to know how girls behave, when they are beginning to think about somebody,—for Dariel must be a girl, as well as an Arch-female-Angel,—I contrived to fetch Grace to a prime state of wrath, the very first morning after her return from London. And I assure you that I learned a lot of things by that, which served me a good turn in my own case. A woman might call this a selfish proceeding. But what is love, except self flown skyward, and asking its way among the radiance of Heaven?

"This is a nice trick of yours," I said, with a careless air and an elderly smile, "to go waltzing about in hot weather with young Earls, as if you thought nothing of your brother hard at work."

"I have not the least idea what you mean, brother George. I am thinking of you, George, wherever I may be. I never see anybody to compare with you."

"Thousands of much better fellows everywhere." True enough that was, although I did not mean it. "Brilliant young men in gorgeous apparel. I am not fit to hold a candle for them." [Pg 111]

"Then hold it for yourself, George, as you have the right to do. And for all of us as well. For if ever there was an industrious, simple, unselfish fellow—"

"I never like to hear about that, as you know. The little I can do is altogether useless. I only want to hear about the romantic young Earls."

"Young Earls!" exclaimed Grace, with an innocence so pure that it required a little mantle on her cheeks; "I fear that you have not been looked after properly, while I have been away, dear George; or else you have over-exerted yourself. Coming home also so late at night, several times, they tell me! Continuing your labours for our benefit, nobody seems to know exactly where! Such frightful work makes you quite red in the face."

If that were true, all that I can say is, that the idea of being brought to book by a young girl like this, was enough to annoy the most superior brother. But to let her see that was beneath me.

"I have thriven very tidily, while you have been away. My buttons never come off, when I sew them on myself. But you know well enough what I mean about young Earls, and for you to prevaricate is quite a new thing. What I mean is about that young milksop of a fellow who writes verses, makes sonnets, stuff he calls poems—fytte 1, and fytte 2, enough to give you fifty fits. Lord Honey—something. What the deuce is his name?"

"If you mean the Earl of Melladew, the only thing I regret, dear George, is that you have not a particle of his fine imagination. Not that you need write poems, George; that of course would be wholly beyond you; but that the gift of those higher faculties, those sensitive feelings, if that is the right name, makes a man so much larger in his views, so very superior to coarse language, so capable of perceiving that the universe does not consist of men alone."

"Sensitive feelings! I should rather think so. He has got them, and no mistake, my dear girl. Why the year we licked Eton at Lord's, I happened just to graze him on the funny-bone with a mere lob, nothing of a whack at all for a decent fellow; and what did he do but throw down his bat, and [Pg 112] roll about as if he was murdered? What could ever be the good of such a Molly-coddle?"

"It comes to this then. Because you hurt him sadly when he was a boy, you are inclined to look down upon him for life. Nice masculine logic! And you nearly broke his arm, I daresay."

"Scarcely took the bark off. But I'll break something else, if I catch him piping love-ditties down here. I should have hoped that you would have shown a little more self-respect."

"Well, I don't quite understand what my crime is, George. And to fly into a passion with anybody who dares so much as to look at me! That is all Lord Melladew has done. And even that seemed too much for his courage. I believe if he had to say boh to a goose, he would call for pen and paper, and write it down. But your anxiety about me is quite a new thing. Is there any favoured candidate of yours down here?"

How sharp girls are! This was too bad of her, when I was doing my utmost for her good. The twinkle in her eyes was enough to show that she suspected something; and if she found it out, all up thenceforth with the whole of my scheme for her benefit.

"Yes, to be sure there is," I answered in some haste, for if I had said no, it would have been untrue, for I thought more highly every day of Jackson Stoneman, whereas Lord Melladew might be soon pulled down as we were, and through the same ruinous policy; "where will you find a nicer fellow, or one more highly esteemed (at any rate by himself), than my old friend, Tom Erricker? And when the tinning business comes to you, Harold will invent you a new process every day, until we are enabled to buy back all our land. Though that would be a foolish thing to do, unless he could find some new crop to put upon it. I cannot see why you think so little of Tom Erricker."

"Do you think much of him, George, in earnest? Is he a man to lead one's life? Would you like to see your favourite sister the wife of a man she could turn round her finger?"

"Confound it! There is no such thing as pleasing you," I spoke with a sense of what was due to [Pg 113] myself, having made the great mistake of reasoning. "All of you girls begin to talk as if you were to rule the universe. No man is good enough for you, unless he is a perfect wonder of intellect. And then if you condescend to accept him, his mind is to be in perfect servitude to yours—yours that are occupied nine minutes out of ten with considerations of the looking-glass."

"Can you say that of me, George? Now with your love of truth, can you find it in your conscience to say such a thing of me?"

"Well, perhaps not. And for excellent reason. You have no need to make a study of it. Whatever you do, or whatever you wear, it makes no difference; for you are always—"

"What? What am I? Come, tell me the worst, while you are so put out with me. What are you going to call me now?"

"The sweetest and the best girl in the world." I should not have put it quite so strongly, except for the way she was looking at me. But it was too late to qualify my words. Before I could think again, Grace was in my arms, and her hair in a golden shower falling on my breast. "After all, this is the best way to reason," she said with a smile that contained a world of logic; and I only answered, "At any rate for women;" because it is not for them to have the last word always.

However I had not changed my opinions, and did not mean to change them. For Jackson Stoneman, whom I had at first repulsed and kept at a very stiff arm's length, was beginning to grow upon me,—as people say,—not through any affection for his money; so far from that indeed, that the true reason was, I could think of him now without thinking of his money. When we first know a man of great wealth, especially if we happen to be very short of cash ourselves, we are apt to feel a certain shyness and desire to keep away from him; not from any dislike of his money, or sense of injustice at his owning such a pile, but rather through uneasiness about ourselves, and want of perfect certainty in the bottom of our hearts, that we may not try—like a man who [Pg 114] steals his gas—to tap the "main chance" behind the meter, and fetch a little into our own parlour on the sly. And even if our conscience is too brave to shrink from that, we know that if we walk too much in amity with this man of gold he will want, or at least he ought to want, to pay the piper who besets every path of every kind in England; whereas it hurts our dignity to be paid for, except by our Uncles, or the Government.

But supposing Jackson were to become a member of our family, what could be more inspiring and graceful, as well as delightful, for him, than the privilege which must fall to his share, of endeavouring to please his relatives? And looking at the matter from a point of view even more exalted, I began to perceive the course of duty very clearly staked out for me. And the conversation above recorded made it doubly manifest. My sister had neither admitted, nor denied, that this young Melladew had been attracted by her, while she was staying at her sister's house. She had spoken of his courage with some contempt; and any perception of such a defect would be fatal to his chances with nine girls out of ten. But Grace had her own little pet ideas; and to shoot with swan-shot at a swarm of gnats is better worth the cost than to reason with such girls. They are above reason; and there's an end of it.

To pass from all this to the things one can see, it was either that very same day or the next, that I came away out of the harvest-field, just for a morsel to eat and a pipe, in a snug place under the fringe of a wood, where a very small brook, fit only for minnows and grigs, made a lot of loops and tinkles. Two or three times I had been there before, and in fact was getting fond of it, because I believed, or as good as believed, without knowing every twist of it, that this little water in its own modest way never left off running until it reached the Pebblebourne; and after that it must have gone a little faster, till it came to the place where Dariel lived.

Possibly if I threw in a pint bottle, after scraping off the red pyramid, who could say that it might not land at the very feet to which all the world they ever trod upon must bow?

Encouraging these profound reflections, I sat upon the bank, and pulled out my pocket-knife, [Pg 115] being a little sharp-set for the moment, and aware of some thrills in a quarter near the heart. There was very little more to be done that afternoon, the week having ripened into Saturday, when no man of any self-respect does more than congratulate himself upon his industry; and on this point few have a stronger sense of duty than the cultivator of the soil of Surrey. No matter what the weather is, or how important the job in hand may be, his employer may repose the

purest confidence in him, that he will make off with holy zeal, right early on a Saturday.

Therefore when I heard a step behind me, I knew that it could be none of our "enlightened operatives;" not even Bob Slemmick would pull his coat off at that hour, though he would sometimes stop long enough to put away his tools. Correct was my reasoning, and with pleasure I beheld the active figure and expressive countenance of Mr. Jackson Stoneman. Not that every one would like this man, or care to have very much to do with him. Universal benevolence was not by any means the polestar of his existence, neither was it his chief employment to saunter amicably in the Milky Way. Butter for his bread, and that the very best butter, had probably been the main quest of his life; until his good stars brought him down into our county, and toward our Grace. He was even beginning to relax his mind, while he braced up his body already; and we thought that a year or two of our fine air would bring a lot of hard gold out of him.

"Glad to see you again. Somebody told us that you were off for the Mediterranean." In this careless manner did I shake hands with this 70 cubit and 20 carat Colossus of gold. There is humbug in all of us—even in me.

"Well, I was thinking of it," he replied, as he sat down beside me, and stretched his long legs, trousered a thousand times better than mine, though I knew which had most inside the cloth; "but after all, what's the good of foreign parts?"

Knowing but little about them as yet, and believing that he might traverse many thousand leagues without finding anything to come up to Surrey, I answered very simply, "You are quite right there."

"But isn't it disgusting, that in your native land, you can never make anything go to your liking?" [Pg 116]

This was very difficult for me to answer. I could not get along for a thousand wicked reasons—Free-trade, Democracy, adulteration, sewage-butter, foot-and-mouth complaint, living wage for men who have no life, and all the other wrong end of the stick we get.

"What I mean has nothing to do with your ideas," he continued as if all my ideas must be wrong, just when I was hoping that he began to see the right; "for Constitutional questions, I don't care twopence. It has become a race of roguery between both sides. Don't look savage, George, you know it as well as I do. Your party would do anything to get into power again. When the bone is in their own mouths, will they even try to crack it? But I have not come to talk all that stuff. I am under your directions in a matter nearer home. Are you going to play fast and loose with me, while your sister is being truckled away to an idiot of an Earl?"

If my mind had not been very equable and just, I must have had a quarrel with him over this. And if he had looked at me with any defiance—but his gaze was very sorrowful, as if all his hopes were blasted.

"Jackson," I answered in a rather solemn voice, having sense of my own tribulation, and I saw that he liked me to address him thus, though the name is not purely romantic, "you are not a bit worse off than any other fellow. Do you suppose that nobody has ever been in love before? You look at things from such a narrow point of view. Consider how much worse it must be for a woman."

"Well, I wish it was." His reply upset my arguments; I found it very difficult to re-arrange them on that basis.

"So far as that goes, I can get on well enough," he proceeded as I looked at him sensibly; "I shall feel it for years, no doubt, but still—but still the blackness and the bitterness of it is this, that such a girl, such a girl as never before trod the face of the earth, or inhaled the light of the sun—" "Don't get mixed," I implored, but he regarded me with scorn—"should be sold, I say sold, like a lamb in the market, to an idiot, just because he has a title!"

"You will be sorry when you have offended me," I spoke with extraordinary self-control, taking a [Pg 117] side glance at my own case; "for I don't come round in a hurry, I can tell you. But you really don't know what you are talking of. My father and mother have heard of no proposal, neither have I. And as for Grace herself, she despises that milksop as heartily as I do."

"George Cranleigh, I have not known you long; but this I can say without hesitation, and I should like to see any man deny it, you are the very noblest fellow that ever—"

"Trod the face of the earth, or inhaled the light of the sun. And why? Because I happen to agree with you. Ah, Jackson, allow me to improve the moment. Is there any human praise that does not flow from the like source, from the sense that the other fellow thinks as we do, and the subtle flattery of our own wisdom, and concurrence with our wishes."

"Shut up," he cried with a smile, which must have procured him much lucrative business in the City; "what has Farmer Jarge to do with moralising? But are you quite sure of what you said—that she despises him heartily?"

"Unless anybody runs him down, she never has a good word to say for him. He will be here upon some pretext or another; but you need have no fear. I see exactly how to treat the case—to praise him to the nines, and exalt him as the paragon of all manliness, and self-denial, and every tip-top element. And then to let her observe him closely, to see if he comes up to that mark—and behold she finds him a selfish little funk! That is the true policy with women, Jackson Stoneman."

The stock-broker looked at me, with puzzle in his eyes, which were ever so much keener than mine, and had a gift of creating a gable over them, like a pair of dormer-windows with the frames painted black.

"Bless my soul, if you wouldn't do up our way!" he said; and what higher praise could be given to a man? "Friend George, you are a thousand times sharper than I thought. But all I wish is fair play, and no favour; except of course favour in a certain pair of eyes."

"You shall have it, my dear fellow, you shall have it. If only you will keep yourself in the background, and do the most benevolent things you can think of, without letting anybody know it. Your money is the main point against you with her. Could you manage anyhow to be bankrupt?" [Pg 118]

"That comes to most of us in the end," he replied, with a sigh, which I did not like at all, but hoped that it was rather of the heart than pocket; "if that were so, George, would you still take my part?"

"Not unless my sister were really committed. But if she had set her heart upon you, Stoneman, your wealth or your poverty would make no difference to me; and I am sure that it would make none to her."

"What more could a man wish? And I am sure you mean it. Come what will, I will play my game in an open and straightforward way. We must never try any tricks with women, George. Bless them, they know us better than we know ourselves. Perhaps because they pay so much more attention to the subject."

CHAPTER XIII [Pg 119]
SMILES AND TEARS

If any one has followed my little adventures only half as carefully as I have tried to tell them, he will see that the time had now come and gone, for my second visit to St. Winifred's, otherwise Little Guinib. And I would have set forth what happened then, if it had been worth mentioning. But except for the medical treatment received, I might just as well have stayed away, for I never got a glimpse of Dariel; and her father was in such a sad state of mind, that he scarcely cared to speak at all. Being a most kind and courteous gentleman, he begged me to make due allowance for him, for this was the anniversary of the most unhappy day of his life, and in truth it would have been better for him, if he had died before he saw that day. One of the worst things of being a gentleman, or of having high-culture like Miss Ticknor, is that you must not ask questions, or even hint at your desire to know more, but sit upon the edge of curiosity in silence, although it may be cutting you like hoop-iron on the top-rail. And this feeling was not by any means allayed, when I saw the great henchman Stepan in the court hanging his head, and without his red cross; and when with the tender of five shillings' worth of sympathy, I ventured to ask him to explain his woe, his only answer was—"Me no can."

But when another week had passed, and my next visit became due, the hills, and the valley, and everything else had put on a different complexion. It was not like a sunset when the year is growing old; but as lively and lovely as a morning of the May, when all the earth is clad in fresh apparel, and all the air is full of smiling glances at it. There came to my perception such a bright wink from the west, and so many touches, on the high ground and the low, of the encouragement of heaven to whatsoever thing looks up at it, that in my heart there must have been a sense it had no words for—a forecast of its own perhaps that it was going to be pleased, far beyond the pleasure of the eyes and mind. And in that prophecy it hit the mark, for who should meet me at a winding of the path, but Dariel herself, no other? Dariel, my darling! [Pg 120]

As yet she knew not—and I shivered with the thought that she might never care to know—in what lowly but holy shrine she was for ever paramount. But a little blush, such as a white rose might feel at the mark H. C. in an exhibition, answered my admiring gaze; and then I was nowhere in the splendour of her eyes—nowhere, except for being altogether there.

But with no such disturbance was her mind astray. Alas, it was "all there," as sharp as the wits of the last man who wanted to sell me a horse. And she did not want to sell me anything; only to keep her precious value to herself. What a shame it is to leave things so that a poor fellow never knows how to begin! But that was not her meaning. In all her lovely life, she never meant anything that was not kind.

"I am not quite assured," she began, after waiting for me to speak,—as if I could, with the tongue in such a turbulence of eyes and heart!—"it is beyond my knowledge of English society, Mr. Cranlee, to be confident that I am taking the correct step, in advancing in this manner to declare to you the things that have come into my thoughts. But if I have done wrong, you will pardon me, I hope, because I am so anxious about very dismal things."

"I assure you," I answered, with a flourish of my hat which I had been practising upon the road, "that it is of the very best English society. If we dared, we should insist upon it upon every occasion, Mademoiselle."

"You must not call me that, sir. I am not of the French. I prefer the English nation very greatly.

There has only been one name given to me by my father, and that is *Dariel*." [Pg 121]

"It is the sweetest name in all the world. Oh, Dariel, am I to call you Dariel?"

"If it is agreeable to you, Mr. Cran-lee, it will be also agreeable to me; for why should you not pronounce me the same as Stepan does, and Allai?"—oh, that was a cruel fall for me. "Although I have passed most of my life in England, and some of it even in London, I have not departed from the customs of my country, which are simple, very simple. See here is *Kuban* and *Orla* too! Will you not make reply to them?"

How could I make reply to dogs, with Dariel's eyes upon me? Many fellows would have been glad to kick *Kuban* and his son *Orla*, to teach them better than to jump around emotions so far above them. But not I, or at any rate not for more than half a moment; so sweetly was my spirit raised, that I never lifted either foot. Some of Dariel's gentle nature came to strike the balance; for I may have been a little short of that.

"Good dogs, noble dogs, what a pattern to us!" I had a very choice pair of trousers on, worthy of Tom Erricker,—if his had been ever bashful,—and in another minute there scarcely would have been enough of them left to plough in.

But the joy of my heart—as I was beginning already to myself to call her—perceived at a glance the right thing to do; and her smile and blush played into one another, as the rising sun colours the veil he weaves.

"If Mr. Cran-lee will follow me, a step or two, I will show him a place where the dogs dare not to come."

"Follow thee! Follow thee! Wha wud na follow thee?" came into my head, with a worthier sequence, than ever was vouchsafed to Highlanders.

"Where the dogs dare not come"—I kept saying to myself, instead of looking to the right or left. The music of her voice seemed to linger in those words, though they have not even a fine English sound, let alone Italian. But my mind was so far out of call that it went with them into a goodly parable. "All men are dogs in comparison, with her. Let none of them come near, where ever it may be, except the one dog, that is blest beyond all others." [Pg 122]

"Are you a Christian?" The question came so suddenly, that it sounded like a mild rebuke—but no, it was not meant so. The maiden turned towards me at a little wicket-gate, and her face expressed some doubt about letting me come in.

"Yes, I am a Christian," I answered pretty firmly, and then began to trim a little—"not a very hot one I should say. Not at all bigoted, I mean; not one of those who think that every other person is a heathen."

I had made a mull of it. For the first time I beheld a smile of some contempt upon the gentle face. And I resolved to be of the strictest Orthodoxy evermore. Feeble religious views did not suit her.

"Christian! I should think so," I proceeded with high courage. "There is scarcely a church-tower for ten miles round, that has not been built by my ancestors." Possibly this assertion needed not only a grain but a block of salt.

But Dariel was of good strong faith, without which a woman deserves only to be a man. She opened the gate, and let me in, so beautifully that I was quite afraid.

"You must not be frightened," she said, with a very fine rally of herself, to encourage mine, "it is the House of the Lord, and you have come into it with your hat on. But you did not know, because there is no roof."

No roof, and no walls, and no anything left, except the sweet presence of this young maid. I took off my hat, and tried to think of the Creed, and the Catechism, and my many pious ancestors, if there had been any. And I almost tumbled over a great pile of ruin stones.

"We will not go in there, because—because we are not thinking of it properly," she pointed, as she spoke, to an inner circle of ruins, with some very fine blackberries just showing colour; and suddenly I knew it as the sanctuary, in which I had first descried her kneeling figure. "But here we may sit down, without—without—it is a long word, Mr. Cran-lee, I cannot quite recall it."

"Desecration," I suggested, and she looked at me with doubt, as if the word had made the thing. "But you do not think it will be that, if I speak of my dear father here?" [Pg 123]

I was very near telling her that we think nothing of such old monkish ruins, except to eat our chicken-pie, and drink our bottled beer in their most holy places; but why should I shock her feelings so? Little knows the ordinary English girl, that when she displays her want of reverence for the things above her, she is doing all she can to kill that feeling towards herself, which is one of her choicest gifts.

"Dariel, you may be quite sure of this," I replied, after taking my seat upon a stone, over against the one she had chosen, but lower, so that I could look up at her; "a place of holy memories like this is the very spot especially fitted for—for consideration of your dear father. Some of my ancestors no doubt were the founders of this ancient chapel, so that I speak with some authority, upon a point of that sort."

All content has a murmur in it, according to the laws of earth; and within a few yards of my joy, the brook with perpetual change of tone, and rise and fall of liquid tune, was making as sweet a melody as a man can stop to hearken. But the brook might have ceased its noise for shame, at the music of my Dariel's voice. She gave me a timid glance at first, not for any care of me, but doubt of unlocking of her heart; and then the power of a higher love swept away all sense of self.

"My father, as you must have learned already, is one of the greatest men that have ever lived. There are many great men in this country also, in their way, which is very good; but they do not appear to cast away all regard for their own interests, in such a degree as my father does; and although they are very high Christians, they stop, or at least they appear to stop short of their doctrines, when the fear arises of not providing for themselves. They call it a question of the public good, and they are afraid of losing commerce.

"But my father is not of that character. The thing that is recommended to him by religion is the thing he does, and trade is not superior to God's will. Please to take notice of this, Mr. Cran-lee, because it makes him difficult to be persuaded. And now he has told me quite lately a thing, [Pg 124] which if he adheres to it as he always does, will take him away, will extinguish, and altogether terminate him."

She turned her head aside, that I might not see the tears that were springing upon either cheek, and a cloud of very filmy lace, from the strange octagonal cap she wore, mingled with the dark shower of her hair.

"Oh, no, oh, no! that shall never be," I answered, as if I were master of the world; "oh, Dariel, don't let your beautiful eyes—"

"It is of my father and not of myself we are speaking, Mr. Cran-lee. And you are surprised what reason I can have for—for inviting you to give opinion. But it is not your opinion for which I make petition, or not the opinion only, but the assistance of kind action from you, if you can indeed be persuaded. And before that can be accomplished, I must expand to you things that you may not have been informed, concerning my father, you know, do you not?"

"Nothing, or very little except what you yourself have told me. I know all about Daghestan of course,"—so I did by this time, or at least all that was in the Cyclopædia,—"and that your father has been a very great man there; and I can see that he has been accustomed to authority and probably to wars, and that he is worshipped by his retainers, and that he has some especial purpose here and prefers a private life, but is kind enough to give me admission because of my accident; and after that, let me see, what else do I know? Why nothing at all, except that he has wonderful taste, and sense of order, and the loveliest dau—door-painting I ever beheld; and after that—"

"Door-painting of great loveliness! I do not remember to have seen that; my father has never concealed from me—I will ask him—"

"Door-nailing is what I should have said, of course, Fleur de Lis flourishes, classic patterns. But what is all that in comparison with him? A man of majestic appearance, and a smile—have you ever beheld such a smile?"

"Never!" cried Dariel, with great delight, "but I expected not that you would already be captured with that demonstrance. It shows how good he was to be pleased with you, for he is not taken in with every one. But now please to listen, while I tell you, so far as my acquaintance of your [Pg 125] language goes with me, what the condition is of circumstances tending about my father. Only I know not the half of it myself, for he fears to make me so solicitous; and it would not be just for me to ask questions of people of the lower rank, in whom he has placed confidence; though Stepan could tell me many things if he thought proper, and I have proved to him that it is his duty.

"My father is the Prince, as they call it in most countries, though he never takes it to himself, of the highest and noblest and most ancient of the tribes belonging to the Lesghian race. The great warrior Shamyl, who contended so long against all the armies of Russia, was of the lower, the Moslem division of the ancient Lesghian race, which is of the first origin of mankind, and has kept itself lofty as the mountains.

"But when all the other tribes fell away, with treachery and jealousy, and bribery, and cowardice, and Shamyl himself was betrayed in his stronghold, my father, who had been called to take the place of his father who died in battle, at the head of the Christian and higher division of the race, could not prolong the war. Not that he was vanquished, that could never happen to him; but because all the Mohammedans, who had made what they call a holy war of it, would not go on under the command of a Christian, and they showed themselves so treacherous that they betrayed him, for money no doubt, of which they were too loving, into the hands of the Russian General. Every one expected that he would be destroyed on account of the bitterness between them, and the many times when he had been victorious. But the Russian Commander was much pleased with him, from the nobility of his manners, and treated him very gently, and finding that he was a Christian and descended from English Crusaders, according to the red cross which we always wear, as the badge of our lineage against the Moslem tribes, he obtained permission from Moscow to release him upon very generous conditions. His great extent of property was not taken from him, as was done to most of the other chiefs, who had fought so long against Russia, but was placed in the hands of a kinsman as his steward, and he was only banished for fourteen [Pg 126] years, until there should be no chance of any further war.

"My father made the best of all these things. He collected all the relics of his patrimony, and travelled to many other lands, and then settled in England, having learned while a boy in the 'City of languages,' where he was educated, to speak the English language as well as many others, German, French, Italian, Russian, Arabic, almost every tongue, for which he has a talent not granted to his daughter. But above all, he loves his own Lesghian words; and the rest of his life, if he ever goes home, will be spent for the education of the Lesghian people. He will never conspire against Russia any more. He says that the tribes of the Caucasus are made up of every race under the sun, are always in conflict with one another, and speak, I forget how many languages, and have, I forget how many forms of religion, whenever they have any religion at all. But though he sees all these things, and is of the largest mind ever vouchsafed to a man, he is filled in his heart with perpetual longing to be among the mountains of his early days, and to finish all his wanderings in his first home. The fourteen years of his exile will expire very soon; and then what a joy there would be for him! I also long, more than it is possible to explain, to see the most noble land the Lord has ever made, though I only behold it in dreams sometimes, according to his description. For although I was born in the noblest part under the shadow of Kazbek and in the most magnificent Pass of the earth, from which my name is taken, I was but a babe when my father took me with him."

"If it must be so, if you must leave England," I asked with a very grim smile, for what on earth would become of me without her, and I did not even belong to the Alpine Club, "why should you be so unhappy about it? I fear there is no one in this country whom it would pain you much to leave. I fear that you find all English people rather dull, and cold, and uninteresting, and you will be too glad to be quit of them."

"I hear that they are cold, but I do not perceive it." Her glance as she said this was beyond interpretation; could it mean any cruel check to me? "They are the first nation of all mankind, my [Pg 127] father has declared to me, many times; but of such matters I have not yet arrived to think. The thing that makes me full of fear about going from this safe land is, that though the people may be dull and cold, as you do describe them, among them there is law and justice, and the wicked men are hanged whenever they require it. But, alas, my father says that among his noble people, no one can be sure of that."

"Dariel," I exclaimed with amazement, having made up my mind that her nature was all softness and all sweetness, "surely you would never wish to be sure of anybody being hanged."

"I would never go to see it, as the people do in England, and I am not at all convinced that it ought to be done here. But in lands where the law of men's lives is revenge, even upon those of their own family, what else is there to prevent them from committing murder? And that which terrifies me from all pleasure of seeing the land of my birth consists of that. Our family, the highest of the Lesghian race, have not that most wicked rule of blood-revenge; but all the other tribes around them have; and I am in the most dreadful alarm that my father has done something to make him subject to that barbarous, abominable, horrible—oh, what shall I do? what shall I do?"

Once more, I made offer to administer to her the kindest and softest consolation; but she turned away sobbing, yet concealing it, as if it could be no concern of mine. And this made me feel—I should be sorry to say how.

I believe that there is a bit of sulkiness in love, even with a man; and perhaps a large lump in a woman, because they are obliged to let it grow. At any-rate I held my tongue. If her ladyship did not think me worthy of her confidence after all I felt, perhaps there was somebody else who deserved it. I knocked my stick against my trousers; and it almost seemed to me, as if I should like to whistle, if I mattered so little to the wind and sky.

"You are offended! You are angry with me!" cried Dariel turning round, as if she were the larger part of me recoiling upon all the littleness. "But I cannot tell you what I do not know. Everything is so dark to me."

Now whether it was mean of me, or noble, depends upon the right view of the case; but before [Pg 128] she could repent of being kind, I got hold of her hand, and kissed it so as to assure her of my forgiveness. Then the loveliest colour ever seen on earth arose in her face, and in her eyes there was the sweetest light just for a moment, and then she trembled, and I was afraid of myself.

By mutual accord we dropped that point. But I knew that she felt for the first time in her heart that the whole of mine belonged to it. Crafty love and maiden fear combined to let that bide a while.

"I fear that it is too selfish of me, and too great trespass upon your good-will," she said without looking at me again, "if I ask you to help me in this matter. But you do admire my father, I think. Nobody can meet him without that."

"He is the noblest and the grandest man I have ever had the honour of speaking to. I wish that I could only do something for him. There can be no trespass on my good-will. Only tell me plainly."

"This is all I know, and I dare not ask more, for it is not considered good to tell me. There is one day in the year of great sorrow and bitterness, through something that has happened in my father's life. It is something that he himself has done, though no one could believe that he would ever commit a sin. Last year, and every year before that until now, I was away and saw nothing of it, being under education with good ladies of great learning. But now that is finished, and it was

not possible for the tribulation to be concealed from me. Long before that I had known there was something of very great misfortune and calamity to us; but I have never been permitted to hear more about it; and how can I learn, of whom can I enquire? Stepan knows, I am almost sure of that; and perhaps Baboushka does—but as for telling me—it appears that with our people, the young maidens are kept out of reach of all knowledge; but I have been brought up in England, and it is not curiosity, Mr. Cran-lee, you must not be in such error as to think that I have curiosity. It is anxiety, and love of my dear father, which any one of any age or nation has a right to; and if he is to go back into that land of danger without my knowing what I have to dread, or what to save him from, how can I be of any use? He had better have no daughter." [Pg 129]

"Shall I go and ask him all about it? He may think what he likes of me; if it will be of any good to you. No, that is not exactly what I mean. What I mean is, that I will take any row upon myself."

"I can scarcely understand what the English is of that." Oh, Dariel, can even you tell fibs? "But if it is anything, Mr. Cran-lee, of a proposal unpleasant to you, and offering unkindness to my father, it is the very last thing I would desire you to do. And what would become of you, when he regarded you, as he has the power of doing to those—to those—who show him what you call impertinence? What I was thinking of was quite different to that. And though it would give some trouble, which I have no right to seek from you, there could not be anything unbecoming in it. I thought of it last night, when I was in such sorrow that I could not sleep with any happiness. My father has one great friend in London, a gentleman known to him in our native land, and who was a great part of his coming to this country. He understands everything of our situation here, and I have seen him several times. My father has told me to make application to him, if anything should arise, beyond his own assistance. The gentleman is not of our own rank of life, because he is of commerce, which we do not understand. Nevertheless he is very wealthy, and nothing can be more respected than that point in England. He is now entitled Signor Nicolo, because it is better among the nations with whom he has dealings with the precious stones. But by birth, and of language, and the ways of thinking, he has always been an Englishman of the name of Nickols. And he is of an integrity beyond all common foreign names. He resides in the best part of London, mentioned by your great Shakespeare, and still called Hatton Garden."

"And you would like me to go and see him?" I enquired with the greatest alacrity, perceiving a good chance now of discovering many things still mysterious; "Dariel, it shall be done to-morrow. Don't talk of trouble, I beseech you."

"It is not only that," she answered, already assuming her right to my services, which women are never very slow to do; "but also the difficulty that Signor Nicolo will have to perceive in what authority you come. It is not as if you bore any message, or power of enquiry from my father, for he would not wish at all that I should so employ myself. And if you do this for me, Mr. Cran-lee, you must bear in mind that my dear father will perhaps be much displeased that it has been done; and then although he is so just and righteous, he will inflict the whole of the blame upon you, because he can never find any fault with me. And then perhaps you would never come here any more." [Pg 130]

"Oh, that wouldn't do at all!" I exclaimed, hoping that I saw a little sadness in her eyes; "I shall put old Nickols under a frightful pledge, penalty of his very biggest diamond, never to let that cat out of the bag."

"He is not old Nickols. He is quite a young man, very clever, and very agreeable. And he has promised to do anything in the world for me. Signor Nicolo is a gentleman you would be much delighted to converse with."

"Now you must know much better than that," thought I, "the more delightful he is, the more hateful to me." However, she did not seem to catch that clue; but went on, as unconscious as the wire in the air is of its own significance.

"The last time he was here, I told him of my ancient ruby cross, the one which I wear most frequently, when I come to pray for my father here. It has been preserved in our family from the period of the Crusades; when the noble prisoners, escaping to our mountains, converted our tribe from idolatry, and married the fairest of the maidens. Signor Nicolo desires much to see it; and I will lend it to you, Mr. Cran-lee; and then he will know that you have a right to ask concerning the questions of my father. And the great question that you go to enquire of is this, whether he can go back to the land belonging to him, without the greatest peril to his own dear life."

"It is my determination," I replied, with some infection of her freely imported English, so sweet was the voice conveying it, "not to leave this matter now, until I have got to the bottom of it. Is there any other Prince, or Jeweller, or Crusader, whose ins and outs I ought to know, before I can deal with him properly?" My wrath grew as its tongue rolled on; and what tongue but our own can tell it then? [Pg 131]

"There is another gentleman who has expressed a desire for a knowledge of our position here, and a little interview with me," she spoke as if she lived without any dogs, or walls, or river, and I resolved at once to make *Kuban* and *Orla* as savage as *Grab* himself was; "but him I have not as yet beheld at all. And he is a Prince, as you suppose so well, possessed of great power already, even while he is so young, because of his courage and noble appearance, and desire to die for his country. He is a cousin of mine; and I have heard—but my father is most righteous in whatever he proposes."

She dropped her beautiful eyes with a blush; and it was lucky that she did not see me grind my

teeth, for verily I must have looked—however, I controlled myself. "What's the fellow's name?" was the only thing I said.

"Prince Hafer, the Chief of the Ossets," she answered, looking with great surprise at me.

"Ossets! If I don't make bones of him," I muttered; "but pardon me. Can I have the cross at once? I cannot go to see your dear father to-night. Important business—I had quite forgotten. But yours shall be the first attended to. Oh, Dariel, Dariel, I must be off, before I say anything to vex you. Send Allai to-morrow night, and you shall hear of that young Nickols."

Probably she thought I was mad, and she was not far wrong, if she did so. She gave me the cross, to get rid of me perhaps; and I snatched her hand and kissed it, and was out of sight in no time.

CHAPTER XIV
THE RUBY CROSS

[Pg 132]

In all matters of love there is a vast amount of luck. That there is of course in all human affairs, as far as we can interpret them; but what I mean is a larger element of luck than in any of our other miseries; unless it be the still finer conflict, and far more enduring one, for money. Any one might have concluded, as I did, that it was all up now with every little hope I might have nursed of winning the favour of Dariel. Yielding to a sudden rush of jealousy, I had quitted her hastily and almost rudely, and broken my appointment with her father. It was true that her calmness and perfect indifference were enough to provoke a saint—if he ever falls in love; but how could she know that? Though certainly she ought to know it, if she ever thought of me in at all the proper vein. "What a fool I am! It will serve me quite right, if she never even condescends to glance at me again," I thought, as I wandered about in the dark, after going home at a great pace upon the wings of rage; "and just as I was getting on so nicely too! What is the use of my going to see that Nickols? A rogue no doubt, almost sure to be a rogue, for sticking a foreign tail on to his name. No doubt he cheats them of their diamonds and rubies. That is why he wants to see this cross. Worth a lot of money, I dare say. What an idiot I must be, to even think of that, when I remember where it has been so often! Oh, Dariel, Dariel! When I first saw your beautiful, enchanting, ravishing, idolatrous—idolised I mean, confound it all—who could have imagined that I should ever hold this badge of your faith—this symbol of your own high-minded, lofty-souled archetype— [Pg 133] pish, there is no word to come near her! But, oh, shall I never come near her again?"

To cut short all discussion, I found myself in a frightful state both of head and of heart, and ready to do anything to bring matters to the crisis. Accordingly I said to Slemmick, who was in his right mind now, "Just look after things to-day; I'm obliged to go to London." He grinned, and I knew that he would be a tiger to any man lying down under a rick.

As yet my conceptions about jewellers, diamond-merchants, and the like were little more than a confusion of the Arabian Nights and Bond Street; so that it seemed to be quite a mistake when the policeman in a little dingy street pointed out a very common-looking house as the abode of Signor Nicolo. There was nothing to show that it contained as much as a paste shoe-buckle or a coral pin, and it struck me that if diamonds were tested there the light must proceed from the jewel itself. But perhaps it would be lighted up by Koh-i-noors, Stars of the South, and other glorious luminaries.

Not only the house but the inhabitants thereof appeared to be sadly in need of lighting up. How many times I rang, or at any rate pulled the long handle, I will not pretend to say; but at last an old woman, not at all too clean, showed me into a small square room, remarkable for nothing except that one end appeared to consist of polished steel. My card was taken upstairs, and presently Signor Nicolo himself appeared.

"Upon important business!" he said. "Ah, yes! Mr. George Cranleigh. Ah, yes, ah, yes!" He was rather a handsome little man, about forty years old, with dark eyes and complexion, wearing a black velvet blouse, gathered in with a belt, and a red scarf under it. Apparently an Englishman who desired to pass as a foreigner, and having a considerable share of Jewish blood might do so without much trouble. Whether his perpetual "Ah, yes"—which I shall not repeat half as much as he did—had first been assumed in imitation of some foreigner or had struck root into his tongue, as "You know," "Don't you see?" and other little expletives are wont, it is beyond my power to say.

"And this you have brought me. Ah, yes, ah, yes," he proceeded when I had explained my [Pg 134] purpose, "to certify that the Prince desires me to impart to you all my knowledge concerning him. The rubies are very fine, and the trinket very ancient. They would not be set in silver now-a-days. But I do not perceive in them, Mr. Cranleigh, you will excuse my saying so, any message from the Prince to that effect."

"You mistake me, Signor," I answered with some warmth, for the man's affectation annoyed me, and I longed to call him "Jemmy Nickols," as his God-fathers and God-mothers meant him to be called; "I said nothing about Sûr Imar, who makes no pretence to be called a Prince,"—that was a little rap at Jemmy,—"it is his daughter who has sent me to you, because she is most anxious and miserable about her father. What she wants to know is this—can he return to his native land, from which he has been so long banished, without incurring very great danger? You can tell me or not, just as you please. The question lies between you and her. She has always believed you to

be her true friend. She cannot come to see you herself, of course, and her father might be angry if she tried to do so; and he would know your hand if you wrote to her. It appears to me that she has a right to ask."

"Ah, yes. She has a right to ask; and more than that, it is her place to ask, that she may know how to act about it. On the other hand, the point for me is—have I any right to tell?"

I began to respect the man more, as I perceived that he really wished to do what was right, but scarcely saw the way to it, through some little complication. "Signor, I am not in any hurry," I observed.

"Ah, you cannot understand," he said, as if I had no power, even if I had a right, to put my tongue in; "it is no reproach to you; but a young man who has never been among such things ought to thank his good stars, and keep out of them. You English are so stiff, you can allow for no ideas. You think that all the world must have the same right and wrong as you have."

"Now, Signor Nicolo," I replied, with admirable self-control, for I began to know all about him now, by the lights that break in as we go on in the dark, "if ever there was an Englishman, you are one." He looked at me steadily with eyes almost too dark for a pure-bred Englishman, and then seeing that I meant to make him proud he became proud, as he ought to be. [Pg 135]

"Ah, yes!" he said first, from the force of habit, and then he went on, as became his birth-right. "Sir, I am an Englishman, and as proud of it as you are. But we are not popular among the smaller nations, because they have a lower standard. We give them everything in the way of trade, and they have not the calibre yet to enter into it. And I am very much afraid that they won't have that, till they have taken every farthing out of us. In spite of all lessons, we carry on still, as if all the world were full of our own ideas. And what comes of that? They believe through thick and thin that our only ambition is to rob them. My business lies chiefly on the Continent, and therefore I am Signor Nicolo."

Feeling the truth of this sad state of things, I took the hand he offered me. It was not his fault, but that of our blind rulers, that to do any business he must be of foreign blood. Still it was a new light shed upon me, for hitherto my belief had been that people unlucky enough to have to live upon the land, had to bear the brunt of that British suicide endowed with the catch-penny name Free-trade.

"Now, I am in this difficulty," continued the Signor, still employing the gesticulation he had learned; "on no account would I offend Prince Imar,—a Prince he is, whether he likes it not,—while on the other hand, I may be guilty of his death, if I stand upon scruples. And that would be a very poor requital, for I owe him my life, and am proud to owe it to a man so great and magnanimous. Crotchety perhaps, as all great men are, and sometimes even more than that; but take him all round, such a man as you won't see in a long day's ride, Mr. Cranleigh."

"That is the opinion I have formed of him. A man of the first magnitude in body, mind, and character. As yet I know very little of him; but one is struck with such a rarity at once, just as ——"

"As I might be with an enormous diamond. But I am surprised to hear you say that you know him so little. I suppose he keeps himself very much to himself, down there. It was I who arranged that place for him." [Pg 136]

"I do not even know whether he has any visitors. None from our part of the country I believe. But I saw no signs of secrecy about the place. It is naturally very lonely and secluded, and out of the line of the more important roads. And he has as good as told me that he was busy about something that he did not wish to talk about. It is suspected in some quarters that his business is the forgery of Russian rouble-notes."

"No, you don't say that! What a people we are! Ah, yes, ah, yes! I have been on the Continent for some weeks, or certainly I must have heard that grand joke. And they will make a raid upon him soon with a search-warrant I dare say. Oh, I would give something to see that! Tell them to keep the dogs in. I know what they are. And the policemen would shoot them as soon as look, for doing the very duty they have to do themselves, only doing it with a little more sagacity. Don't forget that, Mr. Cranleigh. I wouldn't have those dogs killed for a thousand pounds. There is not a dog to compare with them in England. I knew their grandfathers in the Caucasus."

Hereupon I told him, just to help my case, how lucky I had been by a very simple stratagem in saving the life of that glorious *Kuban* from a low beast of a bull-dog, and he laughed, and said "Capital! I should never have thought of that. By the by, I know something of your brother, Mr. Cranleigh. He has very nearly made a diamond, and he came to me about it. Upon my word, I thought at first that he had succeeded, until I threw my test-light on it. It was the nearest approach that has been accomplished yet. I dare say he told you all about it."

"Not a syllable. He never does, unless it is to try the effect upon me. He has the lowest possible opinion of my intellect. He has monopolised the brains of the family. But he is glad enough to come to me for more substantial things."

"Ah, yes! I see. But he will astonish the world some day. What amazed me about him was not his inventive power—though that must be very great, of course—so much as the quantity of pluck he showed, at any rate I should call it so. You would have thought it the turning-point in a young man's life, to know whether he had solved the great problem, or failed; but his hand never shook, [Pg 137]

it was as steady as mine now, and his colour never changed, he was as cool as any cucumber—the last one I bought was as hot as ginger. And when I said, 'No, sir. Not quite yet,' he made me the most beautiful bow I ever saw, and walked off, leaving the work of months with me."

"That is Harold all over. But he will never do any good. He is always on the brink of success, but never in it. And if he ever does succeed, all he'll say will be just this—'Oh, any fool can do that,' and never think of it again. However, I must not go on about him. Time is getting on, and I ought to be at home again. What answer shall I take to Miss—Miss Prince Imar?"

"Do you know what Dariel is?" Nicolo was smiling in a genial manner at my levity. And then he said, to crush it in a truly British manner, "Dariel is the heiress to the throne of Georgia. She has the pink eagle on her left shoulder."

"But there is no throne of Georgia now," I answered, quite uncrushed, for she might have been heiress to the throne of all the stars, without mounting any higher than she already was with me; "the Russians have got Georgia, and who shall ever turn them out?"

This will show how I had got up my subject. A month ago Georgia, for all I knew or cared, might have been the property of our former George the Fourth, or still the prize of victory for Saint-George and the Dragon.

"You take things as quietly as your brother Harold does. Ah, yes! it must be in the family, no doubt. But I give you my word that it is true, Mr. Cranleigh. Not that her father is a Georgian though, he belongs to a higher race, the Lesghians, and the highest tribe of the Lesghians. All the others, such as Shamyl, are Mohammedans. Dariel's mother was the Princess Oria, the last representative of Tamara, the celebrated Queen of Georgia; and she was carried off from Tiflis—it is a most romantic story; I can't tell you a quarter of it. But there was some frightful tragedy—bless you, they are always having tragedies there—and the long and the short of it is, that Imar has incurred the blood-feud. You may be sure that he never ran away from it. He has the greatest [Pg 138] contempt and loathing for all such horrible heathenism. After the capture of Shamyl all hope of resistance was over, for the Mohammedan tribes fell away, at once. Shamyl's chief hold over those fierce races had been his position as Imaum, which confers divine command over those who belong to Islam. Ah, he was a gallant Chieftain, but cruel sometimes, ah, yes, ah, yes!"

"And your share in these adventures, Signor? You must have carried your life in your hands. It seems as if there can be no danger in the world, without some brave Englishman being in the thick of it."

Jemmy Nickols threw his blouse open and showed a fine broad chest, which he patted. "You are right there," he said, "it generally happens so. Ah, I was an active fellow in those days, and afraid of nobody but the Devil. And you may be sure, there was plenty of Him there. Ah, yes, our nation is always on about its sailors; but to my mind the landsmen are every bit as good. However, it was business that took me there, and not any pleasure in hardship.

"I had to make my own way in the world, and was tired of sitting on a stool in London. So I got a commission from the firm to Amsterdam, my father being one of the partners, and there I heard of something which sent me across Europe to meet a Russian merchant at Odessa. I found him quite a young man and very enterprising, which was not very often the case with them in those days. We became good friends, and he told me that he had heard from a brother of his, a Russian officer then serving against Shamyl, of a wonderful discovery of emeralds they had made among the mountains of Daghestan. My knowledge of jewels was greater than his, and he made me an offer which I could not resist, to pay all expenses, and give me all benefit of Russian protection, if I would join him in the search for this treasure; and if we found it, 25 per cent of all net proceeds.

"This was a wild-goose chase, you will say, but what young man of spirit is not a wild goose? We had a rough time of it and repented every day of our folly, but still went on with it. The Russians [Pg 139] had an enormous army, spread far and wide, and whenever we could keep near them we got on well enough, but where we had to trust ourselves to native guides, with the help of some interpreter, it was scarcely ever safe to close our eyes. Let me see, it must have been in 1858, towards the close of Shamyl's long defence. It has often been said that the allies should have landed a large force in Western Caucasus, to help him during our Russian war. But it would not have done a bit of good. He was far away in the Eastern chain, and it would have been a stiffish march to get near him, I can tell you, and when we were there, we could have done no good. People talk of Caucasia as if it were a nation. I cannot tell you how many tribes there are; but for the most part they hate one another, and they speak about seventy languages, and cannot write any one of their own. How could you ever make a Nation of them? Russia might have conquered them a century ago, if she had been in earnest about it; and it is the best thing that could possibly happen to them now. Some little law and honesty, without any real oppression, is ever so much better than a lot of murderous freedom. And pretty freedom! Why, in many of the tribes, the women have to do all the work, while the men lounge about, or rob their neighbours. My opinion is, Mr. Cranleigh, that we talk a lot of rot about civilization. Nature won't have it everywhere; and she shows what she means, by the way she marks the places. And the worse they are in all common sense, the closer the natives stick to them.

"Well, we got a taste of the country, and the people that therein do dwell. My poor friend did not live to tell of it, neither should I, but for Prince Imar. It was in a rocky hole where you said to yourself, 'Never shall I get out of this, and it must have been the Devil that got me into it,'—when suddenly a score or two of thundering savages jumped out from the solid crag almost, and

blocked all the horrible place both ways. I am not at all sure that they meant to hurt us; and I dare say they would have been satisfied to strip us, and rob us of our arms and money, and send our guides to the right about. But unluckily my Russian friend lost his head, and sent a bullet into the crowd in front. I cannot tell you, any more than he could now, what happened in the rush that [Pg 140] was made on us. Only that my dear friend lay dead upon his back, with his eyes upon the little blink of sky above the chasm, and that I like a fool fell upon him to protect him, when nobody could harm him any more, and a big fellow was going to give me my quietus when another man twice his size sent him spinning. All the others fell away, for he had come among them suddenly, and I heard them muttering 'Sûr Imar.'

"'No Englishman shall come to harm, when I can help it. This gentleman looks like an Englishman,' he said, and I never was more ready in my life to acknowledge that. The rest of the lot could not make out what he meant, but they put down their weapons and looked at him. To cut a long story short, he took me to his own mountain-castle, and treated me as if I had been an invited guest, and I never knew such hospitality in all my life. I stayed there a long time, for it was not safe to travel; and there I saw the most beautiful lady that ever trod this earth. Her daughter is very beautiful; but you should have seen the Princess Oria, if you want to know the utmost that the Lord can do in the construction of the human race."

"Don't talk to me," I said, for I could not quite stand this; "you are like the rest who always talk of the past as superior to the present. But I beg your pardon, pray go on."

"I have seen a great deal of the world. Ah, yes!" continued my new friend Nicolo; "and I have come to this conclusion, from all the instances within my knowledge—no very beautiful woman ever lives a life of happiness. I don't mean pretty girls of course, and all the fair women of ordinary charms. I mean the exceptional, the wonderful creatures, of perfect and enthralling loveliness, of whom there are not six in a century. They are as rare as a brilliant of three hundred carats; as yet I have only seen one, and that one was the Princess Oria."

"Then how can you argue about them all?" I enquired very reasonably. "You mean from history, and all that, I suppose. But what became of that wonder of the world?"

I should have known better than so to speak, when he was inclined to be pathetic. But absurd as [Pg 141] it may seem, I was jealous of Dariel's own mother, when quoted against her.

"Alas, that is more than I can tell," he replied without heeding my flippancy. "I only know that it was pitiful, pitiful, something to make all who heard of it shudder. Prince Imar was a most cheerful man, full of life and spirit, even in the thick of blows and danger, when I had the honour of being his guest. Not a sign of jealousy about him, introducing all friends to his lovely wife,—which is not the custom with the Moslem tribes, of course,—pleased that a comrade should share her sweet smile, and proud that she should be admired. And as for her, I believe she adored him. Insignificant as I was, I believe that she preferred me to many grander people, simply because I was never tired of singing his praises, and because I owed my life to him. They cannot have quarrelled, at least I should have thought so; neither can she have betrayed him. One never can be certain, where a woman is concerned; otherwise I should have thought it utterly impossible. And yet what else is there that can at all account for it? She perished most sadly, there is no doubt of that. And I dare not even mention the subject before him. Even Dariel knows not a word about it."

I could well understand that a man's most intimate friend would shrink from such a subject, and Nickols was not at all likely to be very intimate with Sûr Imar, though he might have proved a valuable agent.

"Was there any Dariel in those days?" I enquired, though I might have concluded from her age that there was not.

"No, there was not any Dariel yet. But there was a fine little chap, about a year old, and how well he could run! I have had him on my lap, many a time. What was his name? Oh, Origen. Those people save their friends a world of trouble by being contented with one name. But now I have told you all I know, Mr. Cranleigh, or all that can be of importance. And of course you will not speak about it to any one. Every one has a right to his own privacy, and our friend insists upon a [Pg 142] private life. He might have been the lion of a season if he had liked, with his romantic history and noble appearance. Ah, yes, ah, yes! but I fear I must hurry you, or ask you to call again. We hold a meeting at 3 o'clock, of a Syndicate they call it—horrible word—about a big find in South Africa. In return for my information, I beg you to let me know if anything is threatened down there; and to do your utmost, if you have any influence, to keep them from returning to the Caucasus. He has plenty of money. Why can't he stop here, and have the sweet Dariel introduced at Court? There is a very great man indeed who would be only too proud to manage it."

"Plague them all!" I cried, as he began to fidget, "how many more great men, I wonder? But did you ever get those emeralds?" The "plenty of money" made me think of this.

"Never saw one of them. Never got so far. And what could I do, when my friend was killed? Very likely they are there though. I shall look them up some day, perhaps, if I can hear of that Russian officer. But most likely not worth finding. Pale emeralds fetch very little. Good-bye, good-bye! Don't forget one thing. Have the dogs chained up, for fear of the police making holes in them."

"Oh, you are not afraid of the dogs making holes in the police?" I said, while shaking hands with him. "I should be sorry to have to fight *Kuban* and *Orla*, with a police-staff."

"So should I. But you may depend upon it, when they make a raid of that sort, expecting a big capture, and stout resistance, they will not come down without fire-arms."

CHAPTER XV
SISTER *v.* SWEETHEART

[Pg 143]

There had not been, so far as I could recollect, anything that could be called even a tiff—if such a wretched syllable can find its way into the heaven seventy-seventh—between the lovely Dariel and myself; but on the other hand I had left her rather more abruptly than courtesy would warrant, because of the grievous tranquillity she displayed in speaking of a fellow (a Prince Hafer, as she called him), who possessed almost every hateful merit, and was eager to bring it in, to cut out mine, by some underhand and undermining fraud. What had I done to be treated like this? Was there no claim established on my part? Was it nothing to have come down the hill that evening, at the risk of my neck and Old Joe's as well, and then to put up with a strained conscience for a month, and then to catch no fish every day, for it might be a week of hook and barb, and then to run a frightful risk of hydrophobia, and then to let my duty and the business of the farm—however, there was not much to be said about that; but what had I done that no message came, that I should be left to cool my heels, without even a distant sigh in token of some little anxiety about me?

"Send Allai to me to-morrow night," I had said as plainly as possible, "and you shall hear all about young Nickols." It was no young Nickols—that was my mistake, or my jealousy had rejuvenised him; but that could not alter the intention.

Was it to be supposed that Dariel, the gentle, and sensible, and simple-hearted Dariel had taken offence at my hasty departure, and resolved to have no more to say to me?

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I passed a very anxious and uncomfortable time, endeavouring vainly to turn my whole attention to the doings and the interests of other people, who certainly had a strong claim upon me; but still a certain feeling would arise in my kindest and largest moments, that it was scarcely just on my part to neglect with such severity my entire duty to myself. Who was farmer Bandilow, who was Lord Melladew, Jackson Stoneman, or even sister Grace, that I should have no one to think about but them? Let the whole parish, and the county too, rush into the Union, and break stones, or be stone-broken, by means of this new crack; but love is immortal, Love is Lord of all; what had I done to make him hold his blessed tongue like this?

I strode about, and strove about, and let everybody know that when I was put upon I could stand up against it; and my dear sister Grace, who had ideas of her own, such as I had spoiled her into when she was my childhood's pet, was beginning to smell—oh, vile metaphor!—a rat; because I would not always do exactly what she wanted, and once I had the courage to tell her, that there were other girls in the world besides Grace Cranleigh. Her state of mind at this was enough to prove to mine, that the great truth thus pronounced was a good one for the world; and I venture, with some tenderness, to intimate as much. But how much better for me, as for every man so placed, if, instead of using tongue, I had plunged both hands into my pockets—a proceeding which puzzles and checkmates the female race, because they cannot gracefully do the like—and then had walked off with a whistle, which adds *pari ratione* to their outer insight.

"Then I am right," said Grace, catching her advantage, as a girl always does, before it is even on the hop; "there is some sly girl, without the sense of right to come and ask me what I think of it, who has laid her snares too cleverly for my dear brother George, my only brother, I might say. For Harold is too far above us in intellect to be counted as one of the family. Oh, it is so sad, so sad and cruel to me!"

"Explain yourself," I answered, hitting by a fluke on the very best thing to be said to a girl, because she never knows how to do it. And what had Harold done, to be set in the sky, like that?

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"You know what I mean well enough. Too well, George, I can see it in your face. Now can you look at me in your solid old way, as I have every right to demand, for even you will own that, and assure me on your honour that I am altogether wrong? That there is nobody wanting to come between us. That I am still number one—'A1' you used to call me; but that sounds like slang; and I don't understand the sea. Am I number one still, George?"

"Let every tub stand upon its own bottom." I was not taken altogether by surprise, as she intended; for I had expected this for a long time, knowing how sharp our Grace was. I could scarcely have said a more appropriate thing; for my sister had her stiff linen apron on, bustling about with it, as she did in the mornings, to attend to the dairy and the poultry, and all that. And being of a noble English figure, she had not pulled her waist in, as she found it her duty to do at one o'clock.

"I am not a tub, George. It is very unkind of you to use such expressions about me. I don't care what you say in fun, you know. But when it comes to serious talk—but I dare say *she*—oh, you could span her with one hand."

"My dear sister," I replied, because I saw some sign of glistening in her bright blue eyes, and knew that it was all up with me, if that should come to drops; "I have never told you a falsehood,

and I am not likely to begin. Harold may have all the intellect of the age; but can you say as much as that of him?"

She shook her head, and made a face, which enabled me to smile at the superiority of his mind. "Well, then, I will tell you—there is a little truth in some of your imaginations. Though not at all as you think. Quite the opposite extreme. A great deal too good for me, too perfect, too lofty, too beautiful, in every way too angelic."

"It is quite unnecessary to tell me that." Grace might have shown more refined feeling than this. "But one naturally wants to know more about such an example to all humanity."

"No doubt. But you must curb your curiosity, my dear; and imitation on your part would be hopeless; you have got all this out of me by much perseverance; that implies patience, which you will have to exercise." [Pg 146]

"Now can you suppose for one moment, George, in spite of all your self-confidence, that I would put up with such a thing as this? That an abstract idea of some divinity is to be my entire knowledge of my brother's choice?"

"I wish it could be otherwise, my dear child," I replied, with a warmth that should have satisfied her; "just for the present it must be so. The whole thing is very strange, and complicated with many things most unusual. I am not a free agent, as the lawyers say; if a mysterious thing of some importance comes to my knowledge confidentially, am I to pour it forth to everybody? You would be the very last, I am quite sure, to tempt me to anything dishonourable."

I looked at her impressively, and felt certain that such an appeal must silence her. She thought a little while, and then looked at me; and some flicker of a smile, which I could not altogether help, set her off again, as if I were only talking humbug.

"You called me a tub just now; and this perfect and wonderful creature that lives in the clouds is superior to all the Angels, but even a star may look down into a tub, as they showed us the eclipse last summer. On the other hand, the tub may look up at the star; but, George, can it talk about the star? Come, that is a very sound argument now. You can't get out of that, do what you will. You are bound to tell me everything, darling George, by the force of your own reasoning."

No other relative but a brother could have held out against such coaxing ways. She came, and sat upon my knee, and touched me with a run-away glance (as a child does to a child before any cares come between them) and then brought the hollow of her temple into mine, as if to say —"How could I run away from you?" And then with the freshness of her sweet hair falling round me (which brought into my mind at once our joyful romps together) she knew a great deal better than to visit me with sentimental lips, though they were quivering—for what man cares to kiss his sister, except upon her forehead? But she, being up to all devices, found I had a button off; and in the very place where it should have been, which happened to be very near my heart, there she laid her fingers trembling, and began to reproach herself instead of me. [Pg 147]

"None of that!" I said, with the powers of logic coming to my aid; although I defy any father, grandfather, or uncle to have so got out of it. "Everybody knows how good you are. Well, well, do anything you like with me."

"Now if it had only been somebody else, somebody who never can know everything about you, as your favourite sister does, would you have called her a humbug, George—to use one of your own sweet expressions? Or would you have said, 'Yes, you have a right to know, you ought to know everything about my affairs. I should be unworthy of the name of man, if I kept any secrets from you, my dear.' And then what a help you would have, as soon as ever—"

"As soon as ever I had told her all about myself! How you do mix up things! But this curiosity of yours is useless. I am compelled to maintain strict silence, until certain important events have taken place. Until—"

"Why, it must be at least a Princess!" Grace exclaimed, jumping up, and clapping her hands, and then walking, as if she had a ten-yard train behind her; "we must all be kept waiting, until the impending vacancy of the throne occurs."

"*Why, it must at least be a Princess.*"

"Exactly so," I answered; for after that bit of impudence, and her look of contempt at the ceiling, she deserved to be driven to Bedlam by the goads of curiosity; "how clever of you! There is a throne in question, and one of the most ancient in the world. Well, I never should have thought you could hit the mark like that!"

"I won't ask another thing. I would not hear it, if you told me. No, no, not for Joe!" Oh, what would have Tom Erricker have thought, if he had heard the dignified Grace thus indulging in slang? "I am not going to have my head chopped off, for prying into State-secrets. Who is the Prime-minister? He was to have taken Elfrida into supper, the other night, but he didn't. Still I can apply to him, not to have my head chopped off. George, don't attempt to tell me anything more. Self-preservation is Heaven's first law. But I don't see how this parish will be large enough for us. Ha! I see it now. How very stupid of me, that is what the Earl of Melladew is come for. Closeted—is not that the right expression?—closeted with his Royal Highness, Prince George Cranleigh, for some hours! You see that nothing escapes me. But I must be more cautious." [Pg 148]

"No hope, sweet child, of putting me into a passion. And if nothing escapes you, why should you ever ask a question?"

This was enough to floor even a girl of the highest abilities, for nearly half a second; and as they seldom give more than that time to their thoughts, a man may almost calculate upon the skedaddle of his sister, unless she has at him again within that period. Not so with his wife, she will stick to her guns, having bigger ones, and knowing how to work them. Grace skedaddled, as consistency required; but with a popgun over her shoulder.

"Alas, that we should have to watch my dear brother! He is so good and soft—they will be sure to take him in."

At this I was exceedingly annoyed. So much so that, if dignity and triumphant reason had allowed, I would even have called her back at once, and challenged her to explain her words; which (as I said before) is the last thing they can do. However, upon second thoughts I found it wiser to leave her to herself, which would be a miserable self; when reflection, which is a liquid operation with every true woman, should have set her straight again.

But, thanks be to the Lord, who has made us real men, and given us power to exert our brains, without pit-pat of the heart to distract them at every pulse! Although I was not in the calmest mood for thinking, because I had never had such a row with Grace before (and she was a darling soul, whenever she let her mind come afterwards), nevertheless my road was clear enough

before me. "If I am to be watched," thought I, "and everything is to be put upon a business footing, the sooner I assert myself the better. I have talked rather big perhaps, because she provoked me, and I am bound to have something to show for it. I will strike a stroke at once. I will go and see my Princess."

CHAPTER XVI
INTERNATIONAL ELEMENTS

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But, alas, this was easier said than done, like most things in this world of words. When I had put myself into choice apparel, with hat and tie exhibiting my College colours—which we should have carried to the head of the river, if fate had not swept me from the New College boat—and when I had impeached that fate again, for not affording me my brother Harold's face, yet resolving to brazen it out, had appeared inside the lower door of St. Winifred's stronghold (which I knew how to open by the owner's counsel)—instead of finding things in their wonted peace, orderly, picturesque, in statuesque repose, at a glance I descried a very warlike change.

There was Stepan with a long gun, and cartridges enough in the bandoleer on his braided frock to account for all the civic force, as well as half of Aldershot; and behind him a score of fellows no less martial. Both the gigantic dogs were loose, and equally resolute against invasion; even little Allai was in a clump of trees, with a dagger as long as himself in both hands, and his white teeth ground against all Albion.

In the name of wonder, what could be in the wind? Just like my luck of course it was, at a most important moment, to hit upon something far more momentous to the very people I was come to move.

"Good Stepan, I pray thee to communicate unto me the signification of the matters I behold." For I knew that this trusty Caucasian had picked up a bit of our language, and preferred the long bits. He rolled his fine eyes, which were big enough for mill-stones, and in his still bigger mind [Pg 150] revolved the sounds which had vainly reached his ears. "What are you up to now?" I amended my enquiry; and having heard the milk-boy say something to that tune, when they declined so much of heaven in his cans, he bowed his head magnificently, and said, "All right."

This is the first consolation found by a foreigner in our language. It is courteous to ourselves as well, and shows confidence in our country.

"What a fool you are!" I cried, with a Briton's low ingratitude; and then I saw the stately figure of Sûr Imar coming towards me. This king of the mountains looked as calm as if he had been girded with ancestral snow. There was no sort of weapon in his broad white belt, and no menace worse than a hospitable smile upon his large fair countenance. He took me by both hands, with a tenderness for the left, which proved how kind his memory was, and led the way to a seat beneath the ivied wall, and looked at me as if he liked me.

"I have been expecting you for many days," he said; and nothing but a little turn of voice just here and there could have led one to suppose that he was not of English birth; "why have you never come to show me whether I am a good physician?"

I gave him all true reasons, that I had been away, and occupied with a number of home cares when at home, and I spoke of my parents in a way which he approved; and then I was led on by his kindness so that I asked whether he was quite at leisure.

"Even more than usual," he answered with a smile. "We have stopped our little operations for the afternoon; because we have been admonished by a kind friend that some little attack upon our place may be expected."

"Well, you are a cool hand!" was almost upon my lips; but a glance at him prevented any personal remark. He was not the sort of man to be dealt with thus. But I resolved at least to be straightforward with him.

"Sûr Imar, I must not come here under false pretences. The fact is simply this, and I wish to tell you first, for no blame can possibly attach to her, and I have not told her of it. But I love your daughter, Dariel."

He looked at me with some surprise, but no sign of resentment; and I met his clear gaze firmly, [Pg 151] trying at the same time to look braver than I felt, for he took a long time before he answered.

"Ah, you little know what you are bringing upon yourself. For the sake of your friends you must overcome—you must put it down at once; before it gets stronger, quench it. For the sake of all who love you, and all your hopes in life, you must conquer it, abolish it, annihilate it. You are a man of strong will, if I have any knowledge of the English face." His tone and manner were of friendly advice, rather than of stern forbiddance.

"I know my own mind on this subject," I replied, "and nothing will alter it. Whatever the consequence may be to myself, I shall go on unless there is fear of harming her."

"There is fear of harming her, very great fear of it. Perhaps you have the right to know. That

depends upon yourself. Tell me, for I am at a loss to understand, how long this has been, and how it can have happened; for surely it is of short opportunity."

"That is true enough, and too true;" for although it had been going on with me for months, there had not been half the opportunities I longed for; "but it has been growing very rapidly, Sûr Imar, although there have been so few interviews, and the first of them quite a one-sided one. In fact I have had very little chance as yet—one occasion I lost altogether, and I did not make the best of another. Oh, no, I have scarcely had any proper chances yet."

"Be thankful that it is so, my friend. It will be my duty to prevent their increase." Dariel's father smiled at his own words, with a sense of humour which I did not share. "But just have the kindness, for I have the right to know, to tell me how there can have been any interviews at all. My daughter has been brought up in England mainly, and resembles in many points an English young lady, rather than a Lesghian; but——"

"It has never been any fault of hers at all. Altogether my fault, what little fault there has been. But I hope, if you don't encourage me, Sûr Imar, you will take good care not to let anybody else."

"That is rather a surprising demand;" he spoke so gravely that it was my turn to smile at the modesty of my own request. "Because you are prohibited, all the world must be so. But tell me how you fell into this sad mishap." [Pg 152]

"That I shall never consider it, Sûr Imar, however hopeless my prospect may be. Already I feel that my life has been exalted, my standard elevated, my character in every way——"

"I am sorry to hurry you, Mr. Cranleigh, in the course of your self-congratulations; but some invasion of our refuge may be expected now at almost any moment. And afterwards there may not be good opportunity of speaking."

Thereupon I told him, as briefly as I could, how my admiration first began, and how it had become entire devotion, in spite of the niggardly occasions it had found, and that now I set before me but one object in the world, and cared not for obstacles, denials, scruples, opinion of others, or perdition of myself—in for it I was, and go through with it I would. Then he stopped me, as if I spoke at random.

"Did you begin it, sir, in this lofty manner? Were all these fine sentiments already in your mind, when you peeped through the hedge at my daughter?"

"Sir, you exaggerate that small proceeding; and I am not a bit ashamed of it now," I replied, "because of the glorious results it has produced."

"I am a little inclined to think that I hear a thumping"—in my heart there was one of the biggest thumpings ever known, as I defied him thus, and he disarmed me in that manner. "Is it the arrival of your Civic Force?"

The Peelers, the Coppers, the Bobbies, there they were, beyond all doubt; and I believe that I shall pay the Police-rate—our tribute to the powers invisible—for the rest of my life without a growl, because of the moment of their knocking at that door.

"Stop, sir," I shouted, as the Prince was marching off, in his leisurely style—for nothing ever made him hurry—"there is one thing I have forgotten. Fasten up the dogs. I was ordered especially to tell you that; otherwise the poor things may be shot." [Pg 153]

"Dogs must take their chance in a conflict of mankind. But I leave them to you, Mr. Cranleigh." I knew not then that the true Caucasian is never brought up to love animals, and I wondered to find him so unjust. If a man likes to rush into a conflict, well and good. But to let a dog sacrifice himself to loyal feeling, appears to me unrighteous on the master's part. So I ran for my life, and caught *Kuban* and *Orla* (who would have rushed point-blank at the muzzle of a cannon), and with much difficulty, and some help, thumped them into their kennels.

Meanwhile the kicking at the upper door, and the shouting of hoarse voices, and the hoisting of coned heads between the ivied battlements, were waxing every moment; and so was the ferocity of the warriors inside, who had not enjoyed a fight, perhaps, ever since they came to England, the country of policemen, who mainly beat white gloves. But the master of the place ordered all his henchmen back, and made them stand their murderous guns against the peaceful ivy.

Then he swang on its pivot the bar of the door, which had been readjusted since Slemmick dashed through, and throwing it wide he stood among the foes, and spoke.

"This is a very great commotion you are raising. Is there law in this land, that such things are allowed?"

We beheld a large force of constables outside, as if much resistance had been expected; and some of the mounted police were present to intercept any runaway. "Sir, there is law in the land; and under it I hold a search-warrant of these premises, with orders to arrest all persons here, in case of certain discoveries. Sergeant, you will see that no one leaves the place, without my permission. Now, sir."

Exhibiting his warrant, the chief officer fixed keen eyes upon Sûr Imar's face, and scanned with stern suspicion the tranquil smile and the very peaceful aspect. "To the mill first! To the mill at once!" he shouted, with some show of temper, being annoyed, as I could see, by the calmness of

this reception. "Sir, will you have the kindness to inform me, why the mill is not at work, as usual?"

"It was scarcely worth while, when I expected you, to begin work, and then be interrupted." [Pg 154]

"You expected me, sir? What the devil do you mean?" cried the officer, as one in a fury.

"For some little time," Sûr Imar answered, with one of his most majestic bows, "I have looked forward to this pleasure; but until this morning I could not be sure of the hour most convenient to you. But according to a proverb of your country, 'better late than never,' sir. The mill is at your service, and all that it contains. I have also provided some refreshment for your men. Not such as I could wish, but what you call 'rough and ready.'"

"And you have laid it out in the mill! The very place we were to have broken up! Of course, you have had time to clear everything away. It is a farce, sir, a farce, to carry out our orders now."

"It would be that at any time, for you never should have received them. There is in this country, though the constitution is the noblest in the world—which generally means the least corrupt—very imperfect communication between the working departments. Perhaps you will encourage your men to search; while I am proving it needless. That would be of a piece with your other arrangements. That is not your style of business? Nay, but feeding is. I perceive that your men have walked far, good sir. I entreat you to let them recruit their strength. Stepan, bring two more chairs this way. Gentlemen, I hope that you can manage roast-beef cold. If the date had been more definite, we could have shown more hospitality."

"These things are beyond my understanding," said the officer, gazing at his men, who stood strictly at attention, with eyes very right for the great sirloin; "I have never been more astonished in my life. Will you give me your word, sir, that no one shall leave the place? Then I see no good reason against a little refreshment, while you are explaining this strange state of things to me. Members of the Force, all fall to! Ha, what perfect discipline!"

I scarcely know when I have been more pleased, in my little way of regarding things, than I was at that moment to see everybody converted from the track of war, as one might say, to the [Pg 155] course, or (as might be considered even better, when the fork takes its place as the knife's better half) the chairs—the comfortable dining-chairs of peace. Gallant as any known soldier on the globe, which can show more varieties of them than of soil or climate, is the true British Peeler in quest of promotion; and these were all picked men, as they soon began to prove; and a warm sense of Providence arose within me, at the privilege of seeing them pitch into the victuals, instead of storming Caucasus.

"I am not intelligent of British manners," quoth Sûr Imar to the chief officer, "as if I had the honour, sir, of belonging to your island. But so far as a foreigner may understand your race, I trust that they will make progress now."

"Like a house on fire," replied the officer, with a bow, and perhaps some inclination to do better with his lips, than discipline as yet encouraged. "Sir, I understood that you were going to show me something."

"Sir, in my native land we have a manner, suggested perhaps by the rigour of the climate, of producing a savoury broil at short notice. Measures to that effect were taken upon your first application at my door; and if you will do me the honour of coming to my room, I would ask for the advantage of your opinion on that subject. I trust that Mr. George Cranleigh will join us."

"Mr. Cranleigh! Is this Sir Harold Cranleigh's son?" the officer enquired, and a very gentlemanlike expression, which had been dawning on his austere features, became established there for the rest of the day. "After you, sir. After you!" with a bow that did credit to the Force, he protested; and soon he held his own in a spirited discussion upon the most effective form discovered for a carving-knife.

"Well, sir, what report am I to make?" he asked, in a very proper frame of mind, when now there was little left, and still less wanted; "according to instructions, made strict search of suspected premises, encountered no resistance, found nothing in contravention of the law, but excellent dinner prepared for us. Embraced the opportunity, according to precept and example of superior [Pg 156] officers; found no occasion to take any one in charge, and know no more than we knew before."

"You shall know more than you knew before. You shall not return without perfect satisfaction as to the question which brought you here. You have exhibited the common-sense, the self-restraint, and the consideration which English officials alone display. You perceived that it would be what you call a farce, to search the suspected premises, when you found that your visit was expected. But the gendarmery of any other country would have wreaked their anger and disappointment upon the suspected objects. They would have shattered my machinery, sir; and that would have been a heavy blow to me. I have naturally been indignant at the low suspicions entertained of me. Otherwise I would have routed them, by referring your chiefs to the Foreign Office. One word there would have saved all this trouble. But now you shall understand this mighty secret; and so shall Mr. Cranleigh, if he cares to know it."

With these words our kind host left the table, and crossed the room to a large cupboard, which he unlocked, and took from it a box containing things that jingled. This box he placed between us with the cover off, and we saw a quantity of small metallic objects, of very queer forms and various construction, like pieces of a Chinese puzzle. Sûr Imar stood regarding us with a smile;

for he saw that neither of us was a whit the wiser.

"Those are the products of my mill," he said; "no very portentous secret; but it might be fatal to my object, if my little scheme were to find its way prematurely into the public Press. Therefore, I will ask you, Mr. Officer, not to enter this in your report, though you are at liberty to mention it in confidence to your chief. Mr. Cranleigh, I am sure, will not speak of it at all, if I put it to him so. Now, what do you call these little things?"

"Couldn't guess to save my life," the officer replied, as he fingered one or two; "artificial insects, spiders, tadpoles, shrimps, or dragon-flies—no, that won't do; I give it up, Sir Imar."

"I know what it is," I said, not by any stroke of genius, but through my brother's workshop; "it is all of it type, of some queer sort, but what the metal is I have not the least idea." [Pg 157]

"Type it is, as you perceive. But to what language it belongs, I doubt whether even the British Museum could tell you. For the very simple reason that nothing has been printed in that language yet. It is type of the Lesghian alphabet, the first that has ever been cut, or cast, or in any other manner fashioned. Our language is a very fine one, infinitely the finest of all the forms of speech in the long tract of mountains. But nothing in it has been printed yet. We are obliged to have recourse to Arabic, if we desire to publish anything. And not only that, but the children even of our noblest families have not the least idea—Officer, I see that you are pressed for time; but if you had leisure to see me work this press, not with those castings, but the larger form, the capitals in fact, the coarse capitals, which we turned out first,—for we had to feel our way,—I am almost sure that you would agree with me—"

"I am sure that I should, sir. No doubt about that. I never saw anything so beautiful in my life. But we have exceeded our time, Sir Imar. Thank you—well, I will taste a toss of that liqueur. Upon my word, you know the right thing all round! Sir Imar, your best health! Trappistine is not a patch on it. Beg pardon, Sir Imar, for having hit your gate so hard. I am not quite a literary man myself, but am able to allow for all in that way situated. Good-bye, Sir Imar, and if any one encroaches upon the freedom of the Press, for the folk about here are not like us, just one line to Scotland Yard—a cigar, sir? Yes, it will enable me to think. And I shall take that young fellow's horse back to the station."

Sûr Imar sat down, while I went to see them off; and outside the upper door they gave three cheers. "Wonderful old chap! Grand old cock!" the officer said to me as I offered him a light; "English Aristocracy not a patch upon him for cooking a dinner or for languages. But as mad as a March hare; what a pity! Don't he know what is good, though? Mr. Cranleigh, attend to me. A man who can do French things to satisfy an Englishman—that's what I call international, and no mistake!"

CHAPTER XVII [Pg 158]
PEPPERCORNS

Before I went away, which I was obliged to do without even a glimpse of Dariel, her father very kindly put this question to me, "Do you really wish to know more, my friend, of the scheme which has brought me to this lonely valley, and kept me occupied here so long, in the hope that I may be of service to the race which has trusted and loved me, but received from me as yet no better reward than disaster and war? You are eager to be told? Then if you can come on Saturday, when the work of the day has been accomplished, you shall hear, not of that alone, but of things which have befallen me, from which you will perceive most clearly that the greater the distance preserved henceforth between Mr. Cranleigh and all Caucasians, the better it will be for his welfare and that of all his relations."

Now it is useless for me to trouble anybody, even if anybody would be troubled, with all the wild thoughts that came into my head, and all the sad things that would not let my heart alone, as I went with this burden of doubt to bear. It must not be supposed for a moment, because I have chanced not to touch upon the matter, that I had cast away all sense of duty to my relatives in this adventure. The home, and the farm, and the welfare of the family had not been impaired by a single penny, through what some might call the distraction of my mind. Only let every one attend to business, as I had never failed to do all this time, and what a different place the world would be! And as for disturbing my father and mother, with any description of what had happened to myself, when the chances were that all of it would come to nothing—that would indeed have been [Pg 159] a wicked thing to do, in spite of all their preference for Harold.

So clear was I from doubt upon that score, and all my proceedings had been so blameless, ever since that casual "peep through the hedge,"—as Dariel's father called it,—that instead of any squeamishness or self-reproach, I had two points to dwell upon of maltreatment to myself. Why had I been sent to London on a special errand, and then deprived of all chance of completing it? And again, had I been told of that hateful Prince Hafer, and purposely goaded into just wrath against him, simply that I might break forth into rude behaviour, and so be dismissed as a savage, who could not control himself before a lady?

That supposition was too wretched to be borne with, not for the low esteem of me it implied, but rather on account of the paltriness imputed to the highest, and noblest, and loveliest of her sex.

Against all that my truer mind revolted, and my own experience did the like. But men have a trick of saying such small things about women (when the feminine back is turned), partly because they think it lofty so to speak, and partly because of the poets and sages who have set them this example, and partly (a very small part, let us hope) in right of their own experience. And these things come into a man's lower mind, when depression sinks it in the mud-deposits of the heart.

"Halloa, George Cranleigh! What a blue study you must be in! Don't I carry a light at my fore-peak? And if you can't see it you might smell it."

It was rather dark as I came near home, after that interview with the police, and the trees at the back of the Hall were thick; but I might have seen Stoneman and his cigar, if I had been at all on the lookout. "Come in," he went on; "I waylaid you because I want a chat with you most uncommonly, and they told me at your den that you were gone this way. Fishing again? No rod this time! But perhaps you leave it at some farmhouse." This man had his little faults; and among them was a trick of suggesting a handy fib, and then smashing it, if adopted; the which is not a friendly trick. "Not been fishing, eh? Something better, I daresay. Well, come in here; I want to [Pg 160] show you something good, and the wonderful fellow who does it."

This was as dark as the sky itself to me. But I followed him, for he was a leading man; and in little matters I submit my steps to theirs. Verily, on this occasion I did not walk amiss. For when we were in Jackson Stoneman's little crib, such as any man of nous, with a big roof over his head, is fain to keep for his own better moments, there was something which no magnificence can bring home into the simple human breast. Who is the most delightful writer of our race, since Heaven took Shakespeare away in hot haste, when his hand was too close on the Tree of Life? The answer, although so long in coming, comes louder, as every year adds to the echo—"William Makepeace Thackeray."

That man of vast brain, with the fresh heart of a child, would have been pleased to see what I beheld; and his tender touch only could have touched it off. A bright fire was burning in a low, plain grate, there was not a whiff of smoke throughout it, and in front of the red clear glow, at a distance nicely calculated, stood a beautiful machine with its back to us. Kneeling on the rug was a long-sided man, so intent on his work that he never heard the door, with a silver spoon (once apostolic perhaps) in his right hand, and a long slender crook in his left. What he was tending could not be seen as yet; but a glorious fragrance held possession of the air, and wafted a divine afflatus to any heart not utterly insensible. Sûr Imar's broil was not a patch upon it.

"Ach! it is to spoil everyting dat you are here." The artist frowned and grunted, without getting up, as Stoneman introduced me. "My name is Hopmann; but dese bairds, what will dere names be, if I interrupt?"

Peeping in over the lid of the alcove, which had an enamel lining, I saw four partridges hung skilfully from hooks, with a swivel to each; so that every bird might revolve with zeal, or pause with proper feeling, as his sense of perfection and of duty bade him. While in the tray beneath them, some clear brown gravy was simmering, with a beaded eddy where the basting trickled. In and out among them, the silver spoon was gliding most skilfully and impartially, administering a [Pg 161] drip to each, as sweetly and fairly as their own dear mother did it, in their happy nest. But instead of their dear mother, alas, it was not even an Englishman who was tending them, but a German doctor with a very red face, gazing most severely at them through big silver spectacles. "Not you look! Not you come near!" this gentleman cried, as he gave me a push, in return for the bow I offered him.

"Come in here, George," said Stoneman, with a wink at me. "Let him alone, and I will tell you all about him. He is the best fellow that ever lived; but you will never get it out of his head that almost everything we do is wrong."

"Everyting, everyting! Not almost, but everyting the Englishman do wrong," the Herr Doctor shouted, as Stoneman led me into the next room, where a snug supper-table was set out for the three of us.

"Rather a queer customer, isn't he?" said my host; "but I have known him more than ten years now, and got ten times as fond of him every year. He is the kindest-hearted fellow I ever came across; and there is scarcely anything he cannot do. He is well-known in London; he might be Professor of this, that, and the other. But he has not a particle of ambition, though he values his profession mightily. He is fond of money, of course; but chiefly for the sake of his widowed mother, and two sisters whom he supports. You know that old Chalker of Cobstone Hill went the way of all flesh last month, leaving a large practice, all abroad. Well, I persuaded Hopmann to take to it, for they were paying him shamefully in London, for a lot of work at one of the hospitals. He has only been here about a fortnight yet, but he is sure to get on; he must get on; nothing comes amiss to him. And I want you to help him, wherever you can: you need have no fear, he is quite tip-top—too good a great deal for a country practice. But he would never do in London; he is too honest—sees through any humbug in a moment, and would tell the patient so, though he were of the Royal family. But you should see Hopmann with some old woman, who will never say 'thank you,' or pay him sixpence. That is what I admire in a man; and that tells for him too in the [Pg 162] end, you may be sure. But come along, he is calling us, and he will be in a fury, if we let all his beautiful cookery spoil. All right, Hopmann, hop along, old fellow. A metal dish apiece for us, piping hot."

"And ze last baird, he stay here and keep hot himself! And he become ze property of ze first gent

zat is ready. Now, Mr. Cranleigh, you tell truth! You never taste bartrich before. For why? Because you cannot cook them in this land. You take away everyting that gives what you call ze flavour, that penetrates ze whole system of ze baird. Ach! I will cook again for you, you shall see. Shackson is not half so wise."

I was fortunate enough to please him, and not in words alone, for the effect of my bit of lunch had quite worn off. In a very short time (as happens now and then when two men widely different in their main lines meet) our little corners, which are the clinging points, had fitted very nicely into one another; and I longed to know more of the man, because I knew so much of him already. For who cares to get nearer to a man who keeps his distance?

"Hopmann is a queer fellow in his way, but in a very good sort of a way," said Jackson Stoneman, as we two filled our pipes, and he lit his half-a-crown cigar, which I would not have smoked for half-a-crown; "I am glad to see you enter into each other's merits. Now, will you fall in with a little plan which I have conceived for the good of us all? My German friend is an excellent shot. He can knock a bird over, as well as he can cook it. He was out with us on the first, when George Cranleigh would not come. Two or three swells were inclined to laugh, but he very soon turned the laugh on them. Garrod said that he never saw such a hand, which was not very graceful to the man who pays his wages. I have not yet found anything that Hopmann cannot do."

"Shackson, there are two tings vot he cannot do. He cannot ride very well ze horse, and he cannot listen to his own braises."

"Never mind, he will very soon learn both accomplishments, and then he will be absolutely perfect. But we have a little campaign in view for the day after to-morrow. We have only been round the outskirts yet, we have not touched the best part of the shooting. Herr Doctor, will you [Pg 163] come with your 16-bore, that wiped the eye of several of our thundering twelves, and show us straight powder on Thursday?"

"I vill only come on ze onderstandings of before—that all ze bairds I do shoot shall belong to me, to take home."

"You shall carry off, and cook with their trails in, every blessed bird you knock over. And now about you, George. I have never seen you shoot, but I hear you are very good. Are you afraid to try your hand against this mighty German?"

This put me a little on my mettle, as was meant. Not that I ever cared to shoot in competition; for that, as with fishing or any other friendly sport, to my mind kills the enjoyment. Moreover I had refused Stoneman's invitation, from a sort of pride—a very false pride it might be—about walking by his leave upon land that had been ours. And I had taken no certificate this year.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," I said. "I won't bring my gun, for I have taken no licence, and I would not shoot without. But I'll come and work the dogs for you; they know me as well as they know Garrod, and I shall enjoy it quite as much."

"But Hopmann has taken no licence, either. As if any one would dare to ask you about that, for shooting round here! I should like to see them ask him even, when he is with me."

"For me it is to my conscience so,"—the German had a great gift of winking both eyes, through his spectacles, with rapid alternation; "I am not a subject of this realm. I make game of ze Game-laws."

However, I was not to be persuaded; and when the day came, there were guns enough without mine, and far too many, as it seemed to me, for a free beat and small enclosure. Luckily there was no covert-shooting yet; but one or two of the dogs had most narrow escapes, and I was obliged to interfere sometimes, and declare that I would walk them all back to kennel, unless the men tried to be more careful. One dog was my own, a very handsome lemon-and-white setter-bitch, who dropped to shot almost before you could see the smoke; and yet somebody put a shot [Pg 164] through her ear, though I did not find it out till afterwards, or home she would have gone, whatever they might think at losing the best of the bunch, as one might say.

For there were six guns, sometimes close together,—a dangerous affair for a country like that, even when every man knows his neighbour, and each is an experienced and careful shot; most Cockneyfied too, for the look of the thing; and I had a great mind to keep away from them. But Stoneman would not hear of that; he had invited Lord Melladew, so he said, purely as a compliment to me, and how could I refuse to come with him? To this I could make no reply, being taken up with my own affairs to such a degree that I was not at home concerning other people's doings. The young Earl of Melladew was staying at the "Bell,"—which used to be called the "Cranleigh Arms," until we went down in the world,—and there he had his valet, and artistic outfit, and all his large ideas, in the long room with the magnificent view, where our tenant used to dry his onions. Now I am the very last to say a word against people who have gone up in life, by merits which have been denied to us. The first peer had proved himself a fine man of business, and made an exemplary fortune by lucrative Army-contracts during the Crimean war. If he compressed some dead cows in his hay, and compelled his old sheep-dogs to serve their time still by posthumous fidelity in the form of mutton,—as war correspondents on very short commons were ungrateful enough at that time to aver,—all those and greater errors he had redeemed by having a grandson as unlike him as possible.

This young nobleman (for so he might be called) had many very excellent and amiable points. He

was gentle, generous, and upright, more eager to please than is altogether safe, except in a very rustic neighbourhood; and even less conceited and affected in his manners than a young man of good looks, fair position, and literary tendencies ought to be, for his friends to consider him natural. Everybody in our village said that without Farmer Jarge to certify it, they never could have taken his Lordship for a Lord; though, considering the Boards, and the Hyænas this and that, and the Parson that couldn't turn his coat-tails up till a secondary motion put him into his own chair in the Vestry, there was no call for any one to feel surprise if the great folk came down, [Pg 165] and made the little ones go up. Lord Melladew also was enthusiastic as to the delights of country-life, and the glories of British industry; and this helped him much with my sister, who never could understand why we should be starved by foreign produce, when the land, and the people, and the sky above our heads were exactly the same as she could remember always, and there was as much to pay for everything as ever.

But our young nobleman proved most clearly, with an elegant sonnet in the "Cobham Comet," entitled "Sit down to your own desserts," that prosperity was to return to our land, and the Frenchman and Belgian be blown away by volleys of grape and apple shot from the bulwark of Britain at Farmer Bandilow's farm. Half a million fruit-trees would be planted in October, and ten million bushels of apples, melons, peaches, plums, grapes, pine-apples, apricots, pears, &c., would confront the poor foreigner next August if he dared to attempt a landing.

My father was scarcely so sanguine, but said, "Let them have their try, George, if rich people find the money. Things can be no worse, and some poor fellows may find employment for the winter. Perhaps Mr. Stoneman will take it up."

Stoneman, however, instead of doing that, showed an unaccountable contempt and bitterness, not only towards the scheme itself, but all who took any share in it. There seemed to be something in the matter that touched him far more closely than any question of agriculture. Was it Lord Melladew's long sojourn at the "Bell," and his frequent visits at our cottage? Even now, with this young man his guest for the day, and behaving most inoffensively, the grim stockbroker marched on in such a manner, that I thought it my duty to remonstrate. "You haven't shot him yet," I said, as we stood behind the others, "because it is not dark enough. But if he gets peppered in the dusk, I shall know whose pot it came from."

Stoneman gave me a grin, and behaved a little better, and did his best to be polite at luncheon-time, and after the narrow shaves of the morning things went on more carefully; for the men who knew nothing about a gun had now learned to be afraid of it. Until, with the sun getting low [Pg 166] behind a wood, we came to a bit of gorse-land having a steep fall towards a valley, favourite harbour for a fox, in the days when my chief business was such pleasant sport and jollity. There were narrow rides cut through the furze down hill, and across them tussocks of welted fern, and strigs of moots that cropped up again, after the fuelling had been cleared.

"Why, this is the place where the yellow bunnies live," said Stoneman, as he opened a gate for us, and we stood on the crest of the furzy slope. "I know a man, and a clever fellow too, who has offered a guinea apiece for them. He has given up business, and set up his staff in a wild part of Wales; and there he is going in for a breed of these yellow rabbits. He has got a big name for the fur, and expects to cut out Chinchilla with it. I have heard of our golden bunnies lots of times, and seen some of them once or twice. Shall we get a sample for him, and then offer him live bunnies, if he jumps at it?"

All agreed cheerfully to this, and the dogs were taken up, while the men, peeping down the steep ridges, got a shot or two at any of the coney race who might be dining carelessly. Then, as all of these proved to be of the common grey sort, Garrod's boy was sent home for a couple of rough terriers, to run the furze thickets, while the guns should watch the rides, for two or three yellow fellows had skipped away unscathed.

That boy took a long time in carrying out his message, and when he came back with his father behind him, the dusk of September was settling in the valley, while a wisp of silvery vapour stole along the brown halberds of the gorse, and the russet clumps of bramble. But the hillside now was ringing with the merry yelps of dogs, or the squeak of some puppy in a tangled grip, while the low covert ruffled, or was channelled here and there, with the sway of some resolute terrier hot in chase.

This holiday had been a rare enjoyment to me, though crossed with anxiety now and then, among so many barrels governed less by experience than excitement. Most of all, as I said, about Lord Melladew, who strode along so poetically, clad in green velveteen, beautifully made, but terminating unluckily in very smart buff gaiters short and spruce—concerning him I had prayed [Pg 167] all day that he were safe back in the onion loft. Not that he carried a gun to his own disadvantage as the reckless do, neither did he fire at random, but was well content, in the manner of the public, to shout according to the hit or miss.

"Shut up all," I called out sharply; "too dark, too dark! I expect to see at least a dog shot, every moment."

A dog indeed! If I had said a man, and that man a live Earl—for bang, bang, went the guns, just as if I had never spoken, and four or five puffs of smoke, as if the hillside were on fire, rose from the avenues poor bunny had to cross. "Yellow! Did you see, Shorje? yellow as ze gold is!" The German doctor shouted as he pointed down a ride. "Shackson shot too, but ze rabbit is to me. I will have ze guinea. Ach, mein Gott!"

Instead of a rabbit giving the last kick of death, what did we see half-way down the slope but two buff coneys flying ever so much faster than any coney ever flew before, each flashing in front of each other, as if father fox were after both of them. "I am blowed if it isn't my Lord," cried Garrod; "the foreigner have shot him morshial!"

"Vat you know, ze clods-having-to-hop-by-night-as-well-as-by-day fe-loe? But keep your business, good fe-loe. If I have put ze shot in, I can pull him out again. You shall see."

Guns were laid aside, and the doctor left there (for he seemed to make nothing of peppering a lord, in comparison with basting partridges), and down the steep pitch we raced after the Earl, who with a long start was going like the wind. Do all we might, we could not get near him, until he was brought up by a heavy post and rail, where the Dorking road winds along the bottom. There he struck his chest, and in spite of being winded, did no small credit to his lungs, by a power of shrieks that rent the valley.

"What a coward!" cried Stoneman, who had kept up with me, though we both had "gone croppers" once or twice. "He is all there for holloaing, at any rate!"

But the worst of the business was yet to come. As we drew a pull of breath, before rushing to the rescue, we heard a sudden clatter in the road below, then we saw a wild dash of something dark, and a woman lay on her back under a low tree. I leaped the rail fence, to which the Earl was still clinging, and there lay my sister Grace, in her riding-habit, while the sound of the runaway pony's hoofs came clanging round the corner. [Pg 168]

I lifted my darling sister Grace, and set her against the hedge-bank, and my heart went out of me, as I knelt and whispered to her. If it had been even Dariel, could my terror have been so terrible? I pulled her riding-gloves off, and found a penny in them, the change the dear frugal soul had taken from the last turnpike gate she paid. And then when I saw her sweet kind face as white as a shroud, and the bright eyes closed, and the long black lashes that I used to vow she dyed—when I wanted to put her in a passion—lying upon the waxen cheeks, without caring a dump what any other chap might think, I lifted up my voice and wept.

"***Her sweet kind face as white as a shroud.***"

"Shush, shush, don't be a fool, Shorje," said some fellow, pushing me away; "ze gairl is only what you called shtunned. All raight, all raight, in ten skips of ze vlea. My tear, I am ze dochtor."

I went across the road, and stood by Jackson Stoneman, who was standing as firm as a rock, and pretending to play with the whip he had picked up. "Look here," I said, "she will never pay another pike."

"Take a turn with me, my dear fellow," he replied; "Hopmann will get on better without us. My housekeeper's mother lives round the corner. Though the Lord knows that if all we want is a woman— Lord Melladew, I am so sorry for your little accident. You mustn't wear yellow spats, the next time you go shooting. Garrod will help you to your inn, and the doctor will come, when he has seen to this more urgent case. Garrod, let his lordship throw all his weight on you. Stop a moment. Send your boy at full speed to 'The Bell,' and order their low four-wheeler here. He is not to say why, for fear of frightening Lady Cranleigh. And let him take that villain of a pony to 'The Bell.'"

In less than an hour, I had the great joy of hearing that Grace was quite conscious, and had no limbs broken, nor any other injury that a few days would not cure. When the pony bolted at the [Pg 169] shrieks and kicks and swaying figure of his lordship, a branch across the road had swept my sister from the saddle, but luckily it did not strike any vulnerable part, unless the part that often wounds a man is such. In a word it was her lump of hair, or what ladies call their *chignon*, into which she was obliged to coil her tresses tight for riding, that received the impact of the too obtrusive tree. But I scarcely knew what to conclude about the doctor, or Stoneman himself, who had been so uneasy about a young Earl hanging out so near our Grace, when, as sure as English words were ever uttered by a German, I heard Hopmann whisper this condolence to himself —"Zat was ze graidest shot as ever I did make. One fire, leetle bepper, bring me down two bagients."

CHAPTER XVIII [Pg 170]
A LOVEBIRD

Thus again, without any effort of his own, was the clever stockbroker quit of rivalry; for although the Earl did not leave the village for some weeks, he was not in a condition to do much poetic wooing, even if he could have found a partner. And this was not the only good result from that serious double accident; for the necessity of daily enquiry at our cottage became so pressing, and Stoneman so gallantly rose to this occasion, that the stiffness and coldness which had hitherto marked my mother's reception of him could no longer be maintained, but glided very quietly into goodwill and gratitude. All of us began to forgive him, more and more, for the crime of not belonging to an ancient county family, while the merits of his affluence almost drove us to maintain them against his own indifference.

"You go along," I said, for I had come to know him now, and could talk of his cash without tapping at it; "you know as well as I do, that the first consideration with nine out of ten of us is—Money."

"I am afraid it is," he answered, as he stopped to make a bow, across a thousand cobblestones, to my sister, who was descending from the sky no doubt to attend to her milk-pans, and to know of nothing else; "I am afraid it is, with those who have not got it; and there is a great deal to be said for them. But I should be ashamed if it were so, with those who have obtained it. Moreover, it would be contrary to human nature, for does any man value a thing that is his own? As long as it seems beyond his reach, it is all that is lovely and charming; but the moment he has reduced the [Pg 171] *chose in action*, as the lawyers express it, into possession, all its glory is gone, till he loses it again."

"Very well. There is your *chose in action* over there." I pointed to the dairy window. "I shall take care to tell her how you mean to estimate her, if ever she becomes your property."

"For Heaven's sake," he cried, while he caught me by the sleeve, as if I were going straightway to denounce him, "don't suppose that such impious doctrines apply to—to the one exception of all human laws."

"I am afraid that they do, and ever so much quicker than they apply to money. But once more, when are you going to try your luck?"

For he had pestered me perpetually about his feelings now, and I had advised him not to be in too much of a hurry. I felt that he was further on than I was, in acquaintance with the lovely object; for he must have had about thirty opportunities, to my three, counting dog-dialogues and everything. But he had not done half so much as I had; and women are wise enough to take one deed deeper to the dear heart, than a hundred thousand words. In fact, it is difficult to get that out again, if done by a man of the right age and manner, and if they were sensitive just then with fright. The thought of this bore me up against friend Jackson's flowing opportunities, and made me an impartial critic of his work.

He looked at me uneasily, when I brought him to this point; and all his experience in "carrying over," and contingoes, and settling days, and whatever else they call it, was of very little use to him with such a ticklish stock.

"Come in here, George," he said; "how am I to talk, as if it were a question of exchange and discount, when I see her bright hair dancing in the sun like that? But let me look. Don't say a word, until she goes away."

"Here are two cart-saddles and a pair of blinkers, and a truss of clover hay. If her young spring-carrots can dance through all that, they must beat Berenice's and Helen's of Troy. Don't be quite

a fool, Jack. You ought to know that girls can't abide being stared at with their slops on. They have got a finer word for it—peg something, in the novels. But Grace never gets herself up for a rustic surprise, like those fashionable dairymaids." [Pg 172]

"I should hope not indeed! She is nature itself. And all nature is sweetest in the morning. But there is not a spark of poetry about you, George. All that has gone into the female line. What would I give, to see you frightfully in love!"

The piercing glance he gave me completely turned the tables; but I pulled him back so briskly that he came home to himself; for he was got up very bucklish in some Volunteer apparel, on his way to a swell rifle-meeting; and it may be imagined that he longed for Grace to look at him, almost as much as he longed to look at Grace. However, that was no concern of mine. He returned very modestly to his own affairs, and sat down where he could not see the window.

"Has she said anything about me lately? Does she seem to have the least idea? You know how I have tried to keep myself in the background according to your advice, which was most kindly meant. But meanwhile other fellows have been making play. Thank God, we have settled Melladew; I was most afraid of him. Coronet, and sonnets, and a head of curly hair. Foremost of her sex although she is—but, no, what am I talking of? Her mind is far too lofty. When I behold her in her graceful simplicity, like an Angel ministering what they get out of the cows—but allow me to hang that cart-saddle on the other peg, George."

To my vexation there was Grace again, standing in the doorway, with a great spoon in her hand—for a type of the greater one not so very far away—giving a taste of some white stuff to old Sally, who was stooping a hunchified back to save spilling. To see the light poise of the youthful figure, and the merry smile while the white froth was tilted carefully into that ancient mouth, little would you think that within so short a period, all this bright life had missed the grave by half an inch.

"Thank God!" whispered Stoneman. "How little heed we take of their goodness, George! All men in comparison ought to be killed."

"Not a bit of it," I answered. "Perhaps Melladew ought. He couldn't have made more row if he had been kilt, as an Irishman is being always. But perhaps he could not help it; for it is his nature to." [Pg 173]

"In any other case I should not have blamed him much, though it is not altogether perhaps the style of Englishmen. But one thing we always forget—how intensely some people feel what to others is a flea-bite. And the ankle is a very nasty place after all, though the shot only just broke the skin, Hopmann says. You heard him claim the shot? Well, now he puts it upon me! However, he is quite welcome, for the tale might go against him with his 'bagients.' Ta, ta! I'm off to enquire for my lord, and I always let him know where I come from. Won't Hopmann make a fine thing out of this! I have lent him a trap and a man, to make the most of it. The man drives like a fury and calls out to everybody, 'Can't stop—very sorry—let them all know—the poor Hearl, he is in such hagony!' Hopmann's new letter-box is full already, and his hat is a hoarding of turnpike tickets."

"What a friend you are! What a friend to have!" I exclaimed, as he jumped upon his highly polished horse, for Grace had tripped away with a little turn of neck, which meant, "Wouldn't you like to come with me?" And Stoneman was hoping to get another glimpse from the saddle over the palings. Ay, and he did so too, as the light in his eyes made clear to me.

A firm friend is likely to be a faithful lover, and a true husband when the gloss is off the love; but whether Grace had any sense of this, or even thought at all about him, was more than I could say at present. Quick of perception as she was, it seemed almost impossible that she could have failed to observe his attention, or it might be called his entire devotion to her. Yet when I tried her with a lot of little dodges, such as a brother must have at command, if he wants to keep time with his sisters, she never turned a hair—as the sporting people say—and she looked me out of countenance sometimes, as if I were inferior to the female race. Knowing what she was, I was unable to suppose that there could be any depth in her beyond my understanding, so I said to myself, "Let her mind the milk. What can a sweet girl desire beyond that?" [Pg 174]

To do good, to be kind, to be always cheerful, and to find their happiness in making ours—that was the proper thing, when I was young, for the rising generation of the better sex. Of our faults they must have no knowledge, but be as hard as possible upon their own; and in that particular they had every help from their own sex, whose time was ripening into criticism. Somehow or other they have changed all that, and flung themselves far into the opposite extreme.

Nothing could have made me dwell upon such little things, unless there had been one of them that was all the world to me. And while I was endeavouring to explain my sister to the clearest of my understanding, and blaming her for my failure, there must have been some other purpose behind, which was even more than brotherly. I was able to give very good advice to Jackson Stoneman, and he was quite right in adopting it; but that masterful inaction did not seem to suit my case. What might be going on even now—that was the great point for me to ascertain—in a matter beyond all discretion or cold comfort? Saturday was come; and I had been attending, with a grandeur of benevolence beyond all praise, to a love-affair deeply interesting, but in which you might call me a spectator only. Surely my own state of puzzle was enough, without trying to make dovetails of another pair.

Therefore, as soon as I had paid the men, at three o'clock that afternoon, which was the proper

time, I saddled Old Joe, and without a word to Grace, who might think what she liked—let her mind her own affairs—off I set for St. Winifred's valley, where I knew an old shed that would entertain the horse. Let this old fellow get enough to eat, which he might pull from the hayrick, and all time, all friends, any fatherland would be just alike to him.

The days were drawing in very fast, and although the sun was on the shoulder of the hill, the sense of autumn and of night impending had taken the cheer and the warmth away, and saddened the dignity of the trees. My heart was beating fast, yet low, as I hurried down the slope [Pg 175] from the lonely shed: fast with some foolish jerks of hope that any corner might show Dariel; yet low, as every corner went its way, without any sign of my darling. When I came to the ruined chapel, and peeped in, discovering only solitude, so flurried and tremulous was my condition—a most unusual state for me—that the Lesghian chief, if he saw me thus, might fairly think that some mischief from the old wound was at work inside. To recover myself and appear before him in a decent manner, I crossed the brook by a fallen tree, and wandered into the gloomy wood, where the old approach had lost its way; and here I lingered so long that dusk was deepening into darkness when I crossed the lonely stream again.

Fearing that Sûr Imar might suppose me to be careless, and having recovered my self-command in right of much moralising, I entered by the lower door, and walked across the grass towards the quarters where the people lived. All was quiet, dull, and foggy, darker than the land outside, and damp enough to give love itself a touch of rheumatic fever. Most of the men were gone, as their happy fashion was on Saturday, to fetch good things of victualling—for no cart came down the valley—and other delights, which we are so glad to deny to one another.

As I passed by a low ruined wall in the fog, I heard a click as of some iron latch falling to, or flung to carelessly. This drew my attention that way, and then a swish like the swing of a heavy cloak followed, and then I saw a tall man coming from an angle in the wall that had a roof to it. At the moment I was walking rather fast, and if I had continued at that pace, my elbow and the stranger's might have struck one another; for he was also walking fast, and his course—to use one of Slemmick's words—was "slantindicular" to mine. He had not yet descried me, by reason of the wall, and feeling that he had no right on these premises, I drew back, and let him get in front of me. For I was never at all comfortable about things here, since my interview with Nicolo.

Keeping my distance carefully, I followed that man towards the buildings, while I tried to make out enough of him to learn his rank and age, and anything else that could be known. If he were to turn and resent my vigilance, gladly would I have it out with him; for a little fight, even if I got [Pg 176] the worst of it, would have been a comfort to my bruised spirit then. But the fellow never turned, and seemed to be quite indifferent whether there was any one to heed him. As for his appearance, I could make out very little, except that he was not an Englishman. Dark as it was, I could have sworn to that; whether by his walk, or dress, or figure, or what else, I cannot say; but at any rate he was a foreigner; and I could almost answer for it that on his hip was swung a sword, which would have made short work of me, had he been so desirous.

Instead of entering the passage of grey flint which led to the households of the colony, the man I was following turned to the right, where the wall curved in towards the upper door. *Kuban* and *Orla*, who dwelled for the best of their time in this part of the premises, came forth and looked at him without a single sniff; and then lowered their tails, and crawled away. "What a villain he must be!" thought I; "they know him, but would rather not even speak to him."

But the impression he had made upon them was far beyond this. To my surprise, they condemned the entire human race for the moment, reasoning (as we must have taught them to do) from the particular to the universal. For when I passed and held out my hand, not a word would they have to say to me, which perhaps was the better for my safety. Then as I followed with my temper rising, and resolved to bring the man to book as he unbarred the door, what did he do but with one great vault gain that coign of reconnaissance where the watch-dog loved to sit, and plunge from it into the world beyond, with some strange headgear shown between the battlements, and then a clank of hard metal, and a heavy flap of ivy.

I have often been surprised, as every man must be, who lives to full growth upon this wondrous earth; but this time my astonishment went quite beyond its powers. Every one had always taken me for a great jumper, but, to save my life, I could never have done that. I stood, and looked up into the darkness of the sky, as if for some witness to confirm my doubtful eyes; and then a deep [Pg 177] conviction of the existence of the Devil—which philosophers in mutinous ingratitude deny—came to my aid, and calmed me with the sense of duty which his name inspires. And now the two dogs, breathing calmly again, and with their tails high-masted, came to apologise for that trimming which even they had learned towards their dearest friend. Here was something genial; and I forgave them, because I might have done the same, if touched with equal insight.

"I will get to the bottom of this," thought I, "though the scoundrel has put the wall between us." For I knew not at all how to open that door, even if it seemed desirable. With a quick step, therefore, I retraced my course, while *Kuban* and *Orla* came after me, sniffing my track with happy puffs, to be sure of something wholesome. Keeping clear of the dwellings, I went back along the wall, to investigate the corner from which that demon of mystery had emerged. What superstition can there be in a Winchester and New College man, who has eaten for the Bar, and knows something of Stockbrokers, and as much as is good of Solicitors? But it is better to avoid such subjects now.

Both dogs lay down at a certain spot, where a narrow track just visible across the grass began;

perhaps they were forbidden to come further down that way. But I went on, treading gingerly, until I was stopped by a pair of wire-doors. It was rather dark still, but not so murky as it had been, for the moon began to lift herself a little through the mist. As her faint light came glimmering over the black wall, I began to see what the little structure was, and how it was sheltered and protected overhead. Dariel had told me that she was very fond of birds, and had some beauties of her own; and no doubt this was where she kept them. Now if that hateful fellow with the strange headgear came out of this enclosure, as appeared too manifest, it was equally plain that he must have been inside it; and what could he be doing in this aviary so late, unless the fair owner herself were there?

My wrath and indignation knew no bounds. If I were being treated in this perfidious way, what steps could be too strong or too insidious, if they led to the confusion of the traitors? Though the [Pg 178] dogs were as silent as if they were carved in stone, I went back to them and threatened them with quick and painful death, if they dared to enquire into my proceedings. Then by a little reconnoitring I found a corner of the netting which formed the outer fence, from which I could see into the inner room, which had been impossible from the gate. I could have opened that gate perhaps, but not without noise enough to attract attention; and now I could see as well as if I were inside, for the wire-mesh made no difference.

At the end of the room which was nearest to me, and only a few yards from the corner I had found, sat Dariel herself, with a purple cloak on, or a mantle, or jacket—I never know the proper words, and it makes no difference, except to women. Of the colour, I could not be sure by that light; except that it was deep, and rich, and grand, and her white neck shone forth it, like a hyacinth from dark tulips. There were two candles burning on a rustic round table, and she, with her forehead gleaming softly, kept her left hand partly closed, while the other hand went round and round as if it were winding something slowly upon some little object which I could not see; for around it fell the shadowy tresses which had so often baffled me in quest of a sweet glance from her eyes. Every now and then, I caught a glimpse of a very delicate and straight nose (the beauty of which has never been surpassed), and once or twice there came into view the perfection of a chin, a soft harmony conducting from the roses of the lips to the lilies of the neck. All this was very lovely, and my heart was wild about it; though my mind was fierce the other way, that none was ever to be mine. For whom had she arrayed herself in that homicidal beauty?

But while I was grinding my teeth and wrinkling my forehead into wire-work, she softly turned her gentle face, and my rage was gone as darkness flies when the quiet moon arises. There were great tears rolling, and wet eyes beaming, and the pity of a world of sadness speaking in the eloquence of a silent mouth. Also with love's vaticination I seemed to discover terror there, and the call for some strong form to shield her from troubles and dangers menacing. "There has been [Pg 179] no flirtation here," thought I. "What a jealous fool I am! In this there must be some dark distress. How could I think so of my Dariel!" And when I beheld the next thing she did, my self-reproach grew deeper.

For she opened the curve of her left palm, slowly and softly in fear of rash release, keeping the fingers of the other hand in readiness for repression; and there I saw, with his green fluff panting in a velvet cradle, a small bird of bright plumage, with enquiring eyes regarding her. He seemed to know her for his best friend, and though taken aback by misfortune, to trust this member of the human race to do all that mankind could do for him.

Made of hard stuff as I am, I do not feel ashamed to say, that the pity which is in all of us, drew straws from the candle and made bars along the mist, when I saw what the girl I loved had done. That poor little bird had a broken leg, newly broken by violence, and Dariel had been gently binding the splintered shank together, with cotton wool and a reel of silk, as I could see on the table, and a strip of cane from a chair hard by; and now she was shaking one finger at him, to let him know that fluttering is no remedy for affliction.

But why did she cry so? She ought to be smiling and looking glad, when the little chap's mate flew down so kindly, and perched on the reel of silk to comfort him, and then fluttered round and round him with her wings drooped down, and a tenderness of cooing which almost set him on his legs again; for they were a pair of what are called "lovebirds," of whom, if one hops the final twig, the other pines into the darkness and dies. So at least the story of the bird-men goes, although that excess of fidelity may be beyond the faith of other men.

Tell me not that love is blind. It has the swiftest of all sight. It flies to its conclusion straighter than the truest lovebird. I saw why Dariel could not smile at the success of her own skill: the tears on her cheeks were not of pity only, but of anger at human brutality. That fellow had done it, that miscreant whom even the dogs of his native land abhorred—Prince Hafer had broken the pretty lovebird's leg! A rapid conclusion of mine, but the right one; as became manifest, before [Pg 180] many days had passed.

Blessedness and bitterness at once possessed me. Would she ever accept such a wicked beast as that? And when should I have the delight of breaking—not his leg, that would not be half enough, but the haughty head that he was carrying so high? I felt the black fury of the Caucasus itself rising in a breast of the quiet Surrey stock. Cruelty to anything that lives is loathsome; but cruelty to a little trusting pet, lent us by the Father to teach us loving-kindness, and that pet the darling of a sweet and gentle maiden! One more look at her—she has put him to his roost in a soft warm corner where he can make no pretence to hop, but the partner of his pain can feed him.

But I must be off, for I dare not intrude upon her quiet sorrow, and perhaps I had no right to

watch her as I did; but I meant no harm, and the pretty sight has been a lesson of goodwill to me. Now for her noble father's room! I ought to have been there long ago. What will he say to me? But whatever it may be, what I say of his beautiful child is this—"She is more than any angel; she is a tenderhearted woman."

CHAPTER XIX
TO CLEAR THE WAY

[Pg 181]

The manners and customs of that little colony, or settlement, or camp, or whatever it should be called—for I never found out the right name for it—differed from ours very widely, some better no doubt, and some worse perhaps. For instance, who could blame them for their rational practice of leaving hard work to Occidental races? They did a stroke or two when they could not help it, just to keep their bodies sound; but the chief and commander, as we too expect, had to carry through with his own hands the hardest part of everything. But another custom of theirs appeared to be of more doubtful wisdom; for instead of having set hours for meals and accomplishing them sociably, as well as with some regularity and sense of responsibility, every man was allowed to eat what he liked, when he liked, and where he liked. The natural result was this—you could never be certain of finding a man with his mouth in condition to answer you. How they got food enough to be at it so perpetually, was for a long time a mystery to me, especially as they dealt so little with any of the farms or shops around. Not a man of them was ever seen in our village, and as for the very few women in the camp—Baboushka, and Mrs. Stepan, and some who did the washing—not one of them came out of her white cocoon, though brought up very largely as Christians.

This statement is in its place, to show why the man, whom I revered, was still in a position to command my reverence. If he had been subject to feminine irruptions, to which even the greatest men are liable, all his devotion to the highest enterprise might have failed to secure his [Pg 182] equanimity. But he had contracted upon reasonable terms with a vast Universal Provider, and he only had to pay the weekly totals in advance, and send to the place of delivery, once or twice a-week, according to the temperature. Thus everybody found himself fed to the utmost of his nature, and most of them preferred canned victuals; though something more British had been required for our Police.

That evening, when I entered Sûr Imar's room, after leaving his daughter among her birds, the first thing I did was to watch him very keenly for any sign of anxiety or excitement, such as he might be expected to show if he had been just visited by that abominable Prince Hafer. What right had I to identify the man I had seen with the one of whom I had only heard? And even if that conclusion should prove right, by what process could I tell that there was nothing good about him? Yet in my mind there was no shadow of a doubt about either of those points, and I looked at Sûr Imar as if he must acquit himself of some contagion before I could enjoy his society. But he met me quite as usual, without even complaining of my unpunctuality; for he was a man of such dignity that he suspected nobody of slighting him.

Whatever he might be doing, or of whatever he might be speaking, there was such simplicity, and largeness, and straightforwardness pervading it, that one seemed to fall into it and follow, instead of doubting, and querying, and perpending. And his gentle and friendly and kind steady gaze brought all that was good in one to meet him, and drove away the dirty streaks of our nature, to hide themselves under their own mud.

"I have been considering, my dear young friend," he said, as he took and held my hand, and I felt ashamed to leave it in so warm a place, after all my cold suspicions, "about my behaviour to you the other day. Nothing unkind was intended, but unkindness is often done without that. You told me that you loved my dear, and now my only child. I should have received that with more goodwill, whether it suited my own views or not. For my manner then, I beg your pardon."

I answered that nothing in his manner then, or at any time since I had known him, could be taken by any gentleman as uncourteous or inconsiderate. I had told him what was the main object of my [Pg 183] life, and I felt that I was right in doing so; and although I could scarcely hope for his approval, being a poor man and of no high rank, I had done what seemed to me to be the proper thing, instead of coming as his guest upon false pretences. I spoke plainly, and he answered nobly.

"Of rank I have not so much regard, as of the man who bears it. Neither do I think that wealth confers any high condition on its owner. In too many cases it lowers him. You will believe me when I say that neither of those questions causes my regret at what you told me. I live for only two things now—the happiness of my darling child, and the improvement of the noble race to which I happen to belong. I have also bitter wrongs, and the happiness of my life snatched from me. The love of revenge is in Eastern blood, and a very hard force it is to overcome. You of English race cannot enter into that, because it is not born in you. But I know what the indignation is, when the sense of justice rises."

His quiet eyes flashed as if his heart was roused by the words it had given way to. And glad was I, not to be the man presented by it in the portraiture of memory.

"Why do I admire the British race?" he continued, with his better tone recovered; "not for their

energy and manliness alone, not even for their love of freedom, and great spirit of truth and justice, but most of all because they alone of all the nations I have mingled with are born without this cursed taint of savage and vile vindictiveness. If a man wrongs you, you have it out with him. You thrash him, if nature has enabled you. You vent your wrath upon him, and you go your way. The world is large enough for both of you. If you hear of his misery, and woe, and death, you only say, 'Poor fellow, there may have been more good in him than I thought.' But with us of the Eastern and the Southern blood, that blood is turned to poison by a deep and bitter wrong. By the grace of God, and the grandeur of our Christ, I have struggled long against this birth of Satan in me; but even now I have not overcome it, utterly and for ever, as a larger mind would crush it. But what has this to do with you? A great deal, if you have really set your heart upon my [Pg 184] daughter. Are you sure that you have done that with true English strength and thoroughness? No passing whim, no delight of the eyes, as a flower or a picture catches them; but a power that will last as long as you do, and longer than the earthly part of you?"

No fellow likes to be cross-examined thus; and to tell the plain truth, I had scarcely gone into myself in this awful manner. But I soon perceived that he was speaking rather at the prompting of his own remembrance, than of set form and purpose for probing me. So as the picture arose before me of Dariel and her little bird, I spared no word that I could think of; though none were half strong enough, none half staunch enough; nothing that came to my lips had any right to go out as if it spoke for me. Truly I had not been so touched by the piety, mystery, exalted beauty, and lovely maidenhood of my love, as I was by the sight of her tender self indulging her loving nature.

"I am satisfied about that, my friend," her father said, when I began to be ashamed, as we ought to be, of all our higher feelings; "and I know enough of you to be sure that you have a strong and steadfast mind. I have not spoken of your friends, because you have never invited me to do so. That obstacle, if there is one, is your consideration, more than mine. But the obstacles on our part are of a very different nature. Of English ladies I know not much, though I had the honour of being introduced to some of what you call the high society, when I came first to this island; and they seemed to me to be endowed with virtues well adapted to their beauty. But they have to contend with this great danger—they are allowed to choose their own partners in life, whenever the money is abundant, before they have attained good intelligence. With our daughters this is not the case. The parents make a wise selection for them, sometimes even dispensing with much revenue, when there are great qualities to compensate."

"We never go quite so far as that," I said, "unless the lady behaves in such a way that it is impossible for us to help it."

"But I have been surprised to find," he continued, with a smile which left me doubtful whether it [Pg 185] were of paternal pride, or of that quiet humour which he sometimes showed, "that my daughter seems to take most kindly to the modes of thought and the greater independence which the ladies of this country have permitted to themselves. It may be in the air, or it may be in the nature; but I am often quite astonished at the sayings and doings of my Dariel. She has been brought up by a lady who is partly of English birth, and for a month or two with English children; but still her unusual style of judging for herself is amazing and terrifying to our elder women, who being of a different rank—and that reminds me, if my daughter has a fault, and I suppose she must have, it is, Mr. Cranleigh, the pride of birth. Not an ignoble fault, but still a very serious one, especially as it can never be expelled.

"Through her mother she is of higher birth than I am, though not of more ancient lineage perhaps, as I happen to be one of the Kheusurs. But all these things you cannot understand, even if you wish to do so, without a knowledge of my long sad tale, which I have not told as yet to any person living. Even my daughter has not heard it, and I hope she never may; for it would serve perhaps to do mischief to her young mind with anxiety. The Lord governs all things on earth; all of our race begin to feel that, when their little strength is stripped from them. But you are too young to see things so; and never has the tale of one man's life had any effect upon another's, unless it were to lead him into wild adventures, easy to talk about, hard to go through. Be content without them."

I looked at him with some hesitation. Would it be kind of me, even if I had the right, to put him through all these griefs again, which had changed him from a bold young Chief, primed with excitement, and peril, and love, into a quiet exile, and a Christian moraliser, a founder of type with hard blue hands, and oh, saddest fate of all, an experimental Publisher? No, it would be a cruel thing, a selfish call upon sad memory, a mere abuse of large goodwill, and a vile advantage taken of an over-tender conscience. With these finer feelings, I almost said, "I entreat you, sir, [Pg 186] not to tell me;" when the Spirit that hates the human race whispered to me that there has never been a man, and probably never will be one, who cannot find pleasure in talking of himself, however dark the subject. And why should I doubt that it would do him good, as soon as he got into full swing?

"The last thing I could desire, Sûr Imar, would be to renew your troubles." There was no humbug in these words of mine, as there was with the pious Æneas; for as the Lesghian Chief sat down and leaned his head upon his hands, he reminded me of my father's look, when his money came to nothing; moreover, I saw in his face a large resemblance to his daughter's in her sorrow over that pet bird. "It would be a terrible trial to you. But until I know more, I am all in the dark. Perhaps you will think it over, and whatever you do will be certain to be right." For the more he reminded me of my sweet one, the less could I bear to worry him.

"This is very good of you," he said most kindly, "and it doubles my duty towards you. I am ashamed of this weak and foolish feeling. You have a right to know all my history, and you shall, if you will come to-morrow. It is too late now for me to begin to-night, and I have a little duty to discharge. On a Saturday night we always thank the Lord for His care of us throughout the week. You belong probably to the Church of England. We of the Kheusur tribe have our very simple forms, handed down through ages, from the same source as yours perhaps. We have our little service at noon on Sundays. Would you like to be with us to-morrow?"

Nothing could have been more to my liking; and as it happened, there was no fear of disturbing our home arrangements, for my father was laid up with a slight attack of gout, and my mother in close attendance upon him. So in a few words it was settled that after attending their service, of whatever kind it might be, I should be allowed to hear the history of the Lesghian Chief, which was much more than the first promise I received. Knowing that now I should have full light thrown upon all the strange things which had so long engaged my attention and curiosity, and what was infinitely more than that, upon everything connected with Dariel, I rode home that night in a glow of excitement, tempered at intervals with nervous dread. For I might hear things that would place a bar forever, or a gulf, betwixt me and my love. [Pg 187]

CHAPTER XX
NOT FOR SALE

[Pg 188]

But when I had fed my good horse that evening, and bedded him comfortably as he deserved, returning with a hock of cold bacon to my den, and a jug of ale which I needed sorely, there I found my white deal table, just where I was going to lay the cloth, covered with a canopy and tissue-fringing of gold too bright for the candle-light.

"Who has brought this beehive here and stuck it on my table?" I asked with a tone of wonder and vexation; for I had quite enough to do with my own affairs just now.

"Did you ever see a beehive of this colour? Then I should like to know where they got the straw from?"

Grace had lifted her head, and was passing both hands through the curls of which she was so proud that she cared not what we called them, and her cheeks had a rich, unusual flush; and there was some new brightness in her eyes as well, bright enough always, now too bright, with unsettled weather in the depth beyond the blue. I saw that there was something up, but left her to begin it.

"George, have you taken it into your head, not to care a straw for your sister any more?" This was exactly what I expected; but I looked at her with innocent astonishment. I put down my bacon and my jug of beer, but drew back the cloth, to leave room for her arms, and then gazed at her with some dignity.

"Oh, you need not be afraid. I am not going to cry over it," she exclaimed, with the usual ingratitude of girls; "in fact I feel much more inclined to laugh. You have been trying to sell me, to sell your own sister! Can you not imagine, George, that I am not for sale?"

"Look here!" I said, for this was coming it too strong; "you have got into some tantrums, some feminine delusions. I have not had a bit to eat, I don't know when; and I must recruit the inner man, while you come to your senses." [Pg 189]

"Poor thing! It cannot be so very deep in love, or it would be satisfied to live on air. But don't they feed you where you go, dear George? Well, that does seem inhospitable. And they must be rich people, or you would not go so often."

This was almost more than I could stand. However, I kept up my dignity, remembering that the more impudent a girl is, the more she "climbs down" afterwards. "Your very good health, my dear child!" I said, and then observed her through the glass which formed the bottom of the tankard. Now I say that she was a very sweet young woman, and a worthy wife for the best man that ever lived, not to lose all self-command at this; for the loveliest creature ever born cannot flatter herself that she looks well thus.

"You want to make me cry, but you won't do it. And once for all, just understand this little point. I don't care a rap—as you elegantly express it—what airs you put on to exasperate me. Because I am certain that you understand me, George. All the very small things you say—and you have a low gift of walking under your own feet—all of them—what I mean is, none of them have the smallest effect upon my poor mind. In the first place, I am not clever, any more than you are. And if I were, I should only use it to make you more and more fond of me, instead of endeavouring to make you feel small. But, oh, George, I never thought that you would scheme to sell me!"

"All this is Abracadabra to me," I replied quickly, in fear of a torrent. For when a girl tells you that she won't cry, you may almost always see her fingers getting ready for her handkerchief.

"How innocent you look! But just one little question. Did you not send Mr. Stoneman Jackson to propose to me, this very evening?"

"Nothing of the sort. And as if you did not know his name! I have not even seen him, since that day when you were cutting such a shine in the sun, as the frugal, virtuous, and lovely milkmaid. That is what has fetched him; not your stupid brother." I owed her a cut or two, as everybody will perceive. [Pg 190]

"George, you are cruel, even more than crafty. As if I did anything so low as that! But will you assure me, upon your honour, that you did not encourage him to—to try what he has been trying?"

"Not only that, but I did all I could to damp him off, so far as such a dry fellow could be damped. I told him to hold off, while the Earl was in the running."

"There was no Earl in the running. This is too bad of you. It was only the walking that Lord Melladew went in for, and I am sure he meant no harm by that."

"Well, he made the running fast enough, when they peppered his gaiters, and some one else did the tumbling. But I told Jackson to hold off, for I was sure that he had no chance yet. He is a decent sort of fellow enough in his way; but what chance could he have against a belted Earl, and a gaitered Earl too, who can shriek in sonnets? Poor Stoneman could scarcely put thumb to rhyme with mum; and mum he should have been, though it is rather hard upon him. Never mind, he can find some other girl, when he gets over it. I heard of a Duke's daughter who was wild to catch him. But he is much too hard hit, to think of any one for years."

"One of Mr. Erricker's tales, I daresay," said Grace, with a little sigh of sympathy, as I fetched a sham groan for my poor friend, "about that beautiful Duke's daughter. As if any girl with any self-respect would allow herself to be talked of in that way! And as if Mr. Stoneman would permit it for a moment! However, you seem to have thoroughly discussed my case. Did you settle what my pin-money was to be? Oh, George, George, will you never understand how very different we are from you? I did think I could have respected Mr. Stoneman; but when I find out that he has been to you, trying to buy me like a colliery share, or not even that, for it is all divorce now—to take me on lease like a cottage or a stable,—oh, I see why you took me for a beehive now; but you'll find less of honey than of sting in me, when you buy and sell me by the pound like this."

What a fool that stockbroker must have been to mention my name in the matter, for it was sure to set her off upon this sort of tack! However, it proved afterwards that she, being perfectly calm, while he was in a frightful flurry, had extracted from him with the greatest ease everything she cared to know, till she came with the usual leaps and bounds of feminine reason to the wrong conclusion—that I had suggested and worked up the whole affair. [Pg 191]

"Now go to bed, my dear child," I said, perceiving how vain it was to argue now; "I have business to see to, and even you can scarcely expect me to be swallowed up in your affairs, when you make a point of disliking this man, because your own brother likes him."

That little turn was almost worthy of her own ingenuity. She looked at me with a twinkle, because it was so like what she herself in my position would have said, and then after wishing me good-night, she added—

"But I never said a word about disliking him. There has scarcely been time enough for that as yet. Women very seldom form those sudden prejudices. That they leave for the lords of creation."

As she vanished with this very poor miss-fire, I began to put two and two together, and arrived at the conclusion that the stockbroker's case was not altogether hopeless. She had not come to care about him yet perhaps; but now he would be in her thoughts more often; and if he kept his distance, and looked downcast, and did a lot of good among the poor with strict orders to have it kept secret, and caused general uneasiness about his health; above all, if he could only be bankrupt,—without losing his cash, which of course would never do,—I could not see why he should not have a Mrs. Stoneman, who belonged to an old Saxon family, and had gold enough in her heart and head to do without any in her maiden pocket, and who was blest with a brother of the name of George.

CHAPTER XXI [Pg 192]
VOICES OF THE VALLEY

In the calm air of the Sunday morning with the brook going gently by, I came to the entrance of the hoary ruins wherein I had first seen Dariel. A chapel with lines of grey flint only, to show where once the sacred walls had risen, and nothing but the soft sky for roof, and mortar and moss for pavement. Stepan, as big as a pulpit, but more mute, stood close by expecting me, and led me along a ferny path, and dusted a stone to sit upon, with a noble quietude. But when I asked him—"What am I to do?" he took it for our national salutation, and answered "like a house afire, sir." So I gave it up, and resolved to act according to the light of nature, and the behaviour of the others when they arrived. Only if there came a great procession of images, as I expected, nothing should make me depart from the proper demeanour of a Briton.

However I was not called upon to assert the great Reformation. A more simple, quiet, and impressive service I never witnessed anywhere; and although there was no roof overhead, and

little enclosure on either side, the view of the sky, and the passing of the wind, and the sense of antiquity around us were in harmony, as it seemed to me, with the conditions of humility, and mortality, and hopefulness. The strictest Puritan could have found fault with little except the red crosses worn by all the congregation, and a few triangles and wreaths of white flowers. And the man who can find any fault with these must consider himself too faultless to worship any other being.

First came the women, only seven or eight in number, veiled not very heavily, and cloaked in cheerful raiment. And the last of these was Dariel, looking as if she had never dreamed of [Pg 193] anything uncelestial, while the loveliness of her figure gleamed through the folds of her flowing mantle; even as the flexure and the texture of an agate glisten through the cloudy pretext of their coat to hide them. "Who shall understand these things?" thought I, "there is no one on earth fit to approach her; yet the Lord cannot have meant her to be always by herself." And then I thought of Hafer—Prince indeed! Prince of darkness, and nothing else—and I looked about, with anything but religious peace inside me. However I could perceive no sign of any wickedness high or low; and every heart except my own sang a grateful and worshipful tune to the Lord.

Even to me it was a quiet and devout proceeding, when Imar (not as one who preaches to a crowd of animals below him, but like a man speaking to and on behalf of men—not abject, though beneath a cloud) began the simple offering of our love, and trust, and loyalty. To me it was grander than it might have been to those who could criticise it; for I could not object to anything, because I did not comprehend a word. Nevertheless it did me good, inasmuch as it did the others good; and if a man lives in himself alone, he will not find much good there, I fear. And when they began their final hymn of high thanksgiving, and hopeful trust that our Maker will not be as hard upon us as we are upon one another, the sound of great rejoicing—which our Christians never indulge in—filled the valley, and went up the heights, such as we are bidden to gaze at, while we stick to the dismal hollows. I knew that I was only of a dull prosaic order, but felt for the moment above myself, with the other fellows lifting me.

However absurd it may appear to those who are always at one level of self-made dignity and—something else—true it is we all were moved, as no formality can stir us. Stepan had a mighty voice, and more than his throat was in it; then Dariel cast by her veil, and her beautiful lips were trembling, like a wild-rose quivering with petals half-open over some melodious stream. I thought of the time when I had first beheld her, and my love was not of this earth alone.

When all were gone, and I was thinking still what prigs we are, and cowards too, who suppose [Pg 194] that there is one way only of getting near our Father, that humble man who had been our priest came up to me, and spoke sadly. I saw that he was down at heart, and full of doubt about himself, and wanting higher comfort than a man like me could give him. But I could not guess, until he told his melancholy story, why he should be thus downcast, after doing his utmost for the benefit of others. I had not known what the service meant, but saw that it had been simple, solemn, and free from all rant and false excitement; and this I ventured to express.

"Come in, my friend, and have some refreshment. On Sundays all the men dine together," he said as he led me inside the door, "and we will have something with them. I fear that you found it difficult to keep from laughing at the sight of such an astonishing set of hats, and scarcely any two alike. We copied them first, I sometimes think, from our highest and most fantastic peaks; but art has outdone nature. In truth they are a motley lot, but there is not a false heart among them."

I had seen nearly all of them before, on the day of the police invasion, but not as now in their best apparel, a strange and interesting sight. Some of them had wondrous coats, frogged and braided, and painted and patched, and ribboned and laced, and leathered, and I know not what, with coins, and baubles, and charms, and stars, and every kind of dangle; and two of them wore Russian uniforms far advanced in years, and captured perhaps in the days of Shamyl. But their faces, though covered with beards and freckles, could not be called savage or ignoble; and though one or two bore a swarthy aspect, some were as fair as Englishmen. I could well believe that there might be truth in the tradition of their tribe, that they were a separate race, distinct among the myriad mountain strains, having the hot oriental blood refreshed and strengthened from the Western founts. They regarded their Chief with patriarchal loyalty and deference, but no servility or cringing; it was his pleasant duty to maintain them, and theirs to work for him, to a rational extent. Whatever they had was his, so far as nature allows such partnership; while his [Pg 195] property enjoyed the privilege of ministering to their welfare.

"They have done well," said the Chief to me, while I was revolving these things slowly; and hoping that his daughter might appear at last to grace the feast; "they will go and wander in their gardens now, and have the pleasure of sitting in their native form."

"Which is something like that of a hare," I replied, without calling to mind that it might seem rude; but he smiled, for he never took offence unless it were intended, which is a most sagacious rule. And he proceeded with his inference.

"The fact that they are coming without much pain to the use of chairs and benches, when commended to them by a good dinner, tends to prove that they are of a high and naturally docile race. But come to my room, and have a glass of Kahiti; and then we will go forth into the wood, and you shall know all that has come to pass in the life of a man not so very old yet, but with all his best years behind him."

He smiled, and I looked at him still in his strength, still comely and sweet of temper, a man with almost every gift of nature, but not endowed with happiness. And his smile was not that of a jubilant heart, which has tried and can trust its own buoyancy; but rather of the calm mind which flows in, to level all the tumult, and to cover all the ruin. I thought to myself that I must come to that, if Dariel went on, as she seemed to do, and kept out of sight without a word to me.

But after a bottle of the Chief's light wine—a dozen of which would not have turned a British hair—I had the presence of mind to fill my pipe and pouch with some very fair tobacco of the mountains, and to follow him over a clever little bridge of his own construction into the heart of the grey old wood. There we sat upon a mossy log, and he poured out his story, while the sunshine came in slants sometimes, and I wished there had been more of it.

I cannot repeat Sûr Imar's tale with any of his self-commanding strength, much less convey the light and shade of a voice alive with memory of whatever the soul has suffered. However, to the best of my belief, the import of his words is here. Feebly, but never falsely, have I set down his remembrances. Only his foreign turns of language have escaped my memory; and he must tell what he has to tell like an ordinary Englishman. Which means without long words, whenever short ones serve the turn as well. [Pg 196]

CHAPTER XXII [Pg 197]
IMAR'S TALE—WAR

"That which I have always admired in your nation, and that which has made you what you are, under the guidance of the Lord, is your natural gift of self-command. The race to which I belong has always been very scant of that great quality; and this fault has been from age to age the cause of misery and conflict. Not that we are by any means so turbulent and vindictive as other tribes around us; for we almost alone are guided, when in our proper state of mind, by any sense of Christianity; most of the others who call themselves of that creed, such as the Ossets, Imeritians, and barbarous Suans, have made a strange jumble of the true faith with Mohammedanism, paganism, and even stark idolatry. But the Lesghians, with whom we have most to do, and who claim us as of their affinity, still are of Islam, and mainly of that bigoted and aggressive form of it which is known as Muridism. Even so, they are nobler, braver, more patriotic, and loyal to their chiefs, as well as of finer presence, and greater activity and industry than most of their neighbours on the west and south, who suppose themselves to be Christians.

"My father, Sûr Dadian, as hereditary Chief of the Kheusurs—a tribe now dwindled from its former strength—commanded for many years their division in the army of the gallant Shamyl. Our people did not share of course that fury of Islam, and blaze of the crescent, which scorched the Russians by the thousand out of the dark ravines of Daghestan. Nevertheless we stood up for ourselves, with the muzzle of a gun at every elbow of the rocks; and if all the sons of Islam had been as faithful to their great Imaum, as the Cross was, the Russian flag would never have waved over Guinib, in Shamyl's lifetime. [Pg 198]

"The Russian plan was to press us hard, throughout the summer and autumnal months, with ten men perhaps to every one of ours; to encourage us most benevolently to sow our land and tend it, and then to rejoice and renew their strength with the pithy marrow of our corn, and the juicy fibre of our flocks and herds. A man loves his country on the very same principle on which he loves his mother; but if he can never taste what she is like, he might just as well have a step-mother. Neither was this the only loss of satisfaction year by year. Our men, as I have heard them tell, when I was old enough to join them, felt even worse than their own privations the rich gain of the enemy. To sit on a rock, just out of shot—as many a dauntless Avar told me—with glacier water for his drink, and nothing but mast on his tattered lap, and to see a hundred fat round fellows, who had come into his land quite lean, laughing and joking at his own door, with the milk of his best cow at their lips, and the kids of his flock coming up to them in sniffs from the fires where they were roasting, this he assured me—and I could quite believe him—turned his empty digestion into bile, and the love of his native land into a hollow ache. And this very feeling, in a higher form, cost my dear father his valiant life, and left me and my sister orphans.

"You may have heard of the defeat and slaughter of an entire Russian column, under the great Prince Dorougoff, which our gallant mountain forces, with my father second in command, accomplished most effectually. Everybody knows what glory and renown accrued to the stout Imaum through this; but all of our men who were present declared that my father deserved the main credit. The Emperor of Russia had grown impatient, and sent impetuous orders that his army should advance at once into the heart of the defiles, and crush the rebellion—as he dared to call it, though we never had been his subjects—at one mighty blow, and for ever. The Commander replied that he would march His Majesty's army in, but never would march it out again. And according to that answer, so it was. Our men became tired of slaughter, although they had many a long year of suffering to avenge. [Pg 199]

"As might have been expected, the mountaineers grew careless after this great victory, and left many of their passes open; for the stubborn foe had recoiled, and appeared unable to do anything more until the following season. My father went home to see to his affairs, and to secure a new supply of rifles, for he had brought from Koorbashi a score of those skilled workmen of Genoese

descent, who for accuracy and finish can hold their own with the best gunmakers in the world. All Shamyl's best troops were armed with weapons procured from these admirable artisans, and the clumsy muskets of the Russian force were quite unfit to cope with them. Stepan has one of those Koorbashi rifles, which you would find it hard to match in London, either for beauty of design or for excellence in shooting. But alas they were all muzzle-loaders, or the Caucasus might have been Caucasian still.

"Karthlos Tower, where our family had dwelled for many generations, takes its name from that same descendant of Noah who founded Mischel; and standing on a mountain plateau, with chasms abrupt and vertical cleaving the land to immeasurable depths, it is safe against all adverse powers, except treachery and famine. Among the labyrinth of ravines no stranger could ever find his road; and if chance at last brought him to the winding access, discretion would hurry him shuddering away. For many a black muzzle would look down upon him, and if he escaped all those, a score of yellow ones would confront him at the final crest, and of tenfold size, —brass artillery from Koorbashi.

"It was growing dark in those cloven depths, though the sun was still hovering upon the upper world, when my father rode round the last sharp jag at the foot of the ascent to Karthlos. The survivors of his war-dwindled force were only a few yards behind him, lounging on their tired horses, and scarcely caring to keep up the burden of their homeward song. Then when their leader was round the point, they heard the roar of a heavy gun, swinging like a wing-flap from wall to wall, and departing in the distance, like an echo climbing stairs. They spurred to know [Pg 200] what it could mean, and they found Sûr Dadian dead on the neck of his horse.

"I had not seen my father more than half a dozen times, so far as childish memory goes; but he was always kind and loving, and very gentle with us. We had lost our mother before we knew her; and Marva and myself, twin children, had been sent from home, we could not tell when, to be educated at Tiflis. There our father had some old friends, and being so seldom at home, by reason of this perpetual war, he had done the best he could for us. I was placed in the German town on the left bank of the Kur, and under the care of a learned man, famous even in the "City of many tongues" for his knowledge of all useful languages. He had several English pupils, and admiring Shakespeare as the Germans do, he made us almost as familiar with English as if we were born to it. But Marva, my sister, had her education in the school of a French convent on the other side of the river. Twins as we were, and pining long at this unnatural severance, the force of events, and the power of education, drove us further and further apart, until the early divergencies of tastes and dispositions became so hardened and widened that our mutual love was vanishing.

"The murder of my father—for it could be nothing else—occurred in the autumn of 1852; but it was not known in Tiflis until three months later, for the city had long been in Russian hands, and Shamyl's victorious troops allowed very little communication. Even when known, it was kept from me, for some time longer, as I have reason to believe, by order of the College authorities. At last I knew it by a letter from Shamyl himself, or written by his orders—for he dispensed very largely with literature—which it took me a long time to make out, for I had almost forgotten the Avar tongue. How he smuggled it to me, I know not; but at last I understood it to this effect.

"'Young Imar, the son of Dadian. The Russians have slain thy father in cold blood. Thou art now the Chief of the Kheusurs. Thou art not of Islam; but if thou hast any blood in thy body, come without delay, and have thy just revenge upon the accursed heathen. Shamyl, the Imaum.'

"What youth of spirit and health and strength could hesitate for an hour? I had many Russian [Pg 201] friends at Tiflis, and all of the higher rank made light of the barbarian tumult, as they called it, among the distant mountains. They begged me at least to wait until the truth of the Muridist outlaw's words could be properly established; for they said that he could outlie a Greek, or even an Armenian. But I broke from them all, bade farewell to Marva, and in shorter time than space required, presented myself to Shamyl.

"That Hannibal of the East was now at the acme of his fame and power. Though not of great stature, or winning aspect, or even exemplary cleanliness, he possessed and exercised that gift of forcing the wills of others into the channel of his own, which makes a man's course historical. He had piercing eyes, deeply set and overhung, and a swarthy complexion, and strong harsh features, enlivened sometimes with a smile conveying a boyish and rudimental sense of humour. But let any one rouse his temper, and the Demon of the Mountains, who haunts the crags of Kazbek, could not rave more furiously. It was this, and not cold inhumanity—as strangers to our race imagined—which drove him into those brutal acts which disgraced the name of Avar. Whether he believed in his Divine Mission to restore the glory of Islam, and extirpate the infidel, or whether he laughed in his sleeve at that most useful delusion, I never could decide. As a Christian, and a well educated youth, I thoroughly disdained such stuff; but while contemning the Muridist and the Imaum, I fell more than behoved me perhaps under the influence of the patriot. For I was but eighteen years of age, and as yet quite a child among men of action, though foremost of the students in philology at Tiflis, and even in bodily strength and activity equal to the best of them.

"My presence at first was of service to the cause, only as securing the assistance of my tribe, who had no share in Islam, and would have deserted very promptly without my presence among them. But before long I proved myself a valuable recruit, and was advanced to a command among the scouts; upon whom in that war of surprises and sudden encounters much depended. Although I hated and scorned the religion of our Chief, I shared his patriotism, and admired his valour and [Pg 202] genius, while often wondering at the forbearance he showed to an 'unbeliever.' This I owed to his

sense of honour, as I learned long afterwards, inasmuch as he had promised my father, his old companion in arms, that he would never make any attempt to convert me, if I were allowed to join him. Then suddenly he fell in my esteem, for I found out that he had lied to me.

"So zealous had I been in military matters, and so eager to qualify myself for command, that for two years I never went home to Karthlos Tower, the proper abode of our race. I never cared for form and fuss, and the earthly division of God's children into two creations—the high-born and the low-born half—for perhaps there are more who knew their Father in humility, than in proud estate.

"In my youth I never thought of such things, to which convention drives us, but simply divided the men around me into hearties who would fight, and poltroons who ran away; and of the latter there were but few. The Steward at the Tower had supplied me with all that I wanted in those rugged times; and in the hot vein of my patriotism, a crust and an icicle seemed enough for a soldier to subsist upon. But now I was compelled to return to Karthlos by a strange thing which had come to pass, while I was intent upon war alone.

"Marva, twin-sister of mine, and in childhood dearer than my little self to me, had defied all authority; and when that did not avail, had outwitted it, and vanished from the Convent-school at Tiflis. And my first news of it was a strong demand for her portion of the patrimony, from the man who had run away with her. This was the Chief of an Osset tribe, who had never joined in the war, but waited for the final issue; in which even we who kept it up could have little confidence, unless the great Powers in the West, now at enmity with Russia, would send us speedy and effectual help. And I knew that this Osset Chief had been a hereditary foe to my father.

"His name was Rakhan, which is, I believe, of Tartar origin; and he showed signs in character and in features too of kinship to that widespread race. But his father had been of pure Ossetian blood, and now he was acknowledged Chief of a certain wild, and semi-Christian tribe. We had never [Pg 203] had much to do with them, although their villages lay near us on the West; for the Russians kept a fortified post between us, where their main road crosses the mountain-chain, and we scarcely regarded them as brother Christians, though that did not prevent us from having plenty of private feuds with them. And now this man of an inferior race, and a poor one too—for they throve principally upon goats—had dared to make up to my twin-sister, and marry her, and demand her heritage!

"And this was not the worst of it, for as soon as I entered Karthlos, my good Steward, Kobaduk, a very faithful servant, told me that beyond any doubt Rakhan, the Osset, had compassed and probably with his own hand committed the murder of my father, Sûr Dadian. I replied that the Imaum himself had assured me that the Russians were guilty of that crime, and this had impelled me to quit all friends and hurry without going home to Bodlith. But he spat on the ground, as our peasants do, when they hear of a black deception, and soon proved to me that the Czar's troops were guiltless; and not only so, but that Shamyl the Tartar—as he was frequently called in contempt—knew as well as Kobaduk did, that there was not a Russian within miles of Karthlos, when that cowardly shot was fired. Moreover, the foremost of my father's men who had spurred along the defile, made oath that he saw a white globe whirl away where the crags broke apart in the distance, and he put his jaded horse to the utmost speed, all in vain among darkness and precipices. Now every one knows that no Russian soldier, and the Ossets alone in our part of the range can be found with that hideous head-gear flapping, a sheep-skin puffed out into a ball at the top, like a great white onion at the end of a stick. And there was other evidence as well as this.

"My twin-sister, my only near of kin, for my father had no other children—was I likely, although she had acted thus, to rob her of a single copek? Nay, rather would not every one of mine be at her service? At the same time, could any son endure that his good father should be robbed not only of life but also of a third part of his property by a scoundrel of inferior race, who had stolen [Pg 204] his daughter for that very end. Thereupon I was compelled to believe—for charity is by St. Paul described as the greatest of Christian virtues, but he does not appear (though a native of Cilicia) to have travelled in the Caucasus, as Peter did, otherwise never could he have retained enough of that virtue to describe it—young as I was, the conviction grew upon me that Prince Rakhan, the Osset, had murdered my father, Sûr Dadian, because he had refused him his daughter Marva. Instead of answering the letter therefore in which he demanded his portion, I set forth with a few troopers well armed to pay him a visit in his stronghold at Zacca, near the fountains of the Ardon river.

"Some parts of our own land are desolate enough, but this country where the Ossets lived had scarcely a tree to make the world look living; and having had no war in their neglected places to civilize them with the passage of guns, they seemed to be quite outside all knowledge. Yet to my surprise, they looked down upon our race, which we for generations had been wont to do to them; and with better reason, as all others will admit. We rode very fine Khabarda steeds, which are the best of all the Caucasus, but we were obliged to leave them in the bed of a little snow-river at last, and appear at the entrance on foot, as if we expected to be shot at.

"Nobody shot at us, chiefly perhaps because few of them had learned the way to shoot; but there was not one of them who required any lessons in the art of staring. And to think that such people looked down upon us! All their houses had hideous towers, as if their lives were spent in looking out from the tops; and my heart went low, as I thought of my lively and lovely sister Marva, who had been brought up like a French girl almost, extinguished and deadened among such clods. And I had not even the chance of learning how she liked the lot she had cast for herself. Perhaps

she may have seen me from some tower—for they have narrow loops instead of windows—but she never showed her face to me, nor sent me any message.

"We shouted, and made noise enough to fling all the rocky echoes into a Babel of dispute with one another, and if we could have found the butt end of a tree, we would have made a rush for it and rammed the heavy gate. At last a surly fellow put his head out at a loophole, and rubbed his eyes as if we had broken his repose. I did not understand their language then, though I came to know it afterwards; but some of my men made out this delivery—'Sons of the Evil One, ye shall not rob us. The noble Prince Rakhan is far off; but we will fight until he returns. Ye will be slain by thundering guns, unless ye cease this uproar.' [Pg 205]

"We could not believe that Osset robber; for the people of the village had told us that the Chief and his bride were both at home; but I tore a leaf out of my order-book, and wrote a letter upon it, and handed it up on the point of a lance. It contained no insolence, though that was rumoured afterwards, but only these words which a man of honesty would have met according to their intention. 'Sûr Imar to Prince Rakhan. If you will come to Karthlos, bringing with you the relics of St. Anthony, and upon them swear that you have had no hand in the death of my dear father, I will deliver to you all the portion of my sister Marva, and add thereto my own present to her, and acknowledge you as a brother.'

"This I signed with some hope of better feeling; for I knew that they had in this savage place no small piece of St. Anthony, and having three men who could make a cross, I secured all three as witnesses; and then we marched away from this inhospitable desert. But the worst of the business was not over yet, for when we returned to the spot where we had tethered our horses very carefully, not one of them was there except my own, and he was loose, but ran to me. Him alone those Ossets had not stolen, because he could bite as well as kick, and would let none but his master handle him. We ran back to the village, but there was not a soul there, except a few children yelling. All these we put into one hut far apart, and then set fire to all the rest. But being of stone they burned very unkindly, and having no time to make a good job of it, we shook the Ossetian dust from our feet, and made off in hope as well as fear of having all the mad savages after us.

"How, among a people thus divided, could there be any chance of solid resistance to a mighty nation like Russia, acting in unity, and able to replace every man killed with a dozen just as good? There was not a tribe among us that would join its neighbour, for any other purpose than the plunder of a third; and when this was carried off, the victorious pair were sure to have another fight about the booty, before they were half-way home again. A quarrel was now set up between my people and those of Prince Rakhan, which would probably last for generations; not so much about my father's murder—for that was a matter of suspicion only, and chiefly concerned his next of kin—but about the theft of those well-bred horses, and the firing of that worthless village. And when I received a letter of insult in the Georgian language, from the man who had so injured me, the only thing that surprised me was his ability to write it. For though he spent much of his time at Tiflis, whenever he could scrape up coin enough, it was not for the purpose of improving his mind, even if he had any to embellish. That problem however was speedily solved; for the writing was my sister's. [Pg 206]

"'Imar, son of Dadian. Twice hast thou wronged me, thy brother in the Lord. Thou hast robbed me of my portion of thy father's goods, and thou hast set fire to my wealthiest village, destroying men, women, and children. Though thou art now a great man of battle, and strong among the strongest, so that thy name is as that of Minghi Tau, yet shall that mighty head be fetched down, and those strong hands shall feed the dogs of Kektris. The only hope left thee of escaping this destruction is if thou sendest to the glacier of Gumaran, before the snows fill up the valley again, gold and cattle, and household goods, according to the number herein set down, which is far less than thou owest me, and will not make peace between us for the village thou hast destroyed. But this if thou doest, I will pray for thy repentance, and thy sister whom thou hast robbed will permit thee to look upon her face again. Rakhan, Prince of the noble Ossets.'

"There was also another signature, broken and crooked, as if the hand had been seized in another, and compelled to shape the name of *Marva*. Then I hoped that my sister had not turned against me in her heart, though constrained by her fierce and wicked husband; and I ordered the messenger to wait, and fed him with dainties that he knew not how to handle, while I preserved my temper even against the insult of that address. For now I was entitled to be addressed as *Sûr*, of which we think more than the common word *Prince*; for it is a designation of warlike rank, imported from the furthest Orient, and ascribed to none but a Chief who has led his tribe into battle with a foreign foe. Scorning to show anger, I wrote thus— [Pg 207]

"'Accursed murderer of my father, and serpent robber of my sister. Thou hast piled up a mountain of lies, so vast, and of such deadly blackness, that the snow of thy guile cannot cover them. A man of lower rank than mine may descend into the filth where thou grovellest, and strive to vie with thee in vermin. But I will leave thee to the Lord, who heedeth the smallest thing that He hath deigned to make. Yet that my sister be not a widow, one thing I will say to thee. Let not the right bank of the Terek be tainted by thine evil-smelling body. Lest, for the sake of those whom the Heaven valueth, it be plunged into the bottomless bog. For verily there are foul reeks of Satan, sent by his malice to corrupt the air.'

"Now this was not intended as an offering of peace—though many people took it altogether in that light, not from the moderation of the language only, but because I sent not the wonted double dagger with it—but simply as an overture of justice, in language not too mealy, and an

opening for reconciliation. For Marva, my sister, I felt many pangs, a hankering which I endeavoured to repress, a tenderness of the younger days, when neither could have the skin broken without a burst of tears from the other's eyes. But we have to get harder as we go on, and the hold of soft love on our little thumbs grows slacker; and even sweet twins (who have tumbled into one another's arms, and rolled over with rollicking, till no one could tell which was which of them) must begin to close palm, and even shut fist, to the kisses of each other. And with all this affection heavy on my mind, and a good guard left upon the steeps of Karthlos, I returned for the summer to Shamyl."

CHAPTER XXIII
IMAR'S TALE—LOVE

[Pg 208]

"Perhaps you have gathered from my words already some idea of the character of Shamyl. An idea, and not a perception, was all that his dearest friends could have of him, because he had no dear friends at all. And yet he was a man of warm nature, and kept nobody at a distance from him; neither was there any haughtiness, though abundance of rudeness, about him. Men put up with the latter, and even like it (when shown to their friends) and talk pleasantly about it, and the little ruffle passes over, every one expecting that his friend will be the next to get it. But cold universal arrogance makes the greatest of mankind—if such can show it—universally detested.

"I believe that Shamyl was by nature kind,—though he did some abominably brutal things,—and that if he had not taken into his head, or had it put there by flatterers, that Allah had breathed into him the breath of Mohammed, he would have been one of the noblest, as well as the purest perhaps, of patriots. Peace be with him, for he was at least sincere, which cannot be said of all leading minds, and he understood other men at a glance, though he may not have looked very much into his own man.

"I fear that it may be ungrateful on my part not to speak even more highly of him. For he took a great liking to me in his way, although I was not of his creed; neither did I pretend to any personal hatred of the Russians, who are generally very kind of nature,—more so perhaps than we are,—and only did their duty in shooting us straightforwardly. Neither did I pretend to any special love of him, but carried out his orders as a soldier should, unless they were worse than [Pg 209] even war demands, in which case I told him to seek elsewhere. Therefore I was surprised, as much as any man acquainted with him could be surprised, when he took me aside one day and said: 'Sûr Imar, I have an important mission for thee, which I would intrust to no other. Many of my officers are rough and wild, and have no command over themselves with women. My son is a prisoner with the Russians; and I have a noble scheme for recovering him, and perhaps a hundred thousand crowns to boot. But it is a dangerous enterprise, and must be carried out with proper delicacy to ladies.'

"This was a very high compliment to me, being still a young man in the fervour of my days; but the Captain had heard of stern actions of mine, when some of his men had shown rudeness to those who could not take up arms to protect themselves.

"'Thou hast the best horse in the army,' he continued, with his deep eyes fixed upon my glowing cheeks, as the spirit of adventure began to rise, 'and there is not a stronger man among us, neither one to surpass thee in activity. All this will be needed, and boldness too, tempered with skill and discretion. I would go myself, for the work is worthy of me, but I cannot leave the camp just now. My design is to carry off from their summer encampment all the ladies of the Russian and the Georgian Court. Not a hair of their heads shall be harmed, and we will treat them as princesses, but hold them for the ransom of my dear son, and a good round sum for the military chest. The Powers of the West have been stingy to us, when we might have done them excellent service; but we will make the Russian bear supply a little grease for our bullets; for the ladies are of the highest rank. But the whole scheme fails, if even one of them should be ill-treated.'

"This was the only point about which I felt uneasiness; but he gave me permission, and even clear orders, to shoot on the spot any man who misbehaved. And when he allowed me to take fifty of my tribe, as well as fifty chosen men of his, my only anxiety was to start as soon as arrangements could be made, and before any rumour of our plans should get abroad. For I knew all those [Pg 210] southern stretches of the mountains well, and that perhaps induced him to appoint me in command.

"He told me that trusty friends near the Georgian capital had informed him that the early summer heat had made the city in the deep hollow by the river almost unbearable for ladies of the north; and therefore the wives and daughters of the principal Russian officers, together with the noblest of the Georgian women, had been sent to a cooler spot among the hills in the healthy district of Kahiti, celebrated for its vineyards. Little expecting any danger there so far from the Lesghian outposts, they were lodged in a pleasant place under canvas, guarded by a scanty detachment of Cossacks, most of whom had been invalided from the war. Pounce upon them suddenly, and what could they do but scream? Even this they would not do very long, according to Shamyl's opinion, but soon be happy when they found themselves made much of, and enjoy the romance of the situation, and the high price put upon them. This prediction, to my surprise, proved wonderfully correct; for many of the younger ladies permanently added to the beauty of

our country and the quality of its inhabitants; while those who preferred restoration declared that they would have no higgling about them,—if their husbands attempted to cheapen their price, let them even remain among the gallant men who put them at a higher figure. But this is a later matter, and I only mention it to show the good feeling we created.

"Litters, and light carts, and other conveyances were sent in advance of us over the worst places, with orders to wait in a valley we described; and with all the best horses we could procure, we set forth at sunrise one summer morning, so as to traverse the most dangerous part of the journey in good daylight. We rode very leisurely to keep our horses fresh, until in the afternoon of the second day, we halted in a hollow of the lower mountains to make a good meal, and learn more exactly where the encampment of the ladies was. Here were a hundred of us, all good horsemen, and accustomed to despise the enemy,—not for want of courage, but for want of wit. In courage they were quite our equals, for they never seemed to care much about their lives; but [Pg 211] when briskness and readiness turned the issue, the vigour of the free man could upset the bulk of serfs. This we had proved a hundred times against the weight of numbers.

"Being in command of this dainty enterprise, and having to prove that I was not too young, which always puts a youth upon his very finest mettle, I took all the precautions of an old commander. Ordering all the others to keep close, and having only Stepan and the best of our guides with me, I proceeded very carefully afoot along the course of a stream from the hills, which had worn a deep channel. We knew where the ladies ought to be; and though a man must not rely too much on that, sure enough there they were by the dozen. Their encampment was pitched upon a very pretty knoll, not more than a long eyeshot from the nearest bend of the watercourse we crouched in. I put my red plume between my knees, and watched them, being surprised at the beauty of their dress, and the far greater beauty of their figures. The proudest radiance of the Russian Court was there, and the softer charms of Georgia; and I was glad not to see those lovely faces, which it would be my duty to bedew with tears so soon.

"Having counted their tents, three of which were royal, and made myself sure of their position, I left all those beauties at their tea outside, with the sunset casting their shadows down the slope, and saying to myself, 'Where will you have your breakfasts, Mesdames?' stole back with my two comrades, to make ready for this prize. Stepan, who was always full of strong ideas, and never confined them to himself, did his utmost to convince me that the wisest plan was to let all these houris go snugly to bed, and then catch them up as they were in their first slumber, and whirl them away on our saddles. But I could not bear to think of this outrage on their modesty; and one figure in a silver pink dress was in my mind,—the youngest and the loveliest of all I had descried. Therefore I made ready to descend upon these ladies before they should begin to retire for the night, which they would not do until they had supped well and probably played their games of cards.

"We had little fear of sentries, for there were not more than a dozen, and no sign of any horse- [Pg 212] patrol about; and even of the few fellows lounging round the tents, and ordered to keep at a proper distance from them, we got rid by the old device of sending a boy on a donkey with a flagon of vodka on either side. They showed their alacrity by robbing him of these, and then retiring to their hut, with the officer on duty to take first pull. When the moon was up, and we rode softly over the sod of alluvial ground, the only challenge we received was the screech of a Russian drinking-chorus round the corner of the trees. Without firing a shot, or disturbing a dog, we surrounded the camp of the fair ones, and called upon them to surrender. At the same time we entreated them to prepare in silence for their departure with us, if they valued the lives of their guardians.

"This exhortation was of no effect. Amazement and terror quite overcame their natural discretion, and we found it impossible to parley with them. So great was the outcry that we stood aghast, till those faithful Cossacks came running, or rather staggering to the rescue, which restored our power of action. We bound them in couples to convenient trees with some ropes we had brought for the purpose; and then as the ladies still declined to join us, we wrapped all the most important of them in their cloaks, and placed them on our horses. In this they assisted us to some extent, by kindly disclosing the rank of each other. Thus we obtained all who were of any value from a financial point of view, twenty-two of sterling substance; and at their entreaty and assurance of amendment we took a domestic for each of them, and turned our horses' heads towards the glen where the vehicles awaited us.

"My instructions were to leave no room for doubt as to our possession of six Princesses, whose names I will not give, because most of them, I trust, are still alive, and none the worse for their captivity. Enough that they were of exalted rank, and in command—as the Russian ladies contrive to be—of the Commanders of the army opposed to us. Therefore, before we started, I stood upon the terrace in front of the tents, with our horses pawing the turf, which was almost a novel treat to them, and the white moon making a picture of us. And there with great deference and [Pg 213] courtesy, I called over from the list provided me the names of their incomparable Highnesses, the Princess O——, and the Princess D——, &c.; and each of them made answer according to temperament, and sense of resignation to the will of Heaven. Then I gave the word to start, and remained the last, to bring up the rear as in duty I was bound.

"But suddenly a slender and timid figure came gliding, as if in the haste of despair, from the shadow of a tent, and stood close to me. It was the lovely maiden in the silver-pink attire, and she drew her veil partly aside, and glanced in the clear moonlight at my face, and then dropped her dark eyes, and then lifted them again with quivering tears like a suppliant—'Oh, Captain, am I to

be left behind?'

"'Lady, have no fear,' I said very gently, and half afraid to look again at her; 'you shall not be left unguarded. But tell me who you are, the fairest and the youngest of so many.'

"'Alas, sir, I am not worth money now,' she answered with her white hands clasped together; 'there is none of my race to pay ransom now. There is not even a wealthy friend, to help, or to shelter Oria.'

"'The Princess Oria, the lily-bud of Kajori, the last of the Royal House of Georgia, to which the race of Rurik is a mushroom! Princess Oria, I do you homage.'

"As I made her a low salute, which I would not have offered to the Czar himself, she turned away as if she would not see it, and a soft sob made me feel afraid. This was not one of your haughty mesdames, who let the men fancy that they carry them by storm, while they laugh in their own proud breasts, with knowledge that they are the Masters, as soon as they like. I could hear the Princess D. in the distance, rating the man who carried her on the cushion provided in front of him, and I knew that he had a bad time of it.

"'What are the commands of your Royal Highness?' I asked, with an emphasis on the title, which she alone of the proud bevy could claim. 'Behold, I am proud to be your slave.'

"She rose to the remembrance of her childhood, when she had been made much of, as the last descendant of Queen Tamara; and then her pride melted into a flood of tears, and the sense of helpless maidenhood. She tried to say something, but it only came to sobs. [Pg 214]

"'Trust yourself to me,' I said, 'I cannot leave you here at the mercy of drunken Cossacks. I am Sûr Imar of the Lesghians, not a Moslem, but a Christian. By the body of Christ, none shall harm you, while I live.'

"There was no time for further adjurations. She bowed her beautiful head, and drew down her long veil, and in a moment the love of my life was in my arms, and on the soft pillow in front of me, with my horse at full gallop, in the broad stretch of the moon. Like an image of marble she lay before me, and I touched her as if she were an image of glass. The troopers were astonished when we overtook them, but they knew better than to say a word, or down they would have gone, Russian Princess and all. For I was not in the cue to stand insolence. Having given my orders I kept in the rear, grudging even the moon between the bars of shadow a glimpse at the figure in my precious trust. But no man can think of such things, and then tell them. For, they only come once in the nightmare of life.

"Shamyl was delighted, when we brought him his fair prisoners, and he did his very best in his peasant style to be courteous and polite to them. As the leader of the expedition I had the privilege of introducing them; and it was really a fine thing to see how they behaved to him, and he to them. He gave himself airs which made me smile; and before so much rank and beauty—infidel though it might be—he forgot for the moment that he was the Prophet of the Lord. And as for the ladies, although they were bound in consistency to abhor him, not only did they forego the attempt, but all who had rank to make such a claim decent, insisted upon having a lock of his hair.

"In a word, the Princesses were all so happy, when by means of a flag of truce they had received from their friends a large supply of raiment and other luxuries, that the hope of getting a first-rate figure for them was endangered. Instead of frantic adjurations, and despairing outcries, their letters now were full of bright descriptions and gay narratives; and proud as we were of their good opinions, we could not afford them to that extent. It became needful on this behalf to send the fair captives to a duller place, to some desolate spot, where even a woman could not contrive to see much of the world. Darghi, in the depths of Daghestan, and far away even from the echoes, was a place of so lofty a character that the fashions of the Ark were as valid as the latest announced from Paris; and thither I was ordered to conduct these ladies, for the creation of discontent among them, the scenery being beautiful, but sparsely populated. And if the love of Nature were by any means as potent in the Russian breast as the English ladies now declare it to have grown in theirs, perfect happiness should have been the lot of these fair Princesses. There was nothing to disturb them, beauty reigned on every side; and beauty should have reigned within. [Pg 215]

"But alas that human nature never, at least in its feminine state and form, finds satisfaction in the outward type! Among the rugged mountains, and with frequent shift, and much discomfort, these fair creatures had been bright, and cheerful, and perilously amiable. A flag on a rock, or a drum at the corner, or the flash of a helmet in the hollow, was enough to send their active minds into fifty pleasant flutters. But here they had no stir of war, no delightful dreads to rouse them, only the depths of lonely peace, and the repose, for which they had so often sighed. For a day or two, they tried to enjoy it, and spoke of the pleasures of their childhood, and roved about in cotton jackets as if they were longing to be peasants. Our duty was to defend them only, and never interfere with them, so long as they kept within certain bounds; and we gave them no cause to complain of us; but endeavoured to do our duty well, as sentries of so many money-bags.

"Strange as it must appear, there was nothing that irritated them more than this. They could not bear to be regarded in that light, and being too proud to come out of it themselves, what did they do but send their maids—they may not have meant it, but so it came to pass—to produce a flirtation among my men. Precautions had been taken (as we thought) against any process of that

sort, by detailing for this custody only grizzled veterans, who had wives at home, and could not [Pg 216] understand a single word of Russian. But this, though a step in the right direction, did not go quite far enough; and several of our villagers beyond the prime of life behaved in a manner more appropriate to their sons. So that I found myself compelled, in the proper discharge of my office, to use increasing diligence from day to day. For one of the Russian ladies, being the mother of two little girls, had obtained permission to bring her favourite French governess, as lively a girl as ever lived, and acquainted with half-a-dozen languages. This Mademoiselle de J——,—for I will show her the same consideration as her wealthier comrades,—was perpetually forming little plots of the wildest and most romantic kind, for the escape of all the captive band. With a view to that, she took upon herself to inspect me closely, every time I came to a little gate, newly put across the pass, by my special orders, which had created much offence inside. There was no other way, by which these ladies, who now placed every confidence in me, could manage to get away at all, without perpendicular motion; unless it were the narrow winding passage leading into a sombre wood, and there I had 'Wolves!' painted up in great Russian capitals, so that few feminine eyes had the courage even to look at the signboard. And this is how it should be with them. For we do not wish them to be like us.

"I was trying to get out of that condition of the mind, into which I had been cast by a very few words, and still fewer glances from that lovely Princess Oria, whom I remembered as a very little maiden leading some procession, when I was a lad at Tiflis. If ever any boy has any heart to lose, when it ought to be gone upon play and mischief, mine had taken a sally out of me at sight of that young darling, trying to walk in a stately manner as she had been instructed, and resolute to bring her soft innocent self to the stiffness of the great occasion. How I had longed to lift her up among them and shout—'This is your Queen, if you had a spark of courage. Behold the pink eagle on her shoulder!'

"But now it was a very different thing. The duty of an officer in trust was laid upon me, and if the [Pg 217] men of Georgia would not stand up for their race, what had any outer tribe to do with it? The main point before me was to conquer foolish yearnings, and behave as a figure made of steel and leather. And without the interference of that glittering little governess, the rapture and the anguish of my life would not have been.

"I came down the narrow pass one evening towards dusk, to see to the posting of the sentinels, and to receive any message from the ladies, concerning their welfare and their general ideas; for they were beginning to write very craving letters and entreaties that would move a heart of stone, to husbands and fathers who were made of money, to rescue them from this seclusion. All these we forwarded, and Shamyl calculated that every letter would be worth to us a thousand roubles on the average. But money was not in my thoughts at all, and even the sense of duty fled, when I saw through the bars not the French woman only, but a figure very closely veiled, and endeavouring not to be seen in the twilight of a rock.

"'Poor little soul! She will die, she will die;' said the lady from Paris, with a very light sigh, as if with the thought that we must all do that. 'Those fat Princesses, what is it then? They are punishing her to the death. Poor little one! But why do I speak to Monsieur the Commander? Monsieur the Commander will rejoice in that occurrence, because the poor little one is not endowed with gold. Alas, it is so everywhere, except in France!'

"'Young lady, allow me to enter. It is my place to see to the safety of you all. I have not entered after sundown hitherto. But stand aside, lady, or you may be harmed.'

"She saw that I would break the gate open at a thrust,—for we allowed them to lock themselves in at night. 'Monsieur the Commander, how imperious he is!' she exclaimed with a wicked smile, as she turned the key. I thanked her, and then put my arm across the passage as the other young lady seemed about to fly. 'Pardon, fair Princess, but I cannot have it thus,' I said, with an attempt to look official; 'I am not your warder only, but your guardian. You trusted yourself to my care that night. A thousand Shamyls shall not take you from me. Can you not trust yourself to me [Pg 218] again? Have I given you reason to regret it? I have longed to be with you every moment; but have I ever dared to approach you?' I spoke in her native language, which was very delightful to her ears after so much Russian.

"'Speak then with good courage, thou silly child. Tell the brave Commander all the insults piled upon thee by the proud and fat Princesses. Alas, good Heaven, there they are calling me again! Who would not think that I was born to be their slave? Brave Commander, the time is now for thee.' With these words away ran Mademoiselle de J——.

"Then Oria spoke, without shrinking from me, and her voice was as clear as the melody of a river when the Winter has released it, and the Spring is on its banks.

"'Sûr Imar, thou hast been very good to me. If I placed no confidence in such a kind defender, never could I hope to be defended any more. But now I am safe among all these great ladies; I am not one of those who shriek at every shadow.'

"'To that I can bear witness,' I answered very softly, to remind her of the night when she lay upon my horse; 'but what can I do, if the Princess will not trust me?'

"At this gentle reproach all her generous nature sprang forth, like the sun in a tempest. She threw aside her veil, and came close to me, and was not afraid to fix her eyes on mine. 'Sûr Imar, is that faith enough?' she asked, as she gave me her soft hand long enough to last for many an hour of dreaming. 'It is all I can ask for the present,' I replied, and she turned away her face, but

not her form.

"***She turned away her face.***"

"Fearing to bring her into contumely among her proud companions, whose voices we could hear not far away, I retired from the gate with the proper martial tread; but not before I had obtained her promise to meet me on the morrow at the foot of the winding passage into the black wood; but she was not to venture up the path, until she saw me there; for truly there had been a wolf prowling near it, according to the children of the peasants. Therefore I had taken care to keep our golden ladies from risking ten thousand good crowns perhaps apiece to the cause of freedom (which they were ready to embrace, as soon as they knew both sides of it), by venturing into those gaunt and lonely shadows, where no man could hear them while being devoured. [Pg 219]

"In this assurance I had every hope of treating confidentially the position of the Princess Oria; and if that desirable wolf would only form number three at the interview, who could say what might come of it? But even his youngest cub, if he had any, might have regarded me with contempt, if he had seen the condition I was in, while waiting for the footstep of my love; for they look at such matters in a less submissive way.

"Unworthy as I was of the joy I then attained, even the pleasure of remembering it would be justly taken from me, if I lowered it by any ordinary words. For any one else it seems enough to know that after some talk of affairs in general, and trifles we pretended to be full of, my beauty, my darling, my gift from Heaven, my own and my only love confessed—that I was as much to her as she could be to me."

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At this point, the Lesghian Prince became unable to proceed with his narrative. I felt that I should have been ten times worse, if I had won and then lost his daughter. So I grasped his strong hand, which was trembling not a little, and hoping that soft memories might subside to gentle sympathies, departed with my love for him increased, and my reverence not diminished. When I saw him next, he had gathered up his courage, and was a little ashamed of his own breakdown. And he tried to tell the rest of his sad story, as if it were the sorrow of a cousin or a comrade.

[Pg 220]

CHAPTER XXIV
IMAR'S TALE—PEACE

"Happiness appears to me to resemble the black eagle of the mountains more than the fair dove of the proverb. Restless and swift of wing, it flutters, scarcely long enough for a hover, over any home of ours, and even then too high for us to be sure that we have seen it. Not until it is gone, can we believe that it has been with us; and we know in our hearts that to look for it destroys the chance of seeing it.

"Shamyl was in a rage that Oria dared to pledge her faith to me, without consulting the 'Mountain-lion,' as his flatterers now called him. Whether he hoped to make money of her, or what other reason he may have had, I will not pretend to say. But when by means of my good service, and without the loss of a single man, he secured all those fair prizes, and thus recovered his favourite son, not to mention an excellent sum in cash, and good wives for some of his officers, the least he should have done in my opinion was to smile and pour his blessing upon the union of Oria and Imar. Instead of that, on the very day when the last of the Russian ladies left the lonely recesses of Darghi, he sent a score of his bodyguard, without even the courtesy of asking my consent, to escort the Princess Oria to his own headquarters.

"Bad breeding here made a great mistake, as it usually does among gentlemen. For if he had sent his orders to me, as the officer to whom he had intrusted the captives, I should have felt myself bound to obey him, however much against my liking. But being treated in this rough manner, which the Avar Chief was too fond of employing, I threw off at once my allegiance to him,—which was not that of a tribesman, and had been already encroached upon a little too uncouthly. For at [Pg 221] present he was quite prosperous, and seemed well able to hold his own,—though the enemy had begun already their new plan of campaign, by which they prevailed in the end against him,—so that there could be no dishonour in leaving him with his glory. If the Russians had been pressing on him, I would not have quitted him; though nothing would have made me leave the Princess at his mercy. For when she confided herself to me, what things I said, and what vows I made, and what contempt I truly felt for every human being who thought lightly of such loftiness! Those officers who came with Shamyl's orders, were as faithful as could be to him; but ten times as many would not have availed to march my Oria eastwards.

"'This lady goes with me,' I said, 'she will be my wife in three days' time, just when you rejoin the camp. I will give you a letter to that effect to the inspired Commander. My men also will come with me; and if, as the General, he has any need of them hereafter, they will be at his service. You know that I do not speak in vain.'

"They all knew that, and many no doubt wished that they also were homeward bound. They went one way, and we the other; and the sons of gloomy Islam heard the songs of our rejoiceful faith borne back to them through the mountain passes, by the soft air from the west.

"For three or four years after that, I led a very peaceful life, happy in the perfect love of Oria, and the esteem of my faithful tribe. Being thoroughly versed in mountain war, we made ourselves respected by the badly armed and undisciplined races to the westward and the north of us. If they attempted an inroad, as their manner was, upon us, for their sakes we regretted it, but for our own were gratified. Because instead of plundering us of our honest crops and cattle, they always lost their thievish own; so that we grew very comfortable, and poverty was unknown among us. We sternly repressed all robbery, and to afford an abiding lesson to neighbours of lax principle, we deprived them of the means of outrage, placing these under our own control. At one time the numerous Osset tribes, far beyond Rukhan's rule, promised to join him in the plunder of [Pg 222] our prosperity. But before they could mature their contradictory ideas, we passed with a chosen band through their only fruitful places, obtaining many specimens of things we cannot cultivate, and leaving them so much to talk of that they fell with one accord upon one another. So that they were compelled to send a humble petition to us for seed, as soon as the sun came back again.

"These little matters kept our arms from rusting, and our bodies from torpor. We injured no one who did not require it, and we taught them to abstain from injury. We encouraged literature in every village possessing two men who could read, and within ten miles of Karthlos Tower there were five or six poets growing. All this I mention not by way of vaunt, but to show how much can be accomplished, when the mind is easy.

"But alas before these great reforms had taken solid root with us, the final advance of the Russian forces hurried us to the war again. Shamyl, the gallant patriot, who had for a generation baffled the power of a boundless empire, was at last being crushed by weight of numbers, and worn out by perpetual blows. By forcing his scanty troops together, and closing the defiles around them, the stubborn invaders now had him in a grip, like a wolf blocked in his own den to starve. He called upon all who had shared his successes to help him in this last resource; and loth as I was to leave my happy home and peaceful villages, honour and good faith must not be starved by our prosperity.

"My sweet wife, who had never admired the great Captain as the Russian ladies did, prayed and wept and coaxed in vain; she brought my two children, the boy and the girl, to show me that I ought to think of more than mere abstractions. Innocent flesh of my own flesh, and tender bone of my own bone, and eyes more bright than any star in all the sky of glory, what had the 'Wolf of the mountains' done to make me love him more than these? I stood at the gate with my arm around her trembling form; and my beautiful boy, just three years old, clung to my leg and kissed my knee, and the little baby always wise, who now has come to be Dariel, looked at me through [Pg 223] her mother's hair, with the sparkle of the brighter world babes come from still unquenched by earth. What was pride to me, or glory, if I could not find them here? But love has never yet sufficed to keep a man contented. He grows ashamed of living in it; and his manhood argues that

if he lets his darlings wrap it all in warmth and softness, it will soon cease to be worth their care. I put my wife and children by, with a prayer to the Lord to protect them, and went to do my duty.

"How often I looked back, and thought—as all I loved grew further off—that a man's first duty is to those who cannot live without him. Moreover, that I should be punished for casting eyes upon and longing for stirring rather than steadfast life. Badly begun, and sadly ended, was to be the rule of it. At the outset thus our little band (familiar as they once had been with every twist of the mountain-chain and every tangle of the gorges) had managed, by living in peace so long, to get their memories confused. And even when they hit upon the way, they found it stopped by Cossack outposts at the very points that we used to guard. But after many a climb and crawl, we contrived to rejoin the brave Imaum.

"I was admitted to him at once, and saw by the weariness of his eyes, and the looseness of his attitude, that he knew it was all over. He was sitting at a table with the lamp behind him, and his shaggy head thrown backward, so that the light played down the furrows of his heavy forehead, as from below one sees the moon glistening down a wrinkled steep. With his usual scorn of ceremony he did not rise, but grasped my hand.

"'Imar, thou art a man,' he said, with his guttural voice, such as all the Avars have, now a little tremulous. 'If all had been as true as thou, I should not look like this to-night. It is Russian gold that has conquered us. To-morrow I surrender.'

"This was such a shock to me, that I could not reply immediately. Not that I cared for the cause of Islam, to which he had been devoted; neither did I detest the Russians, or dream that we, with so many races all at feud with one another, could ever form a nation. But I felt as any true man would feel, a reverence for this dauntless hero (who had held his own so long against resistless odds) and sorrow at the close of a career so grand. [Pg 224]

"'I have fought a good fight. I have held the faith. I have not striven for my own glory, but in the cause of God most High. If it is His Holy will to forsake us, there is no more for man to do.'

"It was useless of course to argue with him. A man at all open to argument would not have done much against Russia. And when I met my few surviving friends among his gallant officers, they told me that his last defence was gone, his force reduced to four hundred men, and all his inaccessible retreats cut off. The enemy had blocked him in his last hole; for his own life he cared little, as he had proved a thousand times; but the few who still remained faithful to him, and were ready to die at his side, surely it would have been a mean requital to drive them like sheep into the butcher's yard. Therefore must he yield at last.

"We were talking dismally about all this, and saying that the mountains would never again be fit for a gentleman to live in, when I received another call to Shamyl's room, and had another interview with him. He had spent some time in prayer, and been rewarded with a holy vision from on high, so that his eyes were full of fire, and his countenance shone with happiness. One would scarcely believe that gloom and ferocity so often darkened that wondrous face.

"'I have received the word of the Lord, the holy voice of Allah, to whom be all praise and glory! Imar of the Kheusurs, it is not for thee to hear it, being but an outer infidel. It is commanded that thou shouldest depart from among the chosen warriors of heaven, that they who bear witness be of the true faith. If thou and thy men can escape, behold it is my duty to aid thee. And verily I rejoice, for thou hast been a faithful friend to us.'

"If he rejoiced, I could tell him of some one who rejoiced a hundred-fold, to escape a Russian jail and exile from his wife and children, even if his life were spared; of which there was no certainty, after the many atrocities committed by my very noble friend. Perhaps it was not magnanimous on my part to decline—if good luck should allow it—the glory of being shot or starved for the sake of the beloved country. But a lot of cross tangles came into that question. Was it my country in the first place? If it was, should I help it by quitting it so? And again, would that beloved land show equal love to me when gone, by attending to my belongings? No land I have heard of has ever done that. Therefore I showed my love of my country, by deciding to remain inside it. [Pg 225]

"'Commander of the Caucasus,' I said, knowing that he liked that appellation, though he never commanded half of it; 'a revelation such as thine is not to be disregarded. But how is it to be carried out? By many devices, and some fighting, we have made our way to thee. But the foe hath closed in at our heels. Our little band could never hope to pass the Russian lines again. Thrice hast thou come to life again, when the enemy proclaimed thee dead. But this is beyond even thy resources.'

"He smiled, with the pleasant smile of a man who feels himself underrated. 'Imar, it is not that I am beaten in the powers of the mind,' he said, 'but never was there mortal born, and filled with the breath of the Lord from birth, who could vanquish the love of gold in men. The son of Manoah could not do it; neither even our Great Prophet. I, who have gifts from Heaven also, suited to a weaker age, am beaten by that accursed Power. It is gold alone that hath vanquished Shamyl.'

"Believing that this upon the whole was true, I left him to his sad reflections. But presently he raised his head again, and looked at me with his old grim smile. He spread out his woolly arms, and spoke with a large mouth quivering.

"'Knowest thou that I could carry off every man of my four hundred left, and laugh at the Russian beleaguerers? This night I would do it, and let them smell for us in the morning. But to what

effect? To kill a Russian is no dinner. All the passes are closed against us, and all our villages occupied. The winter is nigh; we should be no more than hungry wolves upon the mountains. But thou art young, thou hast a home to go to, and art not of our religion. Take thy faithful fifty, and go this night. My son will show thee how. No more.'

"That was the last I saw of Shamyl, and this much I will say for him. He never sent any man to face a peril which he himself would shrink from, neither did he fight for his own ambition, or hide in his turban one copek. The Russians behaved very generously and even nobly to him; and in the quiet evening of his days he may have looked back with sorrow upon his barbarities against them. [Pg 226]

"Our little band had never shared in any of those atrocities. Therefore it would be better for us, if we could not escape capture, to fall into the hands of the foe as a separate detachment, than to surrender with the General. And this was my reason for attempting an escape, rather than any fair prospect of success in such a situation. But strange to say, by means of a tunnel in the cliff unknown to the enemy, and then some most perilous scaling of rocks—such as Englishmen delight in, but a native of the mountains prefers to do by deputy—and then some midnight rushes through blockaded passes and defiles, we contrived with the loss of two men only to regain our own abodes. But more than a month had thus been spent after we quitted Shamyl, in wandering, fighting, and lying close, going out of our way for sustenance, and being driven out of it by enemies and tempests. With 50,000 men to stop them, not a horse to help them, no supplies to start with, and no village-folk to provide them, nothing but the fruit the bears had left, to keep body and soul together—even veterans of Shamyl's training might have been proud to force passage thus.

"Alas that we ever achieved it! For my men's sake I am glad, of course; but for my own, I would that God had seen fit in His mercy to lay me dead by a Russian gun, or stretch me frozen on the mountain side!"

CHAPTER XXV [Pg 227]
IMAR'S TALE—CRIME

"It was late of an October afternoon, when my heart, which had been low with hunger, hardship, and long weariness, began to glow with hope and love, as I stood at the bottom of our Karthlos steep. There was no fusilier on guard; and the granite steps and groins were choked with snow; but I sent my followers to their homes, as was only fair to them, with orders to come to a sheep-and-goat supper, if their appetites remained, when they had embraced their families. Then I sounded the great horn, fogged with cob-webs, hanging above the lower gate, and with only my faithful milk-brother Stepan, and one other trooper who belonged to our old tower, breasted the rugged and crooked ascent.

"'How wild with delight will my Oria be!' I thought, as I laboured through the drifts, for there had been no opportunity of sending any letter. 'How lonely she must have been, sweet soul, and trembling with hope of a word from me!'

"But when we reached the upper gate, there was no one even there on guard. The brazen cannon once kept so bright were buried in winding sheets of snow; and even the terrace before the door, which it was a point of hospitality to keep clean-swept for travellers, was glittering with untrodden drift. We were all in such a ragged and savage state of body, that I had ordered my two men to go round to the entrance for the maidens, and meant to do the same myself, unless my darling met me. But now, in my fierce anxiety, I thrust the main doors open, and stood in the hall, which was cold and empty. No sound of my wife's step, no patter of little feet, no welcome, no answer, no gladness anywhere. [Pg 228]

"Doubt and terror kept me standing there; but I shouted, in hope of some great mistake—'Oria, my wife, my wife!' And then, upon the chance that she might be out—'Orry, my little son, my boy!'

"My call rang along the passages on either side, and up the stairs, and shook the plumes of mountain-grass, which she had placed in the vases; but neither wife nor child appeared; and in my famished and haggard state I fell upon a chair, and my heart began to beat, as if it would leap out of me. Then I saw a tall and stately lady, in a dress of velvet, and with a serpent of white fur wound beneath her jewelled bosom, coming down the gray stone staircase, with her eyes fixed on me, but not a word of speech.

"My voice failed me, as it does in a dream, when a sword is pointed at one's throat; but the lady came and stood before me, and a child was clinging to her dress. She looked at me with some surprise, and contempt for my ragged condition, but spoke as if she had never known a tear.

"'Imar, art thou not in haste to embrace thy twin sister Marva? The wrong thou hast done should not destroy all memory of the early days, when hers was thine, and thine was hers. I am prepared to forgive thee, Imar, in this time of tribulation.'

"'To forgive! I never harmed thee, Va;' I answered, using her childish name, as I always did in thoughts of her. 'But none of that now. Where is my wife? Hath any one dared to injure her?'

"Weak as I was, I leaped up from the chair, and it would have gone ill with Marva—for what is a sister compared to a wife?—if she had showed signs of flinching. But she gazed at me with a quiet disdain, as if I could not command myself.

"'I have not touched thy precious wife. I have not even set eyes on her. She hath done the injury to me, that is worse than theft of goods and cattle. Yet have I come hither, to do the duty she hath forsaken, and comfort her deserted husband from his mad adventures, while his treasure of [Pg 229] a wife, his Royal Princess Oria, heiress to a hundred thrones, is enjoying herself at the hot springs in the world of fashion and luxury, with my noble husband Rakhan.'

"What I said, or did, or thought, I know not—perhaps, nothing. The world was all in a whirl with me, and perhaps I fainted, in my worn-out state. It does not matter what I did. From the strongest man in the Caucasus, I was struck to the level of the weakest child. Even my twin sister, with a woman's petty spite inflamed by jealousy and bitter wrong, had some of the echoes of childhood roused, and thought of the time when she loved me.

"'It is the part of a fool,' she said, meaning it for large comfort, 'to be so wild about a woman, and the phantasy that they call love. When I was a child, I believed in it; and to what has it brought me? To cast away my life upon a man, who swore that I was all the world to him, and believed it perhaps, while I was new. But lo, in a year he was weary of me, because I made too much of him. Hath Princess Oria done that? Nay, or thou wouldst be weary of her. Tush, what careth she for her lord? And why should he take it to heart like this? There are plenty of women in the world, my brother; and the more their husbands make of them, the less will they return it. I am the one that should lament, not thou. For I have lost a man, but thou a woman only. My husband will come back to me when he is weary of thy Georgian doll; and I shall be forced to welcome him. But thou, such is the law, thou hast it at thy pleasure to be free.'

"'Talk not to me,' I said, for this was salt rubbed into my gashes; 'go and get me food, that I may recover a little of my strength. And then, *thou also shalt be free*.'

"Many a time have I wondered whether she knew what I meant by those last words. If she knew it, she said nothing, but marched away in her stately style, dragging by the hand her child, who had been staring at my face all the time, as if he had never seen a man before. Marva's own servants brought me food, and I knew not what it was, but took it, not for life so much as death—for death of Rakhan, the adulterer.

"Some sleep as well was needful to me, before I could accomplish that,—sleep to restore the [Pg 230] power of thought which seemed to have left me imbecile, as well as the vigour of my jaded body. No further would I enter my own house, but collected some rugs and bearskins—for we had not even a bourka left—and was about to throw myself on a couch, when Marva's little boy came dancing, half in fright and half in glee at his own self-importance, with a crumpled letter for me. That she should send it by such hands is enough to show how she was changed. I saw that it was from my enemy, and by the light of the one lamp they had brought me read the words that follow:—

> "'Beloved brother Imar,—As thou hast given me to wife a beggar, and a shrew to boot, it is but just that I should have a share of thine to comfort me. She is soft and young and fair; and I have taken such affection for her, and she for me, as the nature of women is, that I will not charge thee for her clothes and lodgings for at least a twelvemonth. Then if she hath a son, she shall remain another twelvemonth; for Marva's child, though strong and stout, is dumb from birth, and cannot be accepted therefore as Chief Prince of Ossets. Son of Dadian, this relieves thee of the cares that oppress thee most—the lust of money (which hath made thee play the rogue), the peril of subservience to thy wife, which overtaketh weak mankind, and the fear of having more children than thine avarice would make welcome. Thou hast robbed me of good substance; I relieve thee of light stuff. And even that, if thou carest to lay claim, thou shalt have again without any charge. Thy sister I leave to thy care meanwhile. She hath never had share of her father's goods; and even thy greed cannot deny her meal and milk, till her tongue grows mild. Her raiment is with her, and will last until I am ready for her again. Unless thou dost relax of the robbery thou hast rejoiced in for five years now, and givest her the garments of her mother, as well as the third part of her father's goods. Thy wife sends her duty to thee, and bids me say that she likes thee still, but loves the man who hath his arm around her, and doth not leave her to pine alone. We shall pass a month at [Pg 231] Patigorsk where the hot springs tend to warmth of love. And then if thou hast aught to say, we shall not shut thee out again, after doing this for thy benefit. Thy good brother Rakhan, Prince of the ancient Ossets.'"

CHAPTER XXVI [Pg 232]
IMAR'S TALE—REVENGE

"In the morning I arose with all my strength renewed, and the sense of wrong as cold as stone, and keen as steel throughout me. My brother Stepan was at my side, for he had come to watch me, knowing what I had endured, and fearing that it might outdo my sense of life. I smiled at him; and he saw that I would smile, until I made others weep. Not a word was said between us.

My wrongs were hotter in his heart than in my own; for I felt doubts about myself, and he had none. By the sacred custom of our tribe, which is a very ancient one, he was bound to hold my welfare even dearer than his own. When the eldest son of the Chief is born, and old enough to shape his lips, he is sent round to the nursing mothers of the tribe to suckle. Whatever babe is placed with him at one breast, he at the other, thenceforth their lives are more than twin—for twins may often fall out and fight, as did myself and Marva, but never those milk-brothers. Stepan's mother was the first to whom I paid my duty in that tender way, and Stepan's arms were twined in mine; and nothing could sever our hearts thenceforth from the allegiance of boy twins.

"As I would not enter the inner chambers, where I had been so happy, Stepan led me to the bath, and fetched another suit of travelling clothes, and everything I wanted, not forgetting a trusty sword and a pair of heavy pistols. Then we had breakfast, and set forth without a word to Marva. My children even I durst not ask for, fearing to hear that their mother had carried them into my dishonour.

"But luckily my good horse *Ardon*, who had borne me through many adventures, had been left at [Pg 233] home when I last set forth, and was neighing for me in the road below, for none but a mule or mountain-pony could clamber up the steep access. Our vehicles also we kept below, using hand-litters to the gates of Karthlos, for ladies or feeble travellers. And thus we three set forth on horseback, with provisions for three days—myself, and Stepan, and the other trooper who had returned with me from Guinib, a faithful and brave fellow who is with me now, named Usnik. Others would have joined us in the valley, but I would not have them. Enough of disgrace already.

"The roads, or tracks as you would call them, bad enough at any time, were now at many places blocked by heavy and windy snowfalls; for the season was come to the middle of October, and winter had set in early. Any one who sees not much of such things, and might be in a mood to consider them, would have found no small delight in the grandeur of the world around. But all that I could think of was the bitterness and baseness of the human race that breathed therein; and when we had passed the post-house (where I kept my troika for long journeys) and learned that the Princess had taken my carriage three days ago, when the weather was fair, and ordered the driver to proceed with all possible haste to Patigorsk, my last hope fell, and before me rose only the fury of revenge, and then the despair of a desert life.

"To that town, whose name was now poison to me, where dissolute Russians came to revel, and vile Circassians to sell their daughters, the journey from Karthlos in the best of weather was a matter of three days; and now with the road so cumbered, and the buffet of thick snowstorms often dashing in our faces, it seemed as if a week was likely still to find us struggling vainly. But about noontide of the second day, being on the northern fall of mountains, and within the boundaries of Ossetland, we came to a fork of the torrent channel which here served for a roadway, and we knew not whether to go right or left. As for any guidance the chance was small, one traveller in a winter week was enough for such a road as that. The harvesting of the tissue- [Pg 234] grass between the crags was over; the neatherd, the shepherd, and the goatherd had long driven home their charges. We knew not what to do, until one of us espied a little drift of smoke among the pine-trees on the ridge, and I sent the hardy Usnik on foot in that direction, while we rested the horses and awaited his return. By this time the wind had dropped a little, but a white vapour rolled in and out the crags and forest, as if a giant lay snorting among them, and the air felt like the breath of death. Stepan strode up and down, when he had tied the horses, slapping his bosom to keep himself warm; but I sat upon a rock, and cast my eyes upon the ground. I was thinking of what I had heard from an Englishman, who had been our guest at Karthlos. He had told me of the savage gaze of Prince Rakhan, at my then beloved wife, when he met her at our summer-feast of roses, when I had been called away from home.

"'Why, who comes here on this evil travelling day?' cried Stepan, turning suddenly. 'My lord will have company, I think; but not of the kind he delights in.'

"His dark look showed me that there was something to be met, and, leaping to my feet, I beheld a company of horsemen advancing towards us by the road upon our left. They broke through the drifts by twos and threes, which was all that the track in its widest parts admitted; but the one who rode first rode singly, and he was a big man, stern and swarthy. The slope they were descending showed us a score of men, well-armed, behind him.

"'Behold they are too many for us! Let us fly up the other road.' Stepan loosed the horses as he spoke. 'They will kill my lord, and then where is our revenge?'

"'What matters my life to me? Whoever they are, I will not fly. But why should they desire to kill us, Stepan? They look not like bandits; and they are not Russians.'

"'Nay, but they are worse than either. They are Ossets of the Karai Khokh, who go either side of the mountains. Their Chief is dead, and they are Rakhan's children now. Rakhan rides first in this handful.'

"'Rakhan shall have speech with me,' I spoke, with the heart of my spirit rising, as the Lord has [Pg 235] granted it to rise when He has beaten down the body. 'Rakhan is welcome! I will salute him.'

"The man had been out of my sight so long (not only because of my service with Shamyl, but through his own avoidance of me) that I did not know his face for certain till I met his eyes. Then I felt sure what my duty was; as God himself ordained it, when He made man to be true to woman, and woman true to man, and their children to spring of their own loins,—there was no choice left me but to slay this man, or be slain by him.

"Having this within my mind, and being calmer than I can be now in looking back upon it, I stood across the narrow track, and took the horse that Rakhan rode by the head, and gazed at Rakhan. He was amazed at first, and the colour of his great black eyes turned paler, and he fumbled for a pistol, without daring to take his gaze from mine. I would not speak, but I struck his hand up with a flip of mine. The lips that had sullied my dear wife's should have no sort of speech with mine. He tried to regard me humorously, as a man who thinks woman his slave blinks eye, when the question is about her; but the sparkle of his gaze died under mine, like an ember with the sun on it.

"'Get off thy horse, Prince Rakhan,' Stepan shouted, with his big arm laid across. 'The time hath come for man to man, instead of lying with another man's wife.'

"Rakhan made pretence to smile, and to leap from horseback lightly. 'What a stir to make about a light-of-love! Fool that knows not what a woman is! Stand back, my sons; this is not for you.'

"The Ossets took their orders gladly. Every savage man loves to see a fight. They leaped from their horses, and squatted in the snow, and filled their pipes, and kindled them.

"There was a clear place close at hand, with a ring of black cedars round it, and room inside for stepping to and fro, if life and death required it. I threw off my furs, and so did he; and we stood against one another.

"'Hold! Is this what you call fair duel? His sword is three inches longer than mine,' Rakhan [Pg 236] shouted, and I saw that it was just, although I had not dreamed of it. I threw away my blade, and took Stepan's,—a common short weapon, stout and broad.

"'One thing before I slay thee, Imar,' said Rakhan, with his bright Genoese on guard; and I saw that my sword was as nothing to his. 'Young man it was I who slew thy father; and now, by the same hand, thou shalt die.'

"Before the words were finished, he advanced upon me, taking the coward's advantage, as he hoped, of striking me when stricken with that shock. But I just drew back for a moment; and then, when he made sure that he had me, and the point of his weapon flashed into my breast, up flew his steel, like the sparks of a flint, and my short strong blade rushed through his heart. He gave me one glare, and he lay between my feet, with a gurgle of blood spouting out upon the snow.

"'Go home to the Devil that made thee,' I said, 'and commit adultery if thou canst, in hell!'

"Then Stepan drew the lids upon those toadstool eyes, and gazed at me with terror; for there are times when the God that made us takes us out of His own knowledge with the passions Himself has placed in us. Stepan thought that I would have slain him too, for doing this ministry to the dead; but he did not understand me. I was quiet as a lamb, and would not have resisted if any one had seized that bloody sword and driven it through my own heart too.

"'Is there any one among you men,' I asked, coming out into the road before them,—'any milk-brother of Prince Rakhan, who feels a desire to encounter me? I am weary now, and he will have fine chance. Or he can shoot at me, if he likes.' But they smoked their pipes, and hugged their knees together, and glanced at their horses, as if they loved their backs. How different it would have been with my own tribe!

"In this stir I was forgetting about Usnik and his message. 'The first half is finished. Now for the second!' I shouted to Stepan from *Ardon's* back, as I spurred him up the track by which the Ossets had descended. 'This must be the way to the Princess Oria.' For what else could I suppose [Pg 237] after meeting Rakhan there?

"But the Ossets, who were departing by the road which had brought us hither, said something to Stepan, and he fetched me back, and pointed to the track upon our right hand. At the same time Usnik returned from the fire in the wood, and the result of his inquiry agreed with what Rakhan's retainers had declared. Patigorsk could be reached by either road; but the one on the left was blocked for wheels, and would soon be closed to horses. If I wished to follow the course of the troika, the road on the right was the one to choose. Moreover, at about three hours' distance, it passed a summer-house, or hunting-lodge, belonging to the Osset Chief, but at this time of year unoccupied, where, if we could get no further, as appeared too likely already, we could shelter our horses for the night, and kindle fire for ourselves. Patigorsk was the place I wanted, and I took what seemed to be the best road to it.

"As we three set forth again, with our horses looking considerate,—for these are better endowed than we are with knowledge both of sky and ground,—a little toss of white softness met us, harbouring into our eyes and beards. The ears and forelocks of our horses pricked themselves with a glittering fringe; and then their manes were like a fountain, and the bow of the saddle became an arch. Presently we could see nothing at all, but left it to them to find the way, which they did without any complaint, not even making a merit of obedience. I let the bridle fall, and wished that I could only submit to God, as these good creatures do our will, and never even seek for thanks.

"We went on thus, with the snow-cloud thickening, and black rocks or a bough of pine jumping out of the white against us, when suddenly my horse pulled up, and his chin was striking something. He seemed to know it, and so did I. It was the black rail of my troika, in which we had enjoyed so many a summer jaunt, in the days when my Oria loved me. The carriage was standing

in the middle of the road, but there was no Oria in it, neither any other human being, nor even a horse in front of it. The cushions were gone: the contents were snow.

"'Her Highness must be close at hand,' cried Stepan, leaning over it, 'and yonder is Rakhan's pleasure-lodge. God grant that the wolves have not gotten her!' [Pg 238]

"'One wolf hath had her; but he will no more;' I answered, with my heart on fire through all the snow that froze my breast. 'Thou, and Usnik, hold the horses; I will see to this myself.'

"Then I stamped on the road, and shook the snow off, and saw that it was red with my own blood where the dead man's sword had touched me; and following the shelter of some trees, where the streaks of the storm went by me, I stood at the door of a house built of logs, with plaster slabbed between them. Thrice I knocked with the hilt of my sword, without drawing it from the scabbard, while I felt that the crisis of my life was come—the time that comes only once, thank God, in His creature's three score years and ten.

"'How soon thou art back! How glad I am! This is so kind and faithful of thee.' It was Oria's voice, and I ground my teeth. She expected her new love, Rakhan.

"Then she drew back the bolt, and stood before me, glittering in all her perfect beauty, but pale as a ghost at this surprise. 'My lord!' she gasped, for she was always timid; and I said, 'Yes, thy proper lord.'

"Her hand went to her heart, as if it were failing her in this amazement, and she spread the other arm to me; but I drew back and gazed at her. 'Never touch me more,' I said; and her soft eyes fell before the flash of mine.

"'What have I done to enrage thee, Imar? Thou hast never spoken to me like this? I have left thy roof. But how could I help it? I have done what women may not do. But it was only for thy sake—and oh, my lord is wounded!'

"'Yes, through thee. But what is that?' I stretched my scabbarded sword across, as she with a rush of tears approached. 'Thy paramour lies dead for this. And what art thou? Liar, adulteress, Zanska.'

"That last is the lowest word that can be used to any woman. She gazed at me for a moment with a look that will never leave me, and then in a low clear voice she said,—

"'It is enough. No woman of my race must hear that name from her lord, and live.' [Pg 239]

"She bowed her head, as if receiving the sentence of death submissively, and then walked slowly towards the inner room. At the door she turned, and waved her hand with a proud and calm farewell to me. I knew what it meant, and sprang towards her, but my scabbard struck the door-post, my feet were cased in ice and snow, and I fell on my back in the outer room, as a flash came from the inner.

"*At the door she turned with a proud and calm farewell to me.*"

"'Help, help! My lord will bleed to death! Lady Oria! Baboushka!' The voice was not Stepan's, but Kobaduk's; and I felt my boiling blood run cold.

'What dost thou here? What have I done?' I shouted, rising clumsily, for my wound had burst forth through the fall. 'Old man, thy mistress hath shot herself. What dost thou in Rakhan's service?'

"'Nought have I to do with Rakhan. Sûr Imar knows not what he saith. Baboushka and I have been with the lady, all the way from Karthlos, till I went to yon village for food for us.'

"I fell against the wall, and stared at him. Then Stepan stood also in the doorway, and his voice was like the moan of death.

"'It is true, Sûr Imar. The troika hath broken down at this gate. The Princess Oria hath never seen Rakhan; neither came she to see him.'

"I laughed, I shouted, as at some fine joke. 'I see, I see my sweet mistake. He came not from her; he came to seek her. Ah, but he met the wrong one; the wrong one it was, and yet the right.'

"What matter what I did or said? Henceforth in all my life, what matters? And when it is over, can I be saved? If so, it will be for Oria's sake. Thank God that she knew before she died, slain by the weapon which she had brought to protect her honour,—and Rakhan would have tasted cold lead, I trow, if his miscreant scheme had entrapped her,—by the mercy of God, she knew in that short hour the hellish fraud which slew her.

"The bullet had not touched her heart, and she passed away as a flower fades, drooping from some inward harm. My pistols were left in my holsters, but I loaded Oria's again, that I might not be slow to follow her, the moment she could not see it done. But she opened her eyes for the last time, when they seemed to have lost all sight of earth, and she tried to lay her hand on mine, with deep love looking back upon me through the cloud of Death. [Pg 240]

"'For Orry's sake, for babe's, for *mine*,' she whispered with her latest breath.

"I pledged my word; but how often was it almost beyond my power to keep! And one of my pledges was lost already; when I got home—to my desolate and wretched home—there was only my baby Dariel left, to link me to this altered world. Marva was gone back to her Osset tower, and it seemed better so; for I had brought her husband's lying letter, handed me by Kobaduk, and purporting to come from her. To wit, an urgent summons for my wife to fly to my bedside and nurse me through a dangerous wound at Patigorsk. This letter I meant to place on Marva's lap,

and ask if she were privy to it. I hope not, I pray not; for it would be almost too black-hearted, too treacherous for the worst woman's revenge. I hope she believed that Oria, whom she always hated, had left home through her own desire, to meet Rakhan in that festive town. For a woman has not strong faith always in the virtue of other women. To her own faith she will be true; but she doubts about theirs too shrewdly. Women of the common sort, I mean. My Oria was too sweet for that."

CHAPTER XXVII
IMAR'S TALE—EXILE

[Pg 241]

"You understand from what I said, that my only son was gone as well, the eldest born of our fervent love, to whom with a pleasant conceit I had given the name of 'Origen,'—born of Oria. The other was named from the place of her own birth, arriving unexpectedly, when we went in the troika to see the great post-house just built by the Russians on their grand new road, which cuts the great mountain-chain beneath the towering peak of Kazbek.

"Unnatural it may seem, and sluggish, and even an abject thing to those who have never lost their courage; but when I was carried up the steps of Karthlos, with the body of my wife on the other litter, and the carpenter ordered to remember my length in the boards he was cutting out for her,—for we are a thrifty race, holding fast the hide when we have lost the horns,—and I managed to say at my own threshold—'Let me see my babies'; behold there was only one brought to me, and she could not walk, nor say 'Dadda,' as babies of every language do.

"Nevertheless, without excuse, she took my liking as of right, lying so, and smiling at me with the faith of baby eyes, and the beginning of a clever nose, and pink lips parted like a berry, as if I had a breast for her.

"'Sweetie, it is thy father, not thy mother,' the woman who bore her said, 'and if he hath no breast for thee, his heart shall be all the nigher. Sûr Imar, this is all the Lord hath left thee for thy home and heart. Gather thy life up, for her sake.'

"I saw the likeness of her mother in her, and she came into my helpless arms, and laid her soft face in my beard, and played with the bandage round my wound. And they say that she spoke her first word thus; but women must not be trusted, when their imaginations move them. [Pg 242]

"As soon as I was able to think more clearly, I asked for my boy, Origen. They told me, as soon as they thought it safe, that on the second day after my departure, the very day of my fatal deeds, the poor little fellow, scarce three years old, was killed through his own high courage. My sister, who reigned in the Castle now, had given orders that he should be kept apart from her own child Hafer, and in the top rooms, where the nursery was with a separate staircase to it. Perhaps she desired that even in childhood there should be no acquaintance between the offspring of Oria and her own. But my little Orry was as strong and active as an average child of twice his years, and he could not endure to be cooped up thus. He contrived to get out of a loop-hole, and thence to the head of the outer staircase, and so upon the table-cliff behind the house, where he ran frolicking among the snow. This rock is perpendicular upon all its southern face, and the dumb child Hafer, seeing Orry's delight, ran out to share it from a lower door, while his mother was away upon some business, with only two trusty servants.

"Soon one of our women heard my boy shouting, and laughing at the other child who could not shout; and instead of tempting them in with a sweetmeat, the thoughtless girl ran after them. Of course they ran away, and before she could catch them, both vanished over the brink of the cliff, where a crest of snow obscured it; and verily she was afraid to go back to the house, and tell what she had done. She concealed herself behind the corner, and left others to find out the loss. But it was not very long unknown, for Marva was coming along the ravine upon her return to Karthlos, in the teleka which had brought her first, and which she kept at the posting-house. She saw the two children lying there after their fall of two hundred feet, her own child unhurt in a pile of snow, and my little darling on the rocky floor, with his poor head dashed to pieces.

"For her bitter turn against me, I forgave her, when I heard of her tenderness to my poor child. It is at such times that the greatness of a woman's nature shows itself. Happily she knew not as yet of my encounter with her husband, which must have been taking place just then, but forgetting all her grievances against me she took both little ones into her carriage, and drove at all speed to the posting-house. There she ordered a private room, and allowed no one to come near them, except her own Baboushka, while she sent to a village five miles off for the only doctor to be heard of. He came as soon as he could, but she had abandoned all hope by that time, as any but a woman must have done long since, and there was no one to receive him. For Marva had sent her own child home in dread of the effect upon his little brain, and at night she appeared at the gate of Karthlos, with the baby heir cold as a stone in her arms. His pretty red cross, and his green velvet dress, and above all the billows of his golden hair still flowing from the linen swathes of Death—when the women saw these they bewailed the child of Imar and of Oria, almost as if they had lost their own. Before my return, he was buried in our little churchyard of the glen; and his mother lies beside him. [Pg 243]

"I have told you a melancholy tale; but when the Lord has tried one child beyond His other

children, and almost beyond the strength vouchsafed to the best of them to bear it, something good shall be yet in store; and happiness may spring up again, though pleasure be but a memory. And the soul that has passed through rough affliction and the long cold shadow, is led more kindly into the paths of shelter, and content with quietude.

"I have done enough of harm, my friend. I have broken up two households; I have wasted half my tribe in war, and slain a good few Russians. These you may slay by the thousand, without checking the supply of them; you are only guilty of their blood, and the tears of those who loved them. But my own losses taught me what it is to make others desolate. And the rest of my life, please God, shall go to redeem the wrongs of wrath and war."

CHAPTER XXVIII
SANGUINE STILL

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When the Prince Imar's tale was told, and I thought of all he had been through, I could not find it in my heart, or even in good manners, to crave explanation of certain points which had not been made quite clear to me. For any such inquiry might appear to proceed from a hankering to hear more about his darling daughter. He had enjoyed, beyond our chance, a quantity of romantic love; and though he might not be hard on mine, remembering his own tender time, and allowing for like state in others, on the other hand that lesson might have taught him how to look at this, before it went too far to stop. And it is not in the gift of men, or at least of such as I am, to be certain how a brother man may take what seems so clear to self. But while I was buried in these thoughts, he spoke again quite cheerfully, and as if he had understood them all, but would not blame me for them.

"From what I have said, you will perceive that I have now two things to think of. The first, and dearest, is my own child, the daughter of the blameless wife, whom I lost through my own madness. The other is my duty towards the people who have been so true to me; who can be raised by one who knows them, to a better and more peaceful life, and the first condition of happiness the rule of Christianity. We have had the name for ages; but we have never known the meaning; of which you too must wait to learn till sorrow has washed the eyes of pride.

"That vile blood-feud, the curse of the mountains, the cause of a myriad murders, could not exist if we were more than mere ticket-porters of the cross. Therefore I am doing my best, without aid of your good societies, which would get into trouble with Russia at once, to print 10,000 copies of [Pg 245] the New Testament, in the Lesghian tongue. In a short time now my period of exile, fourteen years, will expire; and the rest of my life will be given up to the spread of good-will amongst us. Thus alone can I hope to have done some good to balance my evil deeds. But the difficulty of the thing is this. Not a man in a hundred of us can read, and perhaps not a woman of all the race. To meet this I am preparing primers, horn-books, alphabets, all the rudiments; and I shall set up a school in every village. It is too much for one short life, but at least I can begin it, and when once begun, it will go on, for the Russians will not stop me. The Russians have been very good to me, and they hate the rule of Islam, which is warlike and implacable. The Commander of the Caucasus is a man of great humanity. If he could have done as he liked, I should have received at once a free pardon; and as it is, my revenues have never been confiscated. He knows that I would be the last to attempt or join in another insurrection. There never was a chance, since time began, of a great Caucasian nation. We are split into about seventy tribes, and each loathes all the others. Young as I was, when I joined Shamyl, the folly of it was clear to me; and my father perished not by a foreign but a neighbour's hand, as usual. That may be my fate also, especially when I attempt reforms. But if so, I shall have done my best to redeem a life of violence."

As I looked at him, I could wonder no more that Dariel thought so little of all other men compared with him. Here was a man, one might well believe, who never knew what fear was, suspicion, falsehood, meanness, envy, or even the love of money. It had been the sense of justice only, and no greed or jealousy, which had led him to reject the demand of Rakhan, his father's murderer; whence all the disasters of his life ensued. And it seemed to me that if ever there had lived a man of honour and kind heart, who deserved the favour of Heaven and the reverence of his fellows, it was this man long oppressed by some mysterious curse of destiny.

My voice was trembling with something more than regard for my own interests, when I fetched him back from his great ideas, which were ever so far above my scope, to the matter which [Pg 246] concerned me most.

"Sûr Imar, I am quite small of mind, and would rather receive than do good things. And of all the blessings of the blessed world, you know the one that I value most." He smiled a little, for his face was always ready to yield to gentle turns.

"My friend, I know what your desire is. You want to rob me of my one delight. But I feel myself safe for a long while yet. I rely upon many obstacles. In the first place, will your own discretion and judgment bear you out in wishing, even if you had my consent, to connect yourself with a race of such dark fortunes and sad calamities, and crimes as well—for crimes they are? And perhaps there are more before us. I have told you my tale, to show you this. I believe not of course in any heathen conceptions—Até, Nemesis, Ananché, or what not? But who can deny that there is an inheritance of evil quite beyond our power to explain?"

"That may be so. But my one prayer is to be allowed to risk such penalty."

"You speak like an Englishman," he answered, looking at me very gravely; "other men equally brave would decline, through the force of superstition. But I have only begun my objections yet. For instance, what would your own friends have to say about this question? You have not mentioned it yet, I suppose, as nothing was likely to come of it. But without that, you must know pretty nearly how your friends would take it."

I answered in so many words that they left me to follow my own judgment now; that while things continued as they were, it would be wrong of me to forsake them, as they could never get on without me; but that a change for the better might be expected now with all confidence, for England was sick of that farce so ridiculously called "free-trade," and then the land might feed her sons again, instead of giving them nothing but a weedy grave.

"It is the standing joke of Europe," he replied; "there is nothing to compare with it in history. Your benevolence is of the highest order, because so purely unconscious. But it will require another generation to restore your sanity, unless you have a war that blocks your supplies; and [Pg 247] then how simple! That man who can fast for forty days may challenge the nation, when war is declared, and outlive them all, though they eat all they can get. But let me not interrupt you."

What is the loaf compared to love? The dealers and the middlemen have the chief pull of the former. Turn me into a Radical, if the labourer gets an ounce the more for his fourpence, than he often did of old, when his right hand stood him in good stead, and his Saturday night was certain. But a foreigner is allowed to show the common-sense, which an Englishman is hooted down for hinting.

"We shall never be as we were," I said, "we shall always be poor, Sûr Imar. And I am only a younger son. If it is your duty to repel me for that reason, I have nothing more to say."

"We will not part like this," he answered, feigning, as every man should do, to be blind when another man is moved; "there are many things in your way, my friend; but I will not make the worst of them. You have my respect and liking, which I do not give to every one. But in spite of all I have gone through or perhaps by reason of it, I have some romance about me still. You say that you love my daughter, and I thoroughly believe it. But does she love you?"

"I have no reason to think so yet. What right have I to hope for it? She is far above me in every way. But if you do not forbid me—why I could try—I could try my best, you know."

It was almost more than he could do to look with becoming gravity at the sadly waning phase of hope depicted on my countenance. He smiled, because he could not help it. And I smiled, to keep time with him.

"You are honest, at any rate," he said, "and that you have been from first to last. Of English modes of wooing, I know nothing; and they are not like ours. But this strikes me as an unusual thing; though perhaps all you ask is what you would call 'a fair field and no favour.' You shall have it, as far as I am concerned; though I will not pledge myself afterwards. But remember that in a month or so, we return to our native mountains."

This was awful news to me; and I seemed to have no fair chance left. Moreover I felt very deep [Pg 248] alarm concerning that Prince Hafer, Dariel's cousin, about whom I had heard so much, and of whom I had seen too much already. Was he the son of that terrible woman, Marva—Sûr Imar's sister—and that hateful man, and horrible plotter, Rakhan, Prince of the Ossets? I had longed to ask his Uncle Imar for more particulars, about him, and especially what he was doing here, but my courage had failed me on that point. Alas that he was no longer dumb; and if he had fallen 200 feet in his childhood, no wonder that he could jump 10 now; for Nature always strives towards a balance. And if he could not jump 10 feet in height (which perhaps is more than any man even of the mountains has achieved), it was plain enough that he would prove a very awkward customer, whenever my sense of the gross injustice inflicted by his presence should urge me to attempt by hand or foot his desirable removal. But one thing I might ask, as I thought, without showing any impertinence, or reviving painful memories.

"Your sister, the Princess Marva, sir? I hope she continued to show good-will, and afforded you some comfort before you were banished from Daghestan. She herself remains there, I suppose?"

"Not in Daghestan, but in Ossetia, which lies to the west of the great Russian road that marks the division of the Mountain-range. No, I cannot say that she showed any sisterly feeling towards me, except the true sorrow for my child of which I spoke; and perhaps no woman who witnessed a scene of such distress could have helped being touched. But when I heard of her tender behaviour, and remembered that old scruples were partly removed by the death of the offender, I sent her all that she could claim, and much more, of her inheritance in goods and chattels. But it is impossible for her, as long as she continues Rakhan's widow, to show much affection for me, though I may hope that she has it in her heart. For unhappily that most fiendish and accursed institution, which I hope to begin to extirpate, by the spread of the Gospel and of education—the blood-feud is set up between us. By marriage she is an Osset, and among the Ossets she holds [Pg 249] sway, like a petty Queen almost. Although she cannot have any vindictive feelings against me, after all her husband's behaviour to both of us, she must respect their customs, and not show herself too friendly. Therefore I take it as unusually kind and good on her part, that knowing how soon my time expires, she has sent her only son, Prince Hafer, to congratulate me, and to offer an ancient residence or Court-house of the Ossets, which stands very conveniently, for us to occupy

on our return, till Karthlos (which is in a sad condition) can be put into good repair. That I call a true extension of the olive-branch; and it is the more remarkable to one who knows as I do that this infernal code, for I can call it nothing else, is supposed to be doubly binding when it inures betwixt near relatives. Blessed are they that never heard of it. No flight of time, no acts of kindness, no natural affections avail against it."

"It is horrible indeed," I said, "and nothing can be more un-English. We are the most sensible race in the world, as well as the most straightforward. 'Have it out and be done with it,' is our rule; no steel, no lead, no poison; but a fight with what the Lord has made."

"You also have your brutality, I fear. But it is not my place to talk of that, after all the kindness I have received among you. And you are wide awake to all your own virtues, so that I need not insist upon them. Is there anything more you would ask me?"

"Nothing, Sûr Imar. And I may have seemed to trespass already on your patience. But I have a brother who is wonderfully clever in all mechanical and chemical affairs. May I bring him to see your type-stamping process, and other beautiful devices? They are out of my line altogether; but he would appreciate all of them. And more than that he is gifted, as you are, with the faculty of languages. He is the genius, and I the dunce. May he come? He has nothing to do with the Press, and will not even talk of what he sees."

"It will give me great pleasure to see such a man;" my host replied most courteously. "There is no secrecy about my work, beyond this—if your journals spoke of it—and they speak of even smaller matters—it might get into some Russian paper, and my little ideas would be quenched at once. [Pg 250] Russia does not encourage education, outside her own narrow grooves. But if I could only begin unforbidden, probably I might go on for years. You see how sanguine I am still."

"And your nephew will be of great service, no doubt, as his mother is so friendly. In his early days he had no power of speech I think you told me. But that comes sometimes rather late in life."

"I do not think that I spoke about it; because I had no knowledge. His father mentioned it in that fatal letter. But before I left the mountains I was told that an operation at Tiflis had relieved the child of the tongue-tie; and now he seems to be in many ways a fine specimen of the Caucasus. He cannot speak your language well, though he has picked up a little of it, and he is not very fond of your nation. But if your brother is a linguist, possibly he might get on with him. And I should like to try the experiment. When will you bring your brother? But tell him not the story of my life, as I have told it to you. It is a thing I never speak of, without a special reason."

"You may depend upon me, Sûr Imar; I know the favour you have done me, and the reason for it. There are few who would have gone through so much pain, for the sake of almost a stranger. But I know not when I can bring Harold. He is a most uncertain fellow. Nobody can ever tell where to find him. He says it is the beauty of his character. But I hope that I may come before he does; or it will be a bad look-out for me."

"You may come to see me every day, my friend, and I shall be pleased to see you. But if you meet Hafer, be on your guard. He has the rough manners of the mountains still, and has not seen the world, as I have."

Thus I was obliged to leave it. Not at all to my liking; yet with no right to complain of any one. This Lesghian Chief had laid me under a very great obligation, by overcoming for my sake his natural reluctance to recall a past so full of pain, and in such bitter contrast with the present conditions of his life. As a nation we make little of the debt which a foreigner incurs to the hospitality of England. The guest, moreover, is too graceful ever to inflict on us the pain of seeing [Pg 251] him overwhelmed with gratitude. But this Lesghian Chief had formed what was perhaps a romantic view of the greatness of our policy, and a liking for us which is, I fear, by no means universal. This I hoped to work with diligence for my own advantage; as our Government used to do, as long as it still subsisted.

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CHAPTER XXIX
LARGE AND LONG VIEWS

Sûr Imar had spoken of happiness as resembling a mountain-eagle in the brevity of its visits, and the speed of its flight away from us, rather than the gentle dove whose nest is always near our roof, while the cooing of her soft content pervades the summer evening. And probably he was right enough as regards his own race and country, where all is rugged, strong, and fierce, and a pious life too often means pure impotence for robbery.

But if he only could have seen my father of a sunny morning, sitting in his little room, with the red cloth on the table, and the drawers of his cabinet pulled out, and his choicest coins laid gingerly with their faces tilted towards the light, and a chamois leather, and a box of powder, and a tiny bottle of acid to be used most sparingly—that Chief of great stature, and still greater mind, would have perceived that bliss may come with the downy plume of the dove, as well as the swoop of the eagle's pinion. For here was an ancient gentleman, who had never known flash and clash of steel, or the rush of hot blood upon frozen snow; but had only been damaged by the rapid fall of grain, and no longer had the spirit to cry out at that; yet in the evening of his days found

pleasure in the coinage of the past, when the currency failed so painfully. Often he shouted for his wife or daughter, to share some great discovery, some new interpretation of his magnifying glass, or the lens of imagination, over some battered disc, resembling the plate which our blacksmith clamps red-hot on the nose of a vainly squealing porker.

Then was Sir Harold's pleasure at the acme and the apex. What delight is perfect without something to find fault with? And the fonder one is of the poor short-comer, the sweeter it becomes to correct the loose idea. [Pg 253]

"This indeed is frightful, my dear Grace! Will you never know an old L from a T? And how often must I tell you, that they run the other way? There's a tangle of your hair coming in the light again! If you want to be of any use, which you never can be, do go and cut off at least three quarters of it. One would think that girls were made of nothing else but hair. Show me any mops and frizzles, on a feminine obverse. Look at this fascia! I'll get you one to-morrow. You fetch it round tightly, and then you cut off all the rest. Unless you like to bunch it, as a jockey does a horse, I shall speak to your mother about it. Nothing shall be done that you dislike. But you see for yourself how becoming it is?"

"Lovely, oh, lovely! I am wild about it, father. But the lady has no nose. Is mine to come off too?"

"She has had a nose, and as good a one as yours. It is the mere accident of attrition. But here comes George! What can George want now? He knows that I never should be interrupted, with all these drawers open. If any rival Numismatist—I am sorry to say there is no honesty among them. Even the people at the British Museum, when I lent them for comparison, kept back three most valuable—the gems, the gems of my whole collection!"

"Well, sir, I don't blame them. It was for the instruction of the nation." I knew that my father was even more proud than indignant at this fact—if fact it was, and he had long ago made it one, by telling it at least twice a-day. "But I don't want to disturb you, sir, and I don't often do it. Only there are two things that I am bound to consult you about immediately, if you can spare me a few minutes, without having to put more important work aside."

My father sighed; for he hated business, as he had good cause to do, while Grace walked away with a lofty air, like a lady denied the franchise. Finding myself rather nervous, I began in a craven manner with other people's business.

"Bandilow wants to know, sir, whether he may break up half-moon meadow, and plant it with apple- and pear-trees. He says it is the only chance of his being able to pay his rent, next Lady day." [Pg 254]

"But, my dear George," Sir Harold replied, while he spread a silk handkerchief over his coins, lest the atmosphere of business should corrode them, "does the silly fellow expect to realise a fruit-crop betwixt this and then?"

"Very likely he does, for he has found an apple on a tree he planted not more than two years ago; and the Society for the Promotion of British Fructiculture has sent him a coloured print of apples bigger than turnips and brighter than prize carnations. And you know what Lord Melladew did for him; they would not advance him any money,—in fact, he had to subscribe to them,—but for a 'nominal price' they supplied him with a list of fifteen hundred kinds——"

"Oh, I don't want to hear any more about that! I should have some faith in it, if they put their own money into it, instead of being paid for persuading other people to invest in it. However, it is no concern of mine."

"Excuse me, sir, but I think it is. In a sort of sideway, at any rate. You would not like an old tenant, whose family has held under ours for at least three centuries, to be robbed by private folly of the little the public mania has left him. I know the climate of Surrey pretty well, and there are very few better in England. Last May, the mercury stood below freezing point at six in the morning, no less than eight times; and twice it was eight degrees below. Have we any fruit-bloom that can laugh at that? You would not like an elderly man like Bandilow, with a large family dependent upon him, to be ruined, would you now? And he is already in arrears of rent?"

"Certainly I should grieve at that, and throw him off every farthing, little as we can afford it. But my dear boy, you make the worst of things, and you are sadly obstinate; which, perhaps, is a family failing. Men of tenfold your knowledge have proved that the only remedy, and a very easy one, offered by Providence itself, for the present starvation of agriculture, is to take to horticulture. If wheat will not pay at 30s. per quarter, fall back upon apples at a pound a bushel. And then there is jam, a glorious scheme." [Pg 255]

I saw that all reason was in vain. Lord Melladew had got hold of my good father, and tip-top prices upon West-end counters had been quoted for orchard average. It was useless to say another word. But who ever ceased on that account?

"If the wheat crop is precarious, I should like to know what the fruit crop is. Two years in three give a fair crop of grain; scarcely one in three of fruit. If we turned every field into a broom of trees, would even the present low prices hold, in the years when there was anything on them? The fruit might roll on the ground and rot, whenever the season was plentiful. Englishmen cannot live on apples; and jam is only fit for children. But do as you like, sir. Do as you like."

"George, I am guided too much sometimes by the way in which you look at things. You have

formed very strong opinions, and there may be something in them. Nothing is more wonderful to me than the difference in character betwixt you and Harold. Harold looks at a thing all round, and is never quite sure about it. But you make up your mind without looking at all, and I defy anybody to move you."

"I have made up my mind, sir, about another matter, which I came to put before you. And though I am not to be moved from it, I do hope that you will take my view. But is Bandilow to have his way?"

"Certainly," my father answered with a pleasant smile, for he had formed the most erroneous opinions about me; "is no one to have his way, but my son George? It is only fair to let a tenant crop his land as he thinks best, unless he injures it permanently; and especially such a man as Bandilow, who has stuck to us, when all the others dropped off. And there is another reason. Many of the newspapers, loving, as some of them seem to do, to stir up ill-will among Englishmen, keep on declaring that the landlords form the chief obstacle to the improvement of land. The thing is absurd. You might just as well say that if you borrow a hundred pounds of me, I [Pg 256] must long for your bankruptcy, lest you should repay me. What landlord would not be delighted if his tenant could make £50 an acre, as these people say? I only wish this fruit-craze could last."

"Father, you are right. What a blessing it would be, if they could only fetch it round! Let us hope for the best, as they do. And now for the other question, all about myself; and I hope you will take the same liberal views. But it is a long story. Have your easy chair, and your little glass of mead that stops the cough. Well, Harold did some good in recommending that. You never get the cough as you used to have it."

"Harold is a very clever fellow," my father said, after a sip or two; "if that boy would only stick to something—or if I could make a blend of you two—well, well, we can't have everything."

"That is a righteous law for us; but it ought not to apply to you, sir, whose wishes are so moderate. For instance, I want a thing that I shall never get. May I call Mother in, to hear what it is?"

In this there was wisdom, gracious wisdom, such as we are inspired with sometimes, however foolish we may generally be. For whatever opinion my father might form, he would have my mother looking at him, and then she would be sure to give a glance at me, and the experience of years would be belied unless she gave utterance to a conclusion not directly counter, but sub-contrary, hypenantious—if such a word is pardonable—to the view which her husband had ventured to form without waiting for her suggestion. For they had grown so much alike, that both of them doubted about the joint-stock wisdom; as we all despise home-produce.

Seeing myself in the right way thus, while indulging in all due deference, I did my very best to let them know that I had striven after things above me. My father was ready to concede that point; but my mother could not conceive it; and was eager to branch out into a long discourse, about all the great people akin to us in body, but in mind not as yet awake to it. My father joined me in abbreviating that—though at such a time it was hard measure—but he heard the old Grandfather [Pg 257] Clock strike one; and if mother got wound up on that chain, the hour-hand might go round the dial before he got any luncheon! Therefore he spoke decisively.

"What we have heard from George is not altogether what I expected. Everybody knows, though he seems to imagine that nobody ever dreamed of it, that he had found some attraction among those very strange people that live in the dell. Who they are, or what they do there, it has never concerned me to inquire. When strangers come into a neighbourhood, and desire to keep themselves to themselves, no English gentleman would ever think of obtruding himself upon them. They may be very estimable, and even of very high rank in a foreign way, as George supposes. But when they pack themselves up inside a wall, without even a bell, or if they have one with only fierce dogs to answer it, all we can do is to leave them to the Police, or the Government, or the Newspapers. The right of asylum is sacred in England. Of Continental intrigues we know nothing, and we refuse to be mixed up with them. Even with a Radical Government in power—my dear, you quite agree with me?"

"In every word that you have said, my dear. But when our George, without asking his mother, goes out of his way to make strange acquaintance, and people who pretend to look down upon us ——"

"You have no right to say that, my dear. We must not think that they are so absurd. They have the highest opinion of this Country, as of course they are bound to have, except as to our one great mistake. And there, if I understand George aright, Prince—what's his name, Mari? It sounds like New Zealand, but at any rate his views do him very high credit. He spoke of Free Trade with very fine contempt; I think you told me so, George?"

"Sir, he could not find any word strong enough to describe our folly. And the testimony of an outsider—but you never use such language, sir."

"No, I leave that to younger people, who may live to see the worst of it. But this gentleman must have great perception, as well as much integrity. You think that he draws a large revenue, and [Pg 258] this young lady is his only child."

"My dear, you forget how they live out there," said my mother, who was above lucre, and my father as well too superior to show it. "Who can tell how many wives they have? And their laws

not too respectable, I am half afraid, upon such points."

"I was very well up in Geography once," my father replied with a smile at her, "I could construe some of Prometheus vinctus, and I have a coin, with the rock and the chain and the vulture, but the Titan has been eaten to nothing by time. It is extremely valuable; yet the British Museum failed to steal it. That Prince comes from the very same spot. It may have been struck by his ancestors. George says that they come in a direct line from Noah's own great-grandson."

"In that case, indeed, who are we to talk of our own children? Who, indeed, are we?" My mother glanced upward, as if to watch the whole of creation sliding. "Although to a reasonable mind the Heptarchy is as much as one requires to be sure of. But I should like to see that girl, George."

"Stop," said my father, "I am not a sceptic; Mama, you must not set a bad example. I had my little doubts about the Ark, I must confess, until so many people attacked it, among them a Bishop of our Church, who continued to enjoy his income. If he was in earnest, he scarcely could be honest, and in that case, who would listen to him? And if the Ark rested upon Ararat, that would be the neighbourhood to know all about it. I will not contradict Prince Maori."

"But it is the girl I care about;" my mother made a great point of the tempers of young women. "George is so peaceable, and he never argues. I cannot risk his happiness with a wife who may be descended from—from even the females mentioned in the Bible."

"My dear mother, what a hurry you are in. The young lady does not care a fig about me yet. And I am very much afraid that she never, never will. Only I thought that I had better let you know."

"This sort of thing has never happened to you before, and that is very greatly to your credit, [Pg 259]
George." My father looked stealthily at my mother, lest her conscience should involve her in some misconstruction here. "But we must talk it over first, your mother and myself. We could have no idea that such a thing was happening on our property, I mean—of course, what used to be ours. It seems to be departing from the proper way so much, and the practice of the family. I am sure there are plenty of nice girls round here."

"I am not so sure of that," said my mother, rather quickly, and giving me a signal to leave the rest to her; "English girls are not at all as they were in my time. They have dropped all their modest looks and delicacy. They talk slang, and they speak without being introduced, and they call one another Jack and Jemmy, and they let young men give them pairs of gloves, and they come into a room with both arms swinging; and as for their dresses, and the way they do their hair——"

"Your opinion upon all these points, dear mother, has influenced me beyond all doubt, even more than I was aware of. But you must remember that Dariel is also of the most ancient English lineage, gone by quite as much as you could wish—Crusaders, probably our Richard the first, and some of his devoted paladins. What can be nobler than to carry on a peaceful crusade of education, literature, Christianity——"

"They could never do that without plenty of money," said my father, a man as free from mercenary views as ever tried to raise a shilling. "And you spoke of some emerald mines, I think. But we must be careful, very careful, and insist upon verifying everything, quite independently of their reports. Let me see! I have met the Russian ambassador—but no, there have been two more since then. However I am not without influence altogether."

He waved his hand for me to go, and I slipped off, after a good kiss from my mother, who always gave way to the sentimental vein, when my father fell into the financial. And sure enough our finances were of a pensive character just now. My duty was clearly to allow my dear parents plenty of time to discuss me from my birth up to the present moment; and finding myself just a little in the fidgets and unfit for steady work, off I set through the park to our old house, to [Pg 260]
inquire whether Stoneman happened to be at home. For he had taken his holiday, and was come back; and so far as one could judge him by his looks and walk, he found himself better suited in his native land than elsewhere.

CHAPTER XXX [Pg 261]
IN THE QUIET PLACES

"Gone to the City, sir," said the man, who opened the door which I knew so well, and it had a few reasons for remembering my childhood, impressed or indented upon its lower panels; "but he wanted to see you particular, Master George; and he will be home by two o'clock. I was to send down, and ask you to step this way by two o'clock, if you could any way spare the time, for he thinks to have a bit of a treat for you."

How small are our natures! I was pleased with Biddles for making a "he" of his master; when at every breath it would have been "Sir Harold," while we could afford his livery. A fine old Englishman was this, full of pure feeling, and in heart disdainful of gold in comparison with rank; though compelled by his stomach to coerce the higher organ. "How is your little Bob, Biddles?" I asked; and it was better than half-a-crown to him.

Before I had time to pick more than fifty holes in the stockbroker's taste as compared with our own, in came the man himself, full of high spirits, and alive with that vigour which the sparkling

metal gives. Any man must be a cur who can snarl at a good friend, for enjoying the marrow-bone, which has dropped betwixt his paws. Jackson Stoneman was not without his faults; but it would have been mean to make them greater than they were, just because he was able to pay for them.

"Just the man I wanted—the very man," he said, as if I was worth all the Stock Exchange; "what luck I have had all day! And you are come to crown it. Here, you shall have my new Dougall, and I shall shoot with my old Lancaster."

"What a deuce of a hurry you are in!" I answered, for his mind could give me ten yards from scratch at any time. "I am not come here to shoot. I have no time for such trifles. I want to have a serious talk with you." [Pg 262]

"Who do you think looked at me over the palings?" he spoke as if he had quaffed a fine Magnum of Champagne, although he was a man of very great discretion. "Over the palings, my boy; and after putting me down so the other day! I assure you it has quite set me up again; though I am afraid it was only an accident."

"You may be quite certain of that," I replied, for he wanted a little quenching; "she went to get the last of the globe-artichokes, and of course when she heard a horse she looked up. Old Sally looks up whenever any one goes by."

"I tell you there was no looking up about it. Globe-artichokes are as high as any woman's head. You are not going to put me down about that. And she kissed her hand to me. What do you think of that?"

"If you took off your hat, she could do no less to a kind friend of her mother. My affairs in that line are not flourishing. But I don't want another fellow to be made a fool of, Jackson. Can't you try to show a little common-sense?"

"Grapes sour, George? Well, I am sorry. But I fear you have not invested well, my son. What are those foreign girls? Do you think I would ever look at them, with a ghost of a chance of a thorough English maiden? When it comes to an English girl, you know where you are, and no mistake."

"All this is below contempt," I answered, for he had taken altogether the wrong tone with me. "Let me hear no more of such stuff; we are not boys. What is it you want me to shoot?"

"Well, that is a gracious way of putting it, when I offer you a chance anybody else would jump at. Guy Fawkes' day not come, and behold three woodcocks marked down in the Pray-copse!"

"I don't believe a word of it. They never come here yet. The earliest I ever shot was on the fifteenth. But if you can swallow it, I don't mind going with you."

"Well said. And back to dine with me at six o'clock. No scruple about certificate in this, though to my mind the woodcock is the best of British game. We'll call for the spaniels at Ponder's cottage. Best foot foremost!" [Pg 263]

It was a bright autumnal afternoon, after a touch of white frost, and against the sky every here and there some bronzy leaf would swing and glisten like the pendulum of a clock at winding time. But most of the foliage now had finished its career of flaunt and flutter, and was lying at our feet in soft brown strewage, or pricking its last crispage up, where a blade of grass supported it. While at every winding of the meadow path (which followed the hedge like a selvage), how pleasant it was to see afar the wavering sweeps of gentle hill, and plaits of rich embosomed valley, with copse, and turnip-field, and furzy common patched with shadow. It made me bless the Lord at heart for casting my lines in a quiet land, where a man beholds no craggy menace, black rush of blind tempests, bottomless gulfs, unfathomed forests, and peaks that would freeze him into stone. For the people that live there must be in a wild condition always; to tremble at Nature's fury, or to shudder at her majesty, or look around on all that wraps them up, with desolate indifference.

I glanced at Stoneman walking briskly with his gun upon his shoulder, and death to at least a dozen woodcocks in the keen flash of his eyes; and I said to myself—"Please God, I will take a game-certificate, next August; there is nothing like a good day's shooting to save one from blood-thirstiness."

"Jackson, my boy!" I said, with the refrain of a fine old Yankee song arising in my memory, "you have been over half the world; but have you ever been in the Caucasus?"

"No, and don't want;" he answered shortly, "get robbed enough in London village. But they strip you naked there, I hear, and send you down a waterfall. Shamyl did it to some young chap, who might have set up against him."

"That is a fiction of his enemies. The Avar Chief was dry in his manner to strangers; and who can wonder at it? But he never harmed one of his own race. I wish we had a few such patriots."

"Very well. You start the band. You are qualifying well, with all those Egyptian fellows in the valley. But George, you are much too good for that. There are pretty girls in every caravan; but we don't jump over the broom-stick with them." [Pg 264]

Dariel and a broom-stick! Indignation may flash as fast in the meadows as in the mountains. "You

idiot! You talk like an utter cad," I cried; and he being quick of temper too, stood his gun against a tree, and looked at me. I set my gun by the side of his. "Let us have it out," was all I said.

But a gleam of reason came across him. He might have polished me off, perhaps, though he would not have found it very easy, for I was the heavier of the two, and in tidy rural condition. "What rot this is!" he said, lowering his hands. "If you like to have a good smack at me, you can. But I won't hit a fellow with Grace's eyes." I knew that he had meant business, and that there was no white feather in his nature.

He begged my pardon, and we shook hands; and I felt just a little ashamed of myself, although when I think of what he said, I see no misbehaviour on my part.

Without another word, we dropped the question, and went on to look after the woodcocks. We crossed the long "pray," with the keeper and three spaniels coming after us, and whether it was that Jackson's hand shook after menacing "the eyes of Grace," or that mine was extra steady through that firm assertion of Dariel, it came to pass that I knocked over both of the birds that we put up, when they were sailing away from Jackson's gun. The other longbill saved his bacon, by keeping it out of human eyes. These lucky shots, and the pleasant walk, and very fine behaviour of the dogs—who were children of the animals I had loved and chastened, in the better days both for them and me—put me into so noble a frame of mind, that after an excellent dinner and a glass or two of Port wine with the violet bouquet in it, I up and told Stoneman my own love-story; for I knew that the whole of it must come out now.

He, being pretty much in the same condition, though without anything like my excuse for it, listened as if he had never heard anything half so surprising and engrossing, and inspiriting. In [Pg 265] fact, he seemed to take the whole of it as applicable to his own case, though it was beyond my power to perceive even the faintest analogy. His was an ordinary love-affair with nothing remarkable about it, unless it were that money, which is the usual obstacle by its absence, was the obstacle here by its presence. But in my case money was the last thing thought of. Sûr Imar had never mentioned it; and as for me, I only hoped that Dariel might never own a shilling, because then she would appreciate my few half-crowns. And I still possessed her ruby cross, and meant to keep it, until it should be mine by legal right. Ah, who can spy any chance of that through all the gloom impending?

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CHAPTER XXXI
PIT-A-PAT

"She didn't say that she could never care about me," replied the stockbroker, when I asked him what he thought. "If she had, you wouldn't see me here now. I should have been off to the real Rialto; for I've got a first-rate fellow in the Avenue now."

"Jackson, my inquiry was about my own affair. I want to know what you think of my chance there." I looked at him severely, for this inattention was too bad.

"Well, and I gave you a parallel. We are almost in the same boat, I should say; though yours is a sort of savage canoe, full of Oriental fish-tails, no doubt, and liable to Vendetta, and many other frightful nuisances. To your young mind all that too probably increases the attraction. But to my mature views, there's romance enough and to spare, in a quiet English maiden,—sweet, gentle, affectionate, firm-principled, and not too sure of her own mind. Are they to be despised, because you can speak a civil word to them, without having a bullet through you? George, there is more romance really, where you know how to behave, than where you don't."

"Can't see it," I answered, "can't see it at all. Is it poetry to take up your spoon for pea-soup?"

"Poetry be hanged!" cried Jackson. And as it was only my brother who went in for it, when I never could make a blessed rhyme, why should I stand up for the Muses, who had never deigned a glance at me? Nevertheless, I was slightly shocked, for every man is, or ought to try to be, a little above the common mark, when he thinks he loves something even better than himself. And to be above the common mark is getting on for poetry.

"You go your own way, and leave me to go mine." I spoke with that elbow-lift of the mind which [Pg 267] resembles what coachmen used to do to one another, when they met on the highroad, and did not want to raise the whip. "You will see, Jackson, if you live long enough, that I shall have a better time than you will." For I knew that Grace needed a very light hand; though girls had not got their mouths just yet, half as much as they have now.

"The Lord only grant me the chance of it!" he replied, with the happy rashness of young men. It was not for me to speak against my sister; but I knew all her little ins and outs, and I daresay she thought that she knew mine.

"Let me come down to your happy valley," he continued, with that contempt of my ideas, which I always leave Time to redress, and have seldom found him fail to do it. "I want to see this perfect wonder. Why, Shakespeare himself can have never created any heroine to compare with her. It is out of possibility, my dear George. Bless my heart—Imogen, Portia, Miranda, Rosalind, Juliet, Ophelia—no, she was weak—Sylvia, Helena, half a dozen others rolled into one, down in that little

hole! I want to see her, that I may learn to despise the best English girl ever born; or try to pretend to do it, if she won't have me. Do you suppose I was born yesterday?"

When a man carries on like this, you may say what you like—though you are Solomon's Mahatma—without getting a spark of wisdom into him. I longed for Tom Erricker, who could always float on the top of a flood, because he was so light; and in a weak sort of way I had wanted him often, not to unload my mind upon him—for you might as well trust your watch to a floating bladder—but to see him look buoyant, when my mouth was full of brine. But Tom had been summoned by his electroplating parent to fall in love with a very nice young lady, whose father made dish-covers fluted in the rough. Those people had some shooting, and Tom thought that he could shoot. At any rate, it was better for him than the Bar.

"You shall not come near my happy valley,"—it would never have done for me to encourage this,—"remember what you said of the hero who lives there. You took him for a forger, or a ticket-of-leave man."

"Well, I don't care a fig what he is, so long as he gives you satisfaction. But about Grace—I tell you I won't wait. If she kissed her hand to me, is not that enough to show—I shall be there to-morrow; but you must not let her know." [Pg 268]

"Not to-morrow, Jackson. Why, it is her butter-day. And if she could ever cut up rough, I believe it would be the butter, at this time of year."

"Not a bit of it. Nothing would ever make her peppery. And she is sure to be at home, and up in your part of the premises. That is where she looks the most enthralling. But don't let her know, for the world, that I am coming."

It was fair that he should have his own way at last, after giving Grace a luxury of time to think about him, since his offer was made about ten days ago, when she put all the blame of her shilly-shally upon me! See how differently I did everything.

The following morning I gave her a hint—for my duty was to her first, and long afterwards to Jackson—that peradventure somebody in the course of the morning might turn up, to have a look at me in the harness-room; but she took the greatest pains not to understand me, and even put a particularly simple jacket on, of buff-coloured linen smocked with blue, and a delicate suggestion of retiring fronds—almost like a landscape of forget-me-not and lady-fern. But the shade of it was nothing in comparison with the shape, inasmuch as the latter was our Gracie's own; and everybody knows what that means. Only she herself had not the least idea about any part of it. All she cared for was to get on with her work; so she kept all her body and arms in motion, as if she were intent upon throwing shadows.

When the butter was coming forth, crowned with glory,—which the cleverest dairymaid may doubt about, as she has to do sometimes with a little pat or two inside her,—and the long slab of enamelled stuff (for we could not afford white marble) was tilted so that every golden patin could crisp itself without encroachment, and Grace, like a miser telling his moidores, was entering the upshot upon a white slate hanging by a scarlet ribbon, and pondering in her heart with the scales behind her, whether she had tried to cheat any one more than the good of the family demanded, [Pg 269] suddenly a riding-glove was waved inside the door, and its fingers went about like bananas on a string, because there was no flesh inside them.

"Can't have you now, Joe," Miss Grace cried, with a presence of mind that could only be surpassed by the colour presented on her cheeks; "come again in half an hour. I am calculating now." As if old Joe Croaker had ever even seen a glove!

"I won't say a word, if I may come in. Oh, do let me come in and be calculated too. If I may only sit upon a pan upside down, or anyhow, quite out of sight in the corner. Oh, what a sweet place! I could live upon the smell of it. But I won't even go near the lace-edging of a pat."

"Mr. Stoneman! Is it possible? This is one of my brother's proceedings. That I cannot even finish a few pounds of butter! George has done many inconsiderate things—but this seems beyond even his temerity!"

"Miss Cranleigh, I give you my word of honour that I have not even seen him for the day. In fact I came to look for him, to say 'Good-bye,' before I start for Venice. One never knows when one may come back again, you see."

"Of course not. There are so many lovely things out there. The only surprising thing to me is, that any Englishman who can afford to travel spends so much of his time in this commonplace country."

"But you don't mean that! I do hope, Miss Cranleigh, that you have not so low an opinion of your own dear countrymen. And the dearer ones still, your own countrywomen! Foreign girls are all very well in their way. But who with a pair of eyes in his head——"

"You have seen more of them than I have, Mr. Stoneman. But everybody seems to say that they are most delightful. And even my poor brother George,—but I forgot,—forgive me, I am not supposed to know anything of that."

"But I do. I know everything about it," that treacherous stockbroker whispered: can any man be loyal to his best friend, when in love? "What a lucky chance that you should speak of that!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Stoneman; but I never spoke of anything. Only when a mystery is dwelling in one's mind, about one of those who naturally are the dearest to one, and when one's parents do not condescend—you see what I mean; though I really mean nothing." [Pg 270]

"Precisely. And with such swift intelligence as yours! It is not for me to hint at my own weak ideas—such a thing as that I never do. And when no one in the family cares a fig for my opinion ——"

"It is not at all fair of you to say that." Grace cast down her eyes, and then turned away in the most bewitching manner. The stockbroker jumped up from his brown milk-pan; but she looked at him, and he sat down again.

"Be careful, Mr. Stoneman, for I am afraid it has a crack. Sally says they cannot make them, as they used to do! But as I was saying, both my father and my mother are thoroughly aware of all your good-will. And there is not a tenant on the property, I am sure——"

"How can I think about the blessed tenants? Though of course I try to do my duty to them. But oh, do give me a little taste of butter after that."

"Am I a rogue, that I should dare do such a thing? Twenty-two pounds there, and not a pennyweight to spare. And old Mrs. Ramshorn made a fuss last time. After a cigar, how can you taste? Your taste must be very far from perfect."

"My taste is absolute perfection; and that is why—what I mean is, why I enjoy this most exquisite result. But a coward is ever so much worse than a rogue; and to shrink from the test is cowardly. I could never have believed it of Miss Cranleigh."

"Very well. But you shall pay for what you eat. I will take it from one of your own pats, that are going to the Hall in half an hour. But you must not blame me if it is not first-rate. Slemmick, the cleverest man we have, says that there is a leaf coming down now, which gets between the blades of grass, and it is useless for the cows to blow at it, for it makes a point of getting into their very finest butter. George calls it nonsense. But what right has he, when Slemmick was brought up so much more out of doors?"

"Slemmick is sure to know most about it. A man who has never heard the names of things, always knows most about them. Therefore do let me give true judgment on the butter." [Pg 271]

"Then you have never heard the name of butter!"

"Oh dear, oh dear! you leave one less than a shred of the soundest argument," was the reply of the infatuated stockbroker. "Reason" would have been the noun to use, after a twelvemonth of matrimony.

"Now you must understand," said Grace, in the flush of that triumph of intellect, "that nothing ever tastes its best, when taken out of its proper course. No metal should ever be used with fresh butter. This is a blade of hard white wood, I quite forget the name of it. But I can easily find out. Let me run and ask old Sally. You can't wait? Very well, then I must cut it short, and tell you when you come back from Venice. But to think that I made all of those, and the ready money they will fetch!"

She dropped her eyelids just a little, and spread one palm above them, as if the dance of pleasure in her eyes required veiling; and then she finished her sentence. "It is a lovely place, I hear. How nice it will be, to be there! How much you will enjoy yourself!"

"You are quite wrong there," replied Stocks and Stones. "I expect to have a most wretched time. What do I care for the Stones of Venice? I am not going to please my very miserable self. You know why I am going, Miss Cranleigh."

"Mr. Stoneman! How should I know? I have not the very smallest idea!" Oh, what a dreadful story, Grace! And did you make it better or worse, by a blush, and quick palpitation of the guilty breast that harboured it?

"Then I am going for this cause. There is somebody in this country who has got me entirely underfoot, and tramples on me every day. There is no cure for it, but to run away. I have no spirit left. My eyes are always on the ground."

"Indeed! Well, I have not perceived that. But if you have no will of your own, what else is there for you to do? But it seems so un-English to run away. You are not weak, Mr. Stoneman. My brother says that you are very strong. And he would be only too glad to help you. He is too fond of what the reporters love to describe as personal violence." [Pg 272]

"If it were a man, I might have some hope, even without such a champion. But when the tyrant is a lady, and the most perfect of her sex, one against whom it is impossible to rebel——"

"This does you the very highest credit. And it is so unusual. A great friend of mine, and such a sweet girl, quite adores her stepmother. But men—though I know so little of them—but I fancied that they were apt to feel a kind—a kind of prejudice. Narrow, no doubt, but violent."

"It is worse than fifty stepmothers. My step is a quiet, sweet-tempered woman; and I wish that I saw more of her; but she seems to prefer her own relatives. Now, as if you did not know what I mean! What did I tell you the other day?"

"A variety of things. And what did I tell you? And didn't you say very clearly that you liked me all the better for my objections?"

"No, no. Come, that is a twist! I said that I respected your objections, but thought them extremely romantic, and would live in the hope of your trying to get over them. May I sit upon this tub, and reason with you? Oh, how I wish I was a dairyman!"

"My brother George is in love with a lady," said Grace, who never saw the way to miss the very worst of jokes, "who will want a lot of practice before she can sit down. What on earth will he do with her when he gives a dinner-party?" This was a thoroughly vulgar error, as I have shown most distinctly above.

"Poor George, what a fool he is making of himself! But no brother of yours could ever be a fool. Forgive me: for the moment I was forgetting the great mental powers of your family, Miss Cranleigh."

"You need not call me that, unless you wish it. I mean at least—you need not call me that, so often. After all that you have done for us, it sounds so formal."

"Bless your kind heart! what have I ever done for you? But Grace is what I should love to call you; Grace, Grace, and nothing else. Unless I might add another word, beginning with a d——" [Pg 273]

"All words beginning with a d are bad. But there can't be much harm in Grace, that I know of. Only you shouldn't say it very often."

"Oh dear, no! Not more than every time I breathe. Very often is superlative. And so are you. And therefore I am to say it, every time I say you. So I will; am I not a worshipper of the Graces?"

"You must not say it, every time you say me. And I made a dreadful slip, as you must perceive. I wasn't thinking for the moment. And surely you would never dream of taking an advantage——"

"Now come all they that wish me evil; all they that against me have imagined a vain thing——"

"What else are you doing yourself, if you please? If you would only allow me one moment to explain——"

"In the name of the Lord will I destroy them."

"Oh, Mr. Jackson Stoneman!"

She looked at him in doubt of his ferocity, or sanity; and he, in high spirits, clapped his heels on the floor and sprang up, and began to draw nearer. "No tub will do for me. I must have a throne. I am the King of the City, and of Surrey. Grace Cranleigh has proclaimed it."

"Truly you are in a great haste to crown yourself. She has never done anything of the kind. But if to make an ell out of half an inch is kingly——"

"If I did that, I will soon put it right. Let me make half an inch out of the ell now."

"No, no! I insist upon your staying where you are. There is a little door going out, between these two pans; and unless you are quite sensible, you will see no more of me."

"How can I be quite sensible, when I see any? Oh, Grace, Grace, you cannot conceive what a relief to me it is, to be able to utter your name, with a joy, with a pride, with an ecstasy inconceivable!"

"Mr. Stoneman, you are upon the Stock Exchange, and a certified dealer—is not that the proper term? Very well then; you don't deal with any property, until you get it."

"Don't we, though? Oh, Grace, if we did not, where in the world would our business be? But I don't want to talk shop now at all. I want to talk something far outside of that." [Pg 274]

"Shop-windows, perhaps." And then her heart reproached her, as it ought to do with one who has made a flippant stroke. But he had overdone his hit with her as well, and had the sagacity to wait for her remorse.

"I did not mean anything rude," she said, edging her own tub a little nearer, while the forget-me-nots on her bosom danced like flowers on a river, when the mill-stream lifts; "I say things I ought not to say—what I mean is, I say things without meaning them."

"Whatever you say is the sweetest of the sweet," he answered with a sigh, that made his waistcoat keep the tune; "and it is right to remind me of my distance, Miss Cranleigh; because I was taking liberties."

"I defy you to say such a thing to me again. You have not the least idea what I am like, when—when I feel that I have been unkind."

"Let me know what it is like," he whispered, "when—when you feel that you are getting kind again. O Grace, Grace, how I do love you!" She looked at him softly, and her blue eyes fell; and then she spoke submissively.

"Now don't pretend to say it; you must not pretend to say it—unless you are quite certain. Shall I tell you why?"

"I say it a thousand times, and I will spend my life in saying it. You know it as well as I do. Certain indeed! But tell me why?"

"Only that I should feel it very much indeed, if I were not sure that it is perfectly true."

There were tears on her cheeks—the true playground of smiles; neither did they look out of place, for there was not much sorrow in them.

To reassure herself, she whispered something altogether repugnant to the spirit of the Stock Exchange, silver, and gold, and even jewels. But that blessed stockbroker knew the quickest way to close transactions. He swept back a mint-worth of ductile gold from the sapphires whose lustre was tremulous with dew, and he gazed at them gently, tenderly, triumphantly, yet not without [Pg 275] fear and diffidence. "All this committed to my charge?" he asked, with the other arm defining the flexuous circuit of his future realm.

"It may be a very poor investment," answered Grace; "but one thing is certain—what little there is, is entirely a genuine article."

"***What little there is, is entirely a genuine article.***"

CHAPTER XXXII
A PAINFUL DUTY

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It is all very fine for those fine people who can carry on like that. My sister Grace gave ten thoughts to every pound of her own butter, for one she could spare to every thousand pounds of Stoneman's money. A great weight of cash hung against him at first, in the scales of honest affection; but goodness, and kindness, and manly conduct, and bashfulness—thriving rather shyly in "the House" perhaps, but sprouting more freely in our fine air—had gone down plump against the adverse weight of a metal which we seldom find too heavy. Yet people should keep their felicity quiet; even as a cat (whose name may be akin to it) should purr before the fire, instead of squealing on the chimney-pot.

But Jackson went aloft, and began to look down upon me, to whom he owed everything, as he surely must have known. He chaffed me about my Oriental Princess, a subject not only too lofty for him, but exceedingly painful to me just now. For I felt myself out in the cold, as it were; and with all due allowance for exalted spirits, there is such a thing as good taste; and there is, or

ought to be, such a thing as sympathy. And the deeper a man is down in the hole of love, the more should the fellow at the top desire, and strive (without hooking him in the back) to wind him up to bank again. However, I never let them hear a groan, but endeavoured to content myself by meditating on the comparative grandeur of my own position.

Grace was all pity, and flutter, and excitement, and very tender interest about my state of mind, and laid down the law, like the Lord Chief-Justice in some very complicated Liquidation-suit. But [Pg 277] when I said to her point-blank, "Very well; as you have it all so clear, let me drive you in mother's pony-trap; and then you will make it all right for me with Sûr Imar, and with Dariel," to my great disgust her answer was, "I am quite ready, George—if dear Jack thinks it proper."

"Dear Jack, indeed!" I replied with undisguised contempt, for Stoneman had persuaded her to drop the "son"; or perhaps she had made him his own father. At any rate, they had found out between them that "Jack" was of higher rank among the novelists than his offspring had as yet attained. However that might be, he was her Jack-of-all trades now; and I, who once did everything, must be proud of second fiddle.

That settled all interference of theirs. And, in truth, I would not have let her interfere if a thousand dear Jacks had sanctioned it. In the flow or ebb of his own affairs, let every man paddle his own canoe.

Inspirited thus, I made up my mind that if Harold did not appear right early, the proper thing for me would be to pay my visit without him, for the master of the place had clearly said that I might call upon him at any time; though that would be of little comfort to me, unless I might call upon his daughter too. And here I confessed myself quite at a loss, being entirely in the dark as to the social usages, and the tiptop tone of the Caucasus, which must be in a position to look down upon ours. But I said to myself, "Shall extreme humility bring me to so low a pass, that a savage young Osset—whatever that may be—shall trample on the British flag? That a swaggering bully who scorns noble dogs, and breaks the legs of lovebirds, shall scare a young Englishman from his true love, and carry her off, and disdainfully treat her, as Rakhan his father behaved to his mother? Where is my courage, or sense of right, or even manly compassion, that I should permit such a sacrilege as that?"

Not only was I warmed by these large reflections, but touched up also by the little prick of thorns, which the May-bloom hedge of another fellow's love-nest sometimes administers to the plodder in the lane. So I came to this practical conclusion—take the bull by the horns, and have it [Pg 278] out with him. For this gallant purpose, forth I set about two o'clock of a November day, with a little drizzle in the air, but not what an Englishman would call a real fog.

Perhaps I may have mentioned, though I will not be too sure, that a little trifle of a brook arises, among the few fields which we still kept in hand, and contrives to make its way, without venturing upon noise, but accepting every zigzag that any hedgerow offers, down the trend of land that goes away very mildly, until it gets view of a valley. And then there are thickets, and corners of halt, and windings of the little water, and flat beds strewn with the season's leaves, where birds of the neighbourhood, or of passage, find an agreeable change of diet, or of rest when their wings are weary. And a man with a gun may get a very pleasant shot, if he probes this sweet home of theirs warily.

Even the tiniest brook ever seen must lead to something larger; but according to the lie of the land, this runnel must wayfare long on its own account, before it meets the Pebblebourne. Woodcocks are apt to be somewhat capricious birds. Sometimes we never heard of one almost throughout the winter, and the next year, perhaps, it would come into their heads that there was nothing like a happy Surrey coppice. This year they had taken that correct view of us, and our duty was to make it final. So I whistled for my favourite spaniel *Bess*, and with my old breechloader on my arm, set off for a roundabout walk towards St. Winifred's. If I had the luck to bring down a long-bill, perhaps a fair creature might immortalise him.

After a long rough trudge through fern and swamp and briary thicket, I heard the murmur of a larger stream, which could be no other than the Pebblebourne. Daylight began to fail, and the mist was deepening in the valley, so I took a short cut towards the ancient walls with my little offering provided. A woodcock, a leash of snipe, and a widgeon were more than I had expected, and a pheasant or two would have borne them company, if it had been lawful.

Suddenly from a little glade of covert a frightful sound invaded me. It was not like the cry of a cow for her calf, nor that of a dog with a cart-wheel on his tail, nor even the fitful palinode of a [Pg 279] cat upon the roof, suffering deep remorse of love. But if there be any organ capable of combining a wail, a bellow, a shriek, and a yell, with a howl and a moan, and a few other indications that all is not perfect bliss here below, that instrument must have been doing its utmost in the dusky copse before me. My pet spaniel little *Bess* slank away behind my heels, and covered her eyes with her ears to exclude such an audible vision of the Evil One. But a man alone, or at any rate a member of the human race alone, could compass an effect so horrendous. My blood ran as cold as the water in my boots, and if I had stopped to think for even half a second, right-about-face would have been the order.

But real curiosity must never stop to think. With a few rapid steps I was over the low stile, and stood in the tangled enclosure. Like the shrillest fog-screecher that has ever been invented, that sound led me unmistakeably, until I saw a little dark man struggling for his life against victorious bondage. He was corded to a tree no larger in the trunk than he was, so that it just filled the

hollow of his back; his wrists were tied behind it, and his feet being lifted high enough above the ground to deprive him of all leverage, the publication of his sorrow was the sole resource. The last light of day was rolling, rather than flashing, in his helpless eyes; and the cruel distortion of his anguished face might have foiled his own mother's faith in him. And his yells were not those of our language, which can assert itself, even in our outcries.

My impulse of course was to rush forward, and succour this poor victim; and I went for it at once, although I saw that two strong men sat gazing at him. One of them was tall and dark, and a foreigner all over; while the other was bulky and big of limb; and both were jeering pleasantly. With my gun on the left arm, I pulled out a knife, and rushing between them before they could rise, cut the cords of the captive, and eased him down on my shoulder, and lo, it was Allai!

He uttered a guttural something, altogether beyond my philology, and picked up his pet little jingal from the moss, and was off like a hare, before I could speak. When I turned round, a man [Pg 280] stood on either side of me, but not quick enough to grasp my arms. I jumped back, so as to get the tree in front, and cried, "Fair play, you rascals! If you want to taste an ounce of shot apiece, here it is at your service."

The tall man turned away, as if that proposal were not much to his liking. But the other stood his ground, and spoke, as if he knew that I would not fire. "Who are you? What's your business here? Mind your own affairs. We were only having a bit of fun."

"Well, and so am I. It is quite as good fun to scare two scamps, as to bully a helpless little devil."

"Right you are," he exclaimed with a laugh, which made me think better of him, for he could not know that I had drawn my cartridges when I left off shooting; "but we are not scamps, young man; we were performing a painful duty."

"You said it was a bit of fun just now. At any rate I have stopped it. And if you find that a grievance, I will put down my gun and meet you. But only one at a time, mind."

"What an obliging man you are! And you stand nearly six inches over me. My friend would have a better chance with you. But he does not understand 'the box.' You have spoiled our day's work. Who are you?"

"I have a right to ask that question first. I am in my own neighbourhood, as you can see. But you are a stranger, and doing strange things. Tell me your name, sir; and you shall have mine."

"Fair enough. I am Captain Strogue of the British Pioneers,—not ashamed of my name, and not likely to be, though it is better known all round the world than at home. You think me a coward for tormenting a small chap. It only shows your ignorance of that race."

"It is not brave to torture anybody, Captain Strogue. But that is no longer my business. My name is George Cranleigh, well known about here. What I have done I would do again, and so would any other Englishman."

"Likely enough. But it is unlucky, and you may have done a world of mischief. However, I bear no grudge against you. Some day perhaps you will be sorry for it. But where the deuce is the—why, [Pg 281] hang me upside down, if he has not vanished!"

The Captain seemed eager to do the like, and it was not my place to stop him. He lifted his brown hat to me, and was gone, leaving upon me the impression of a man, resolute, testy, adventurous, excitable, and perhaps unscrupulous.

As to the other man, although he had not presented himself distinctly, what other could he be than Hafer, the son of Imar's sister Marva, and now the Chief of the Osset tribe? Although I had not seen his face that night when he left Dariel weeping (neither had I seen it plainly now), the figure and carriage and style of dress were quite enough to convince me. Even in the dark there had been something about that fellow—or Prince, as some would call him—and about the moral smell of his nature, unpleasant, to use the mildest word that I can think of, to my plain and simple elements. He might be the better man of the two, more kindly, more trusty, more lovable, and of a higher stamp in every way. Never mind; I had not the least desire, though he were all that, to resemble him. And Providence, having made us as we are, cannot take it amiss if we are satisfied.

"I shall have a good look at him some day," I thought, "and then I am sure to feel that I was right. I can have no prejudice against him, merely because he has dared to look at Dariel. She, who takes so long to see what I am, is not at all likely to be carried by storm by this fellow's olive complexion, and fine nose, and black eyes, and sable moustache, and all the rest of it. Why, he is a brute, and nothing else, however handsome he may try to look! I can scarcely believe him to be that noble man's own nephew."

CHAPTER XXXIII [Pg 282]
TREMBLING

However, these great reflections did not save me from being in a rather nervous state when Stepan, who was most obsequious now,—if such a word may be used of such a steadfast hero,—

showed me into Sûr Imar's room. And before he raised the curtain, he whispered in best English, "Milord, me good friend to milord now. Allai worth dogs, dogs, all right a hundred dogs." I pressed his hand, because he was thus cultivating our dear language.

"It is long since I have seen you," Sûr Imar began, with his kind and cheerful but never joyful smile. "I began to fear that you had taken amiss something of what I said the other day. It is difficult at such times to consider one another. But all right, as Stepan says. He is becoming quite an Englishman. Did you notice the fogle, as you call it, this child of the Caucasus has picked up somewhere? It is the envy of all our encampment. What a simple-minded race we are! But that is a material to work upon for good. And soon we shall be among the heart of it again. What will my daughter think of her native mountains?"

"But surely," I answered in a melancholy voice,—"surely you will not take her to that frightful place—I beg your pardon, to all that world of grandeur—when everything is frozen, and there is not a place to sit upon. When there is not a flower, not a blade of green grass, nor even a tree that is not a hump of snow. You may find it very nice; but young ladies—Sûr Imar, have you thought about her constitution?"

"My young friend, I have; and it is as sound as mine. There will not be much society; but has she any here? From all that I have seen of it, and I lived some time in London, society means [Pg 283] pretence, affectation, jealousy, littleness, stale slang instead of humour, slavish imitation, contempt of fellow-creatures, and cowardly blindness to the afflictions of this earth. My daughter has no taste for such a life as that."

He appeared to me to speak too strongly, and too much from a primitive point of view; and all who set up such a standard as that are impatient, and apt to exaggerate. But it was not for a country Lubin to vindicate the ladies, and I was in haste to deal with nearer considerations.

"Perhaps you will be angry with me," I said, "but you have told me so much of yourself, that you will not regard it as a liberty. Are you sure, sir, that you do not imperil your life by returning to people so revengeful?"

"As certain as a man can be who knows their obstinacy, and the power of long tradition. And who would wish to harm me now? My sister made much for a time of her wrongs about the marriage portion; but her wicked husband's public vaunt that he had slain our father, and my surrender of all her share as soon as she was a widow, must have taken the sting from that. And as for Rakhan, and his death, could she prefer a faithless husband to her own twin brother?"

"Well, you know best, sir. But is there not a son of that same Prince Rakhan, 'Hafer' you called him the other day, who may feel himself bound by that fiendish law, even if his mother rejects it?"

"Yes, and I hope to introduce him to you. A young man of what you call a rough and ready nature, the natural produce of a rugged land. Too free-spoken perhaps, and apt to give offence to those who dislike strong convictions. But I hear that among his own people he is beloved, and admired beyond all example, for his justice, mildness, and unbounded generosity. The Ossets are not what you have in this country, advanced and experienced Christians. On the contrary, it is a painful fact that the larger half are idolaters; and of them, and of the Christians too, not one in ten is far off from a thief. This makes them thoroughly worthy of the deepest British interest. In going round the globe so much, you never care about any race that is beginning to get better. Your [Pg 284] own, for instance, is nothing to you. You can hope for the best about them; and believe that the Lord, who governs the earth for the benefit of the British race, will make it all right for the worst of you. Upon that point you have no misgivings, any more than you have about any others, when you feel yourselves summoned to improve the world. But my duty is upon a very small scale, and is limited to my own people."

Great as my reverence was for Sûr Imar, it was difficult not to suspect that some adverse influence had been at work with him. Hitherto he had always expressed a genial admiration of our race, which had produced on my part a corresponding respect for his uncommon powers of insight and freedom from foreign prejudice. "You have taken a turn against us," I replied with some warmth, and looking at him as I had never looked before; "time will show who is right, Sûr Imar."

"My young friend," he answered, "you are quite mistaken. I am not leaving you through my own wish. Such quiet days I shall never know again, and such kind respect for my privacy, even with ten feet of snow round my walls. For the sake of my countrymen I must go. That I cannot do much is quite certain; but I hope to start them on a better course. For years, as you know, I have been preparing, and my first chance of trying it is come at last. Am I likely to speak ungratefully of the only land on the face of the earth that would receive me, without a thousand mortifications and annoyances? Why, even your tax-collectors have been civil."

This was a climax of approbation which amazed, and by power of contrast puzzled the warmest asserter of national virtue. "Surely you cannot mean that!" I exclaimed. But romantic as he was, he nodded.

"Now, as you charge me with distrust of England, and I may have said some ungracious things," he spoke with a smile almost as bright as Dariel's, "show your forgiveness, my dear friend, by coming with me into my daughter's room. We are beginning to put up our little possessions, for the journey to a rougher place. How many thousand times shall we regret the halcyon days in this quiet little vale! But come and have a cup of coffee."

"I am not fit to go into a lady's room. I have got about a pint of water in either boot. They are warranted waterproof, and so they won't let it get out again." [Pg 285]

"We'll soon put that to rights. You should wear arabas. Come into this passage, and Stepan will see to it, and bring you a pair of my sandals. I will be with you again in a minute."

While the faithful henchman was pulling off my boots, which was no small tug for even his great arms, his mind was evidently in a condition of still more strenuous exertion. She—if the higher portion of our composition lays claim to the higher half of gender—was struggling and rolling and flopping about (being over-bulky for lighter process) in quest of some fugitive English word, earnestly courted, but wickedly coy.

"Milord, put on more smoke, more smoke. Yes, yes, more smoke, else be too late. Me good friend to milord now. Wicked mens come every day. But milord smoke, smoke, smoke."

He puffed with his lips and panted, as if to impress me with the need for a vast fumigation. "I want a pipe sadly, my friend," I replied; "but how can I have it in a lady's room?"

The Lesghian stared at me, and stroked his beard, and shook his head angrily, as if he had found it empty. "Stepan fool. No say, no say," he exclaimed as he made off to fetch the slippers; but I am afraid that I heard him mutter, as he turned the corner, "Inglese, dam languidge; dam languidge, Inglese!" In a minute, however, he returned, with a broad smile lighting up all his battered countenance, as if he had found what he wanted in the sandals.

"Me know now. Stepan big fool. Milord put on shteam, shteam, shteam! Go ahead! Who's afeard? Won't go home till mornin'? The gal I left behind me. Nancy is my darlin'! Milord know now."

"I am blest if I do," I endeavoured to reply; but he would have no more quenching. In the triumph of philology his dignity was lost; and I saw that he must have spent at least a day in London. "Is the Caucasus come to this?" I asked, and was glad to see my host return.

Stepan stood up, and shut his mouth in the curtain of his beard, like a casement closed under the ivy, and looked at me, as if there had never been less than a mile of moral distance between us. In the name of the Lord, where does sham end? But I had to do a little on my own account. [Pg 286]

Dariel's room! I had never been in the shrine of my divinity till now; and when I was there I could look at nothing except her entrancing presence. She was resting upon something—it might have been a cloud, for all that I could tell about it. The soft light fell upon the sweetest face that heaven itself ever shone upon; and I tried to speak, but no words came; neither could I look upon her as I longed to do. If she had been too much for me out of doors, what possibility was left me here?

"My child," said her father,—for she too was silent, which emboldened me to steal an ecstatic dream of the petals of a blush-rose fluttering on her face,—"my child, I have brought our kind friend, Mr. Cranleigh, who has placed us under so many obligations, to say good-bye, or at least good-night; for I hope that we may see him again before we leave. We have taken you a little by surprise, I fear."

"But it is a pleasant surprise, dear father. I was a little—what is the proper English word?—melancholy? No, I can never be that with you. But sorry, perhaps,—out of spirits, is it so? We have been so happy in this very tranquil rest."

"It is true," replied Sûr Imar, as he turned to me; "perhaps we shall never have so smooth a time again. It is like the beginning of a new life to us. But Dariel knows that we must not think of our own comfort only."

"No, but of our lives—of your life, father. What does it matter to me where I go? But we are travelling from a land where you are safe to a country of savages, where there is no law, but everybody burning to kill everybody else."

"A pretty description of your native land! It is the air of this country, Mr. Cranleigh. My daughter has breathed it so long that she believes that there is no other excellence under the sun. We know that it has some such effect upon the natives. But why should it be so with a little foreign girl? Dariel, my dear, I feel ashamed of you?" [Pg 287]

"Oh, how much better does he know than that!" the loving daughter exclaimed, as she placed both hands upon his shoulders and her face among his beard, whose dark cascade spared a silver rill or two to glisten through the sable of the young abundance; and thence she looked at me with a snug composure, as if to ask, "What do you want with passion? This is affection, if you please. This is all that a sweet girl needs." And then she very calmly stroked his moustache up, and put her lips to his, and kept them there, till I could almost hope that he might prove to have taken a taste of garlic. But perhaps if he had, it would have been all the same to her.

"You see what our manners are," said the father, with a laugh; "we have not quite attained the proper self-command, I fear." And then I had my revenge; for Dariel blushed as if she had done an outrageous thing, and whispered, "Oh, I beg your pardon!"

It was a lucky thing for her, perhaps, although a sad one for poor me, that her father was so close at hand; else how could I have controlled myself? For, being a little repressed, she turned the ardent appeal of her eyes on me, quite as if—quite as if I had been a member of the family. And when I smiled, not reassurance only, but most loyal encouragement, what did she do but glide

away from papa, and sit down by the visitor!

"Oh, Grace, you are graceful enough," thought I, "for yourself, and for any stockbroker. But if you want to know how to sit down, you must come and see Dariel do it." For she had told Jackson, and he in his lunacy thought it too good to be kept to himself, that her brother George, if he got the wife he wanted, would be obliged to put her through a course of chair-drill before he could give a dinner-party!

How I trembled to find myself sitting at her side, indoors, unhurried, with the sanction of authority, civilised, waiting for a cup of coffee, watching the turn of her exquisite hands, nettled by the dancing of the clustered hair, which drew a veil, always at the most provoking moment, [Pg 288] over the lustrous speech of those myriad-flashing and yet ever gentle eyes, as the filigree of some crafty jeweller tempers and deepens the delight within! What was there for me? Could a common sort of fellow, with nothing but rough truth and deep worship to commend him, dare to suppose that he could ever get in there, and be cherished as the owner of the heart that moved the whole?

I assure you that I made a great fool of myself; though such an assurance is superfluous to any man who has ever earned his salt. I had just enough sense left to say "Yes" or "No," with a "Please" in a deep breath now and then, and a "Thank you" that took away breath altogether. Dariel, who was as fit as a fiddle—how those low expressions spoil one's most exalted moments!—saw with her ill-timed serenity the confounded tumult of my system; and, as she told me in the wiser days, felt ashamed of herself for enjoying it. Ah, me! it is not often, in the little square-round of human life, that we get tossed over the boundaries thus, with the profundity of misery struggling with the sublimity of ecstasy.

"My dear young friend," said the tranquil Lesghian, who had let his eyes follow the lines of his beard in amiable serenity, though there must have been a stealthy smile under it, "few things are more gratifying than to have one's own productions valued by those who understand the subject, and speak without prepossession; especially when the producer has departed from general usage, and carried out his own opinions. You are really sure that you admire——"

"Admire is too weak a word, Sûr Imar,"—my eyes were still upon the charming result of his system of education,—"worship, love, adore, enshrine——"

"We will put it on the labels of our tins, as soon as we have a London agency. But only your initials, as your friends might not approve. I am always at a loss for those strong, expressive words of your language, which now survive only in advertisements. My dear, put them down in your tablets; I defy any soap to surpass them. G. C. worships, loves, adores, and enshrines the coffee of the Caucasus. I am not enthusiastic, Mr. Cranleigh; but next to education and the spread of Christianity, I trust to the civilising effects of commerce, which your nation insists [Pg 289] upon, perhaps even more strenuously than the other two great agents. The Russians have introduced the growth of tea, and I heartily hope that it may answer. But knowing the genius of our people, which certainly is not inclined to persistent toil, I have come to the conclusion that coffee, which requires less constant attention, would have a better chance upon our Southern slopes, where the summer is long and the heat intense. I wish I could have seen your brother Harold, that universal genius, about it. The preparation which has so impressed you is not from our native berries yet, only from the slopes near Tiflis. But I hope we shall have our own in a few years' time. And then my discovery comes in."

For all that I knew to the contrary, I might have been drinking bilge-water flavoured with tar and stirred with marlin-spikes. But I grasped his hand with emotion, and said, "No words are adequate, Sûr Imar."

He must have known as well as I did—or what would be the good of his having ever loved his Oria?—that confusion was far too weak a word, and fusion itself not strong enough to describe the condition of my brain. Till Dariel, with one precious glance of reserve and soft sympathy—as if her father really must not claim to be the only one having any knowledge of me—bowed for me to move a little; and oh, she quite hung over me! For, being so stupid, I had not moved; and stupidity gets the prize more often than the cleverest volatility. "Darling!" I whispered through her hair; for her father was gone to his coffee-grinder, to secure some more of my adoration. And Dariel only whispered "Hush," with a quiver, but no repugnance.

"Father," she said with pure presence of mind, as he looked round from his grinding, "my senestra is a little out of tune; but Mr. Cranleigh will allow for that. He is kind enough to wish to hear me sing; and he thinks that my voice is rather agreeable."

"He is right enough in his judgment there. But what opportunity has he ever had of hearing it?" This question made me tremble when I thought of my first offence; but the nymph answered very bashfully—

"You remember—the day, dear father, when you invited Mr. Cranleigh to attend our little service. [Pg 290] We all sang in our quiet way; and he was kind enough to be pleased with it."

"How could he be pleased? They do their best; and I am always proud to hear them. But, my dear friend, it is a frightful noise that drowns my child's soft melody. Englishmen who have travelled among our mountains, tell their countrymen that all our voices are harsh and cackling, guttural and disagreeable. Some may be so, but not all, and in my opinion few of them. I am not a judge of music, but I think my child sings beautifully."

"Oh, father, you have spoiled it all. Mr. Cranleigh will expect wonders. And all I can do is so simple; only it sounds nice to me because—because I feel that I mean it."

"Then your voice must be of your own tongue. She can sing in English very sweetly; but never with the expression which her native language brings to her. Mr. Cranleigh says he would like best to hear you in your own language, dear; though he won't understand a word of it. That ancient lay of Inkulluk, I like it as well as any. The words are nothing; but the melody has a tinkle like a mountain-stream, which modern music seldom has. We call it the song of the stork, although there is very little about them in it. If you like it, you shall have a prose translation, and perhaps your brother will put it into verse, for you tell me he has even that accomplishment. Now try that simple little song, my dear."

The lovely maiden, thus exhorted, smiled as she cast back her hair, and upon the white rise of her breast laid a musical affair of some dark wood, having divers strings and curves. Lute, zither, mandolin, tambourine, lyre, it was none of those, and I knew not, neither cared what it was, only to watch her swift white fingers dancing like snowdrops inspired by the wind, and her lips like rosebuds tremulous. The words were nothing but sounds to me; yet I knew, by the power she gave to them, that whoever could bring them home to her would have no cold-hearted wife to wed. And this is what Harold made of it:—

[Pg 291]

THE SONG OF THE STORK.

"When the veil of the mountains is lifted by Spring,
And the voice of the water saith—Winter is past:
When the stork from Armenia plies her glad wing,
And the ibex lies down, without fear of the blast;
With a heart that is warm as the nest of a dove,
In the bend of the valley, I wait for my love.

"When the splendour of summer makes spangles of snow,
And lights with red lilies the gloom of the glen;
While the forest is flushed with azalea's glow,
And the melody of fountains floats through it again;
With a heart that is true to its nest as a dove,
On a lawn of sweet roses, I wait for my love.

"When the tempests of Autumn have turban'd the peak,
And the gray shadows hover above their stronghold;
Yet the fruitage still lingers—a faint purple streak,
And the ripe corn embroiders the breastland with gold;
Though my heart may be quailing at the storm-clouds above,
Like the harvest, it answers the sunshine of love.

"When the mountains are turned into caverns by snow,
And the heavens are black with the fury of cold,
When the spectre of Rakhabat stalks to and fro,
And the gaunt wolf is howling alone on the wold;
With the ice-crags around us, and the avalanche above,
My love shall not shiver in the breast of his love."

CHAPTER XXXIV
REJOICING

[Pg 292]

When I was going home that night, a very strange thing befell me, which but for the mercy of Providence would have left me nothing more to say. Although there had been very little chance of making sweet speeches to Dariel, because her father would not leave the room, yet her rich clear voice thrilled through me so that I scarcely knew what I was doing, and resolved to put all upon the cast at once, rather than flutter, and quiver, and tremble till some swaggering foreigner rushed in.

Modest I was; and think no harm to confess it, having never had chance to grow out of it, by any fat manuring while my roots were young. Humble I was; and who would not be so, unless he were fool enough not to know the difference between a mere hulking clodpole and the exquisite perfection of the Maker's finest work? Timid too I may have been; and who can be surprised, when even a stockbroker trembled at our Grace? But as for my being a jelly-fish, could any such creature have done what I did? I held the hand of my darling as long as I dared at the corner of the passage, when her father was looking for a lantern, and I said with an audacity which frightened me as soon as I had time to think of it, "To-morrow I must know my fate. Will you be in the chapel, about three o'clock? Or any time, any time; I will wait for hours."

"What can make you ask me such a thing?" she answered, and I said, "Don't you know, Dariel?" And she drew back, and whispered, "I will try—if my father has no objection."

Now it was the thought of this that sent me in a most exalted yet highly disordered condition of [Pg 293] mind upon my homeward course. If order is heaven's first law, as some one says, the entire code must be suspended when the human race is in its most heavenly state. To me the earth was nothing; and the stars alone and the distant sublimity of the sky had any claim of kindred. Leaving *Bess* (who was very tired) to the care of Stepan, with a careless toss I flung my gun upon my right shoulder, and strode forth into the darkness.

Suddenly, as I was marching on a ridge of moorland about half a mile from the camp, I received a most shocking whack under the right ear, as if somebody had struck me with a big hockey-stick; and at the same moment a flash of broad fire started up, and then a roar from a clump of bushes just beneath me. How I saved myself from falling is more than I can tell, for I staggered very heavily, and my head went round.

I cannot remember at all what I did, much less what I thought in this frightful amazement, though afterwards I tried to make it out more clearly. But I must have kept hold of my gun, although my right hand was jarred and tingling with it, and then I must have leaped into the bushy hollow, without time enough to realise the peril. And I shouted, which was a most stupid thing to do; but I know that I shouted, because one of the first things that fetched me to myself was the sound of my own voice. But there was no one for me to lay hold of, or to let drive at with the butt of my gun. The place was all silent and empty, and I saw a great star shining through the naked twigs from the crown of the ridge I had been crossing, and I knew that I had been shot at by the advantage of that star.

To the inhabitants of a lawless country this may be little to dwell upon; but never having been among such crooked lines of action, I knew not what to make of it. My blood ran cold at the enormity of the thing; but without further reasoning I pulled out a brace of cartridges, which I ought to have done before entering the hollow, and slipped them into my old breechloader. Then I found that the right hammer would not move, and began to perceive what had happened. There [Pg 294] was no time to go into that question now. With the left hammer cocked, and the muzzle level and ready for a snap-shot—though probably my nerve would have failed me at a fellow-creature—I searched every yard of the thicket, and then the gully which led to a little watercourse below. The night, having only that big star to help it, was so dark and baffling that a dozen men might have slipped away without leaving me any the wiser; and the only trace vouchsafed to me was a rustle of some bushes at the bottom of the slope where a hedge ran along. At this I brought my gun to my shoulder, for I might just have peppered a man down there, and that would have been a caution to him. However, on second thoughts, I did not fire, for by this time I was quite cool again, and the blaze might have brought another bullet at me before I could pop another cartridge in. So I marked the spot very carefully, and hurried home with gratitude.

And truly, when I had lighted both my candles, and taken a good draught of ale to refresh me, I perceived that my escape had been marvellous, and I knelt down and thanked God for it; though I have never been able, as many persons are, to believe myself the main shareholder of Divine protection. A heavy bullet had been fired at me with accuracy undeniable. And it must have dropped me as dead as a stone, passing upward into my poor brain, if my own good trusty gun had not been on my shoulder. Happily for me the lead had struck the lock-plate just above the trigger, and failing to enter the steel of course, had glanced upward and passed through the brim of my hat, cutting a groove in the crown as well, but touching never a hair of my head. My right ear was red as a radish from the jar of the stock against it, and the spring and tumblers of the lock were jammed; but I soon put them to right again.

What cowardly and cold-blooded miscreant could thirst for the life of a harmless, quiet, and unpretentious fellow thus? No enemy had I, to the best of my knowledge, in all the wide world, for the simple reason that I never wronged, insulted, or looked down upon anybody; and whenever I could not get on with a man, I let him go his way, while I went mine—unless he [Pg 295] brought a pole across my shins; and even then, if he was sorry, I forgave him. But one thing was very clear to my mind, when I had lighted an eager pipe, and dwelt on it (sliding along the gentle slope, where a blue cloud routs black vapours), that no Englishman ever would have crawled like that, to pot a brother Englishman.

Then I thought of the sneaking shot from the gun of Rakhan which had killed Sûr Dadian, when he was returning full of joy to his ancestral castle; and the thing became almost as plain to me as if the sunlight had been poured on it. Captain Strogue would never have done it; a bravo he might be, but not a Thug—if there is any meaning in any man's eyes. But the tall dark fellow, that son of Rakhan who would not come up to look at me, Hafer, who was come to fetch Sûr Imar, he was the miscreant who tried to shoot me.

Sometimes I have a deep vein of discretion, though nobody else perceives it, and I always feel myself below my proper level, when I work it. But a man who has just escaped foul murder by a hair's breadth, and may meet the like to-morrow with the turn of the hair against him, must—unless he is weary of his life—take some thought of his actions. And I felt by no means weary of my life, but kindly and warmly in love with it, when certain glances made it sparkle, like a dewdrop in the morning. Not a word must I say to any one about that dastardly attempt, unless it were to the faithful Stepan, who might cast some light upon it. He had warned me; perhaps he knew that some one longed to do away with me. He would take it as the natural outcome of my intimacy at the camp; and now he approved of "milord's" suit, and urged him to put more steam

on. Probably he knew why those two villains had lain in wait for poor Allai, and were trying by torture to make a traitor of him. And Stepan had clearly some reason of his own for keeping his master in the dark about it. Moreover, he was struggling with the English language, manifestly for my benefit. With this resolution I went to bed, and dreamed neither of thickets, nor bullets, nor bravoes, nor anything else that was nasty; but only of sweet Dariel singing the song of the stork like a nightingale, and coming with white wings to my window, where I caught her with a pair of reins. [Pg 296]

By this time Grace was in such a state of mind about her noble stockbroker, that brother George might have fifty holes in his hat, or in his head almost, without the loving sister coming to brush, or darn, or even poultice them. Of this I made no grievance, but went so far as to be unaware of it; and when her conscience began to work, I showed her that I had bought a thimble, and she called me a heartless molly-coddle. "Never mind. There are better girls than you who can appreciate me," I answered with a superior smile, and she flew into a passion. Such is feminine jealousy. They want to love some new-comer better, yet we are not to know it, or to feel the difference.

Most heartily I wished poor Jackson Stoneman only half as good a bargain as he fancied he had made of it; for the blindness of a man in love is to others quite ridiculous. And I knew that although Grace was blessed with many of the merits he had inspired her with, no one else could think her fit to hold a candle to Dariel. Yet for the world I did not wish to hear any one praise my darling, unless it were her father or myself; for it was our business only.

Upon my way to the sacred place where my destiny was to be settled, being much before my time, and longing to divert my mind (which made my legs feel trembling), I turned aside to search the covert which had so nearly proved my doom in the darkness of the night gone by. If I had been as nervous then as now, nothing could have saved me, for the shock of the blow must have thrown me down, and the enemy would have leaped up and dispatched me. Even as I had been full of glorious thoughts, and striding in full pride of strength, probably I should have lost my balance, if my left foot had been foremost. And now in the broad daylight I was half afraid to examine the dingle. But I had brought my gun, that loyal friend, now as fit for work as ever, and both barrels loaded with duck-shot. If that miscreant's gun had been loaded so—but those thundering villains are no sportsmen.

At once I discovered the place where he had crouched, and a comfortable lair he had made of it, less than twelve yards from the path by which he expected me. But the ground being strewn with [Pg 297] leaves, wherever it was not covered with grass or tangle, no footprints could be descried, either there or further down the dingle; and I was at the point of abandoning my search, when a little brown disk, like a piece of stamped leather, attracted my attention. It was hanging on some twigs about a yard from the ground, in a line between the lurking-place and the spot where I had been when the bullet staggered me, and at first I took it for a large, thick leaf. And a leaf it was, but not of any tree or shrub that I had ever met with; and I perceived that it was streaked with black, and smelled very strongly of gunpowder. Beyond any doubt, it had been used as a patch or wrapping for the leaden ball that was meant to send me to another world, and parts of it were scorched or singed by the explosion. I could even see the impress of the iron cap belonging to the heavy ramrod, by which it had been driven down the rifle-barrel, and on the other side might be traced the convexity of the bullet which had been enclosed. What leaf could this be? It was thicker and tougher than any English leaf I knew, as well as different in shape and texture. Tearing a fibre from the cleanest part I laid it on my tongue, and was surprised by a strong and peculiar aroma. After packing it carefully in a letter from Tom Erricker which happened to be in my pocket, I went on my way towards the ruins of the chapel, having made up my mind to inquire at Kew, where I knew a noble botanist, what tree was likely to produce that leathery and spicy foliage.

But this and every other thought of things around me and of myself were far from any mind of mine,—if mind at all remained to me,—as I sat upon an ancient stone begirt with fern and lycopod, and sandalled with soft moss rosetted here and there with ivy braids. All such things are soothing; and there also seemed to be a tranquil air, proceeding from the memory of holy monks, who never pretended to be better than they were, because they saw no need of it. Hereupon I began to fear, as a few dead leaves went by me, that I should not have appointed this cold and holy spot for speaking of a turbulent affair like love. But, without another word, I was strengthened greatly; the very argument against me took my part. True love is a sacred thing, as [Pg 298] the Lord Himself ordained it; and a place of ancient reverence, with the sky alone to roof it, suited well for that which is the loftiest of the human state.

Perhaps the maiden had some thoughts a little like my own, but better, larger, and less tumultuous. I was not in a fit condition to know exactly what she did; and I even pretended to know less than eyes and heart brought home to me. I only knew that she was there, and for a little time I felt afraid to wish for any more than that.

She, to my delight and glory, trembled, and tried to look away, as if she shared my fear, but begged me to let it go on a little longer. Then, as I caught her hand, and raised it very gently and reverently, good manners compelled her to show surprise, and to cast an inquiring glance at me. "Don't go," I said. "If you only knew—but I never shall be able to make you know."

"It would not be right for me to go, when my father ordered me to come."

"Because he knows why. And he gave me leave to say what you know already. Oh, Dariel, what is

the good of talking? You know all about it. Ever since that blessed moment, when I first caught sight of you——"

"Through the bushes and across the water? Or was it when you saved *Kuban's* life?" She looked at me very gravely, as if the time made all the difference.

"Both, both; and a thousand times since. And it must go on for ever. You can't understand it; of course you can't. But I can understand nothing else. Oh, Dariel, don't be hard upon me. I know that you are the wonder of the world, and that I am nothing but a very common fellow, not half so worthy to look at you as the short-eared owls in your ivy——"

"I am very fond of owls," said Dariel; "they are the wisest of all birds. But I never saw them sit and look at me."

"Then they are fools, and I'll do it for them for ever. But oh, if I could only make you see for a moment how I love you! Don't laugh at me, Dariel. Don't do that."

"I am sure that I never laughed at all. How can you think that I would be so wicked? But I will confess, if that will be quite sufficient, that I think—that I have been persuaded considerably, Mr. Cranleigh, that you—that you like me." [Pg 299]

"Like you, Dariel! what a wretched word! Can you look at me, and fancy it no more than that?" But she would not be taken at any disadvantage; though she turned one ear towards me a little—as if ears could hold no agency for heart or lips or eyes.

"Now listen to me for a moment," I said, creeping close to that ear, which was a masterpiece of shell-work, and filigree curves, and chasing; "tell me—just say—have a little kindness, say whether you think you could ever like me."

"Yes, I will say; I will not conceal. I think that I could like you very well; because—because——"

"Because what, Dariel? That I may do it again, and go on doing it for ever."

"Because, because—it is just for this reason," all the glory of her eyes flashed on me, "because you are so much afraid of me."

"Am I?" In a moment she was in my arms, and I had the sweetest revenge ever known for an imputation of cowardice. And she, whether carried away by my love, or by her own sweet gratitude, looked at me with a glow of light, like the gates of heaven opening, and drew me into fresh ecstasy, and whispered, "Do you love me?"

Such a time is the date of life, for ever to be dwelt upon; but never spoken of, unless it be with the only one who shared it. And I would never have touched upon it, but left all those to take it home, who in their time have been so blessed; unless I were bound to let them see how much I had to go upon, in my obstinacy afterwards. Dariel loved me! Who was I, to be rapt by such a miracle? And who of mankind should take it from me, as long as the heavens continued?

"Let us kneel, and thank the Lord," my darling said, with coy reproach of my impetuous transport; "here where first you saw me, George. If He has meant us for one another, He will be vexed if we do not thank Him."

I followed her to the place that once had been of holy rite, and there she took my hand, and knelt upon the plinth of the old sanctuary, and made the sign of the Cross upon her breast and forehead, and spoke some words in some sweet language, and then arose and offered me both hands, and I kissed her lovely brow, and met her loving eyes bedewed with tears, and said, "You are mine for ever." [Pg 300]

She bowed her head, as if to say, "I am well contented with it;" but when I drew forth that ruby cross of hers which I had kept so long, and offered to place it on her breast, as it was when I first beheld her, she shrank away, and her cheeks grew pale, and she trembled so that I felt compelled to throw both arms around her. "What is it, my darling? My own love, what has scared you so?" I asked, drawing the red flash from her sight.

"You know that I am not too wise. You do not want me to be wise; oh, George, I have no strength of mind; I cannot bear to be taken from you."

"I should like to see anybody do it," said I, guiding her craftily to a less exalted place; "but why has this little thing frightened you so, when you must have worn it a hundred times?"

"Because there is a most sad tale about it, which I will tell you some day. But even without that I must not wear it, according to the rules of the family; unless—unless—a thing that would grieve you heartily, I hope, George—unless I cease to care for you. No maiden must have this on her heart, when her heart has ceased to be her own. Shall I tell you a little secret? That was why I lent it to you and never asked for it back again, as soon as ever I began to fancy—not to be too sure—but to be uncertain whether—oh, you know my signification, George!"

"When you doubted, sweetest sweet, whether you might not be beginning to think in your angelic heart of a worthless fellow, whose name is George."

"What language to use of such a pair! If you abuse one, you abuse the other. Do you see what English I speak now? I could not talk like this, when first I met you. How do you think I learned to do it?"

"Dariel, how should I know? Your voice would make any language sweet. Your father has the gift of tongues. He speaks better English than I do. No doubt it has come down to you. And you have been with English teachers." [Pg 301]

"Yes. But they made me speak French more than this. They thought that the air would teach me English. And my father always talked to me in our own language, such as I sang to you last night. But when I began to have George in my mind, and to fancy that he was getting fond of me, I changed all that. Comprehend you now? I made my darling father speak nothing to me but the English. And I shall be angry with myself, if you have not observed the improvement."

At this proof of her lovely love, I said and did—no matter what. Never since the world began has any man been so beyond himself. Such things are not to be described. And I never would have gone back thus, to give any one else an idea of them, if I could have won that glory, with no anguish afterwards. Every man must be in glory, when his true love loves him. He knows that he is not worthy of it; and that makes the triumph nobler.

She might lead me where she liked. A man is never like a flower—unless it be a tobacco-flower, which only blooms in the evening—but he has always been like grass; and grass (if you watch it carefully, and mow it very seldom) has a gift of turning to the sun, like most of us who manage it. My sense of beauty was so vast that I could not get to the end of it, and strove to teach her every item of her own perfections. But she arose, and took my hand, and said, "Let us go to father. A little bit of wisdom will be good among all these wonders. But I only wish that I owned them all; because they would all belong to you."

Sûr Imar received us with a loving smile. I thought that he had never looked more grand. Dariel knelt to him, while I held her hand; and if I could have knelt to any man, I would have done so then to him. But the knee of an Englishman goes down to none except his Maker.

"***Sûr Imar received us with a loving smile.***"

"So be it," he said, as he kissed her forehead; "may the Lord bless both my children."

CHAPTER XXXV
A RACE OF PLATERS

[Pg 302]

Of the 26,250 days (which, after due allowance made for the little jangles of the sun and moon,

are the up-cast of our living-time according to the wise man) that sage complains that no one produces anything exactly like the produce of its brother one day old. If it were so in the almanac of Solon, what can be expected now, when every day is supposed to achieve a long stride in advance of all previous ages, clapping their laurels on its own pert head? So have I seen a pretty little dear, with her hair upon her shoulders, dash out in front of the village mile-race, at half a skip from the winning-post, and scream out, "I have won it."

To me, in my quiet slow-go pace, it would have been more than enough, if the morrow had been content with its yesterday, and backed it up in a friendly style. But instead of that, it only cared to indorse the safe corollary—"All in all, a human creature is nothing more than accident." Accident to wit, just out of luck, according to the word there used, which bears no merry meaning. Perhaps this on the whole was my disgrace; for a friend's good luck should be one's own.

But could I put Tom Erricker in the most romantic scale of friendship (such as the Romans cultivated) against the heavenly Dariel? Those Tusculans knew not such love as ours; because they had no such girls to love. However, let Tom have his say.

> "Beloved George,—You are my best friend, the only one that understands me, in this smiling vale of tears. You may not have heard from me for some months, because I have [Pg 303] had the finest shooting I have ever yet been blest with. It makes one despise all the partridges and pheasants, tame fowl of a lower order. Grouse, my dear boy, and blackcocks too, and we heard of capercailzie! Tell old Stocks and Stones, who was so stingy about his rabbits, that I blow my nail at him, as the poet says. But that is not half of it. The grub—the grub—George, you never came across the like. I am seven pounds heavier than when I came down, in spite of walking off two pounds per diem. The wind seems to blow it back into you. And you make it up at dinner-time; and then you have cigars, such as you never put between your teeth; and then half-a-dozen lovely girls, all ready to scratch one another's faces, to draw you for their pal at billiards. And did not I show them a dodge or two?
>
> "But that reminds me that I had my choice; and I chose like the man who put the broom across the walk. I might have had beauty; I might have had fashion; I might have had wit, though I hate it in a girl, because they soon give you the worst of it. And I might have had noble birth; but that would never do, because she might be nasty about the forks and spoons, at the height of the most festive enterprise. She was very sweet upon me for as much as three days; and my aunt, who has £80,000 to leave, was wild to have a Lady Frances Erricker. But my Lady Fanny made a wicked slip about the new process, that the Governor has given five pounds for, and expects to clear five thousand by it; and it was all over with her chance. She repented with many tears, and I forgave her, but could not see my way to put her on again; for her outside value was about a thou.; and she would cost more per ann. than that to keep.
>
> "Well, I was just putting on my blinkers for another trot in single harness, when a little thing comes round my nose, and looks at me, and strokes my ears, and, by Jove, it was all up with me. Oh, she is such a little Venus, George! Small, as all the true sort are; but no mistake about her. Every time you look at her, you say to yourself—This is a girl; not an Amazon, nor an owl, nor an owl-faced Athenè, nor even the one who changed her sex, every time she struck a serpent. I may be wrong about that; never mind, my Loo [Pg 304] will never want to be a Louis. In plain unvarnished fact, she is a duck, and that is what you want of them. Swans are not for me, nor eagles, least of all a cormorant. Her sweet name is Louisa Box; and I said a pretty thing to her. You know my little knack that way. I said, 'Loo Box, you have boxed my compass, and fetched it all to looward.' She could not quite take in my point, for no girl ever knows north from south; but she said, 'Oh, Tom, you are so clever!' while some of them would have boxed my ears; and Lady Fanny longed to do it.
>
> "To cut a delicious tale too short, Louisa Box—who has £20,000 on the nail, which is not to be sneezed at, with tin going down—and Thomas Erricker, of Middle Temple, are to be joined in holy matrimony, at 11 A. M. next Saturday, and the devil take the hindmost. I have been up to London for new togs, but could not get an hour to run down to you, and I know what a rumpus you are always in. This you will excuse of course. But I rely upon you, mind (and if you fail me it will not come off), to put yourself into your best array, and be best man on Saturday. You must come by the train which reaches Sheffield, 7.45 P. M. on Friday. I will meet you at the station, and we will have a blow-out at the Governor's, and I will put you up to everything. And it would be kind if you would call at old Puckerpant's before you start, and bring my vestments with you. I have paid his bill; so that you can swear at him.
>
> "Now, my dear fellow, this is a solemn matter. I feel the vitality of holy matrimony; and I trust my old pal to back me up. Last night I had a spasm in the plaster on my chest. I am not so strong as I was at College, and I shall never pull through it without you. You are a sneak, if you desert the Tom who has done so much for you."

Any one of lofty altruistic soul, or even decent fidelity, would vote me a very paltry fellow, for doubting what to do in a case like this. It seemed an atrocious thing of Tom, and a pestilent piece of luck for me, to take me two hundred miles from home, at this very crisis of my life,—just when I meant to compel my father to call upon Sûr Imar; or if that could not be done, to bring sweet [Pg 305]

Dariel to see my mother, whose kind heart she would captivate. Then I would show her to Grace, and perhaps at some leisure to Jackson Stoneman; and look what becomes of their pride and their Saxon infatuation, after that! Was this and every other delightful plan to be put off, nobody knew how long, for the sake of a headlong cash and love-affair concocted by Tom Erricker? I was sure that my sister would agree with me, for she always had made light of Tom, and I vowed to my reluctant self, that the decision should be left to her. What then was my chagrin and wonder, when she said, "You are bound to go, George!" And I fear that she wanted me out of the way, because I would not kow-tow to her "Jack!"

The terrible results of this sudden start have strengthened me for ever in my solid judgment, which for the moment I was much inclined to slacken under the arch spell of St. Winifred. Listen deferentially to feminine opinion, but never let it go beyond your ears; until you have a good wife of your own. She will know how you look at things, and shape her wisdom to suit yours, and go beyond your own conviction in the certainty that you are right. And then she knows that she has done it all, whenever everything turns out well. But if, peradventure, it all goes amiss, she is the last one in the world to make it bad for you. It is your place then to take the blame on your own clumsy shoulders, and think scorn of outside results, while you have one true breast to comfort you.

These thoughts were far beyond me yet; for a young man believes himself wondrous clever, and airs his conclusions about womankind, as a boy blows his bubble, or a child upon the grass his ball of dandelion-seed. And this was just the very thing Tom Erricker had always done; and I had thought it very fine, until I met my Dariel. But now I felt disgusted with him, and his Loo of £20,000 and all that snobbish frippery about his togs. However, I must make the best of that and him.

To the life of my life I sent a line, as full of love as I could make it, with any room for common-sense behind. And then off I set for all that humbug, show, and sham, and breakfast-speeches, women up to date with tears, and men beyond it with champagne, lovely bride with lips too sweet [Pg 306] for margarine to melt inside them, bridegroom in tepid waxwork form, and looking for courage to his mother, whose mind dwells over his weaning.

All this was there, and a great deal more; and it seemed to me that my dear friend (who had lost his wit, and his wits as well) deserved our finest sympathies; though the girl was a harmless and good little thing, who wondered how her Tom could have thought so much of me.

But if ever there were kind and warm people on the face of this cold-complexioned earth, these Yorkshire folk might fairly claim the warmest place among them. Not for hospitality alone (though in that they were beyond abundance) but also for solid good-will without sham, and a hearty power of liking any one who met them frankly. There was something about them altogether different from our Southern style; stronger and deeper, and more true in the way they stuck to what they said. Also I found them very eager to have large and liberal views of their own in abstract questions of politics; and if they made mistakes, it was—so far as I could follow suit—from contempt of shilly-shallying. I went among them, with the tags of my Tory armour tied, hooked with steel I ought to say; and though they could not pull any of it off, they made the whole suit more flexible, and airy, and elastic.

Alas, that I had so brief a chance of expanding under the broadcloth! None of them could unsettle me in what I was brought up to. But having an equitable mind, and being worsted generally in argument, I began to see that the strongest principles may go too far in their own strength. There was one old man of mighty aspect, and immense benevolence, who must have brought me beneath his mantle, in three more nights of looking at me. I felt his influence, and feel it now.

But whether for any good or harm, all this was cut short suddenly. After Tom and his bride were gone, with the usual showers after them, all the guests and many more came together at Silver Hall, the abode of the ancient Tinman, as Tom in his impudence called his father. For why; it had been arranged among them to have the wedding-dance out there, with more room for enjoyment [Pg 307] than Sir Benjamin Box could minister. And I was beginning to count my time, for I meant to go by the midnight train; and clumsy dancer as I am, there were several very nice girls indeed, who did their best in a charming way to make me do my best as well. Especially there was Tom's younger sister, as pretty a girl as need be seen; in a formal mood of the masculine mind, "Miss Argyrophylla Erricker." Her mother had paid a poor Oxford man a guinea for invention of that name; and she was worth it, though everybody called her "Pilla."

It was a lucky thing for me that I had not seen Pilla too early in life, for I know not where I might have been. This very pretty girl was also of a very romantic tendency; which, with a little wit to quicken, and sweet brown eyes to sweeten it, stops you, in your course, like a double water-jump with a hurdle of furze between it. You pause to think; and you pause for ever. I had heard of her a hundred times from Tom, but had never imagined that she was so nice; for he spoke of her with that fond condescension which made her look up to him as a mighty hero. And now I had to take care what I said, as she always got back to him at every other breath; and a great stretch of verity was needful on my part, to respond to her view of his merits. But this made me like her all the more, and I wished more than once that my sister Grace, who certainly possessed much more occasion for it, were gifted with an equal amount of this lovely philadelphia.

How many times I danced with Pilla is a great deal more than I can say; but it was very far from being to the exclusion of everybody else, as people were found to say afterwards. She, as the daughter of the house, was bound to pay proper attention to the guest who had come so far to

please her brother, and would have to leave so early. And, for my part, I could not forget the duty of warm friendship to my dear old Tom. Every time she came back to me, I thought that her rich brown eyes grew brighter, and I told her how much they resembled Tom's, although infinitely more expressive. And she found me improving so fast in my steps, which had fallen into sad neglect among the furrows, that I feared to fall off again, if I failed to make the most of so rare a [Pg 308] chance. But as to making love to her—what love had I to make? All my rights and dues of that were signed, sealed, and delivered to another lady—of a different grade altogether.

But away went all a man's thoughts of homage to anything but humanity when, after I had said "Good-bye" to Pilla, and seen my bag come down the stairs, and was casting a wrapper around me, while the cabman thumped himself betwixt the doors, the sweet little creature ran up to me again and tried to speak, but only mumbled, and would have gone down with her chin upon the floor, if I had not stretched both arms to catch her. Upon them she lay, like a lamb upon a rail, with all her body quivering, and the helplessness of her slack head thrown against my dancing waistcoat.

"What is it, dear child?" I asked in vain. All she could do was to spread one hand towards a big door; and then that hand fell, and she was all long hair and pink muslin. "Is there a woman here?" I called out, in terror of a fit, as I kept her from the floor; and a woman of great substance rushed up and caught her, and glared at me, as if I were a villain. "Poor lamb! Poor darling! The bad wicked man!" "Did you see how he swept her off her feet?" There were half-a-dozen handmaids now; and I left poor Pilla to them.

"***A woman of great substance rushed up and caught her.***"

Then seeing how stupidly quick they were, I went to the door she had pointed at, and with heavy misgivings entered. It was a large high room, with a lot of gilt about it, and gorgeous books sprawling upon stamped leather; but the gas was turned down, and the light of the fire flickered with gushes of shape and shadow.

There was another and a darker shadow there. A dead man lay in the deep composure of a most luxurious chair; his head had fallen back against the rich morocco; and the fire that played on his dull wan eyes should warm no part of him any more,—Theophilus Erricker, a man who had made his fortune, in the rush, and kick, and pell-mell of life—by fair play, no doubt, when the rules permitted; and with kindness to his fellows, when so be it, the facts went the right way for him.

It was strong hospitality, and quick heart now, which had brought him to this sad extreme. [Pg 309] Throughout the day, he had been doing too much for a man of his legs, and years, and weight, as several persons told him. But the old man kept up to the height of young time; and when Sir

Benjamin Box (an alderman of substantial yet melancholy order) entreated him not to dance so much, stout Mr. Erricker challenged him, though Box was ten years his junior, to jump over a dining-room chair with him! And thus he carried on for hour after hour, dancing, and slapping old friends on the back, and running about among the pretty girls, like a waiter who has to subsist upon tips; and ever so much rasher than that man is, because he was stirring up his intellect, to the same high scale as his body. What wonder then—with his doctor called away to a wealthy confinement, and his good wife too busy to frown at him—that he verified the warnings of those who knew, but could not at such a time remind him, that he had all but created a vacancy in the Town Council last Easter Monday, through juvenile impetuosity?

What an awful crash of buffers, in the midst of headlong gaiety! Even to me, so new a friend, it seemed to sweep aside all thoughts of self, and plunge it in the great tide of human fate, that pitiless gulf-stream, in which we cannot even endeavour a course of our own, but are whirled along like a dollop of froth, or a shred of pop-weed among other weeds.

Being (as a young man ought to be) entirely without experience of the sudden tragedies of life, perhaps I overdid my sense of duty in a case like this. If so, I erred on the better side; and in spite of all the sad home results I say that I would do the like again, whether others would do as much for me, or not. Right or wrong, I could not bring myself to leave these unhappy people without any friend to help them. My services were but small of course; and yet as it happened there was no one in the house to be more efficient. The family lawyer had left the town, after seeing to the marriage-settlement; the execution of the will was committed to Tom and his mother. Tom was away on his wedding-trip; and his mother, in delicate health for some years, had now broken down entirely, and left her daughter to do the best she could. Only on one point the widowed [Pg 310] mother still had the courage to insist. Whatever came of it, her son should not be called back from his honeymoon to the coffin of his father. He had set off for Italy, or the South of France—I forgot which it was for the moment—nothing but a telegram could stop him; and no telegram should be sent.

A miserable time it was indeed. The lawyer's junior partner came; but he was a young man without self-reliance, regardful of nothing but legal forms, and desirous of nothing but to please Miss Pilla, who could make a flexible stalactite—if such a thing there be—of him, by every crystal tear; and she having therefore little faith in him, all he did was to cast the burden of every doubtful arrangement upon me.

"The old man will cut up finely, sir," was the most practical of his remarks to me; "no expense must be spared on his funeral. Under the widow's instructions—poor thing! you must now act as quasi-executor. The Corporation will not be pleased, unless everything is carried out A1. And if I may venture upon a private sentiment, it will all tell up, sir; it will be a sound investment, with an eye to the welfare of the business."

Then Sir Benjamin Box came in, and put his hat upon the very chair in which the Master of the house had breathed his last, and spake below breath impressively.

"Saddest thing I ever knew, in all my life! We shall never look upon his like again. My dear Sir George, what a lesson for us! But to jump over chairs, at his time of life! And eighteen stone, if he weighed an ounce. I, who am comparatively active—but we will not reproach him, when he cannot reply. Fine thing for Tom though; can you give me an idea? You are the acting Executor, I believe."

"I am not an Executor at all, Sir Benjamin. And I am no Sir George, but plain George Cranleigh. I am doing what little I can, at the request of the ladies, and their lawyer. But you are more nearly connected, and if you would only take it off my hands——"

"No, no, thank you. That wouldn't do at all. I never could stand a house of mourning. My own heart is ticklish; this has given me quite a turn. But you are young, sir, you are young. My [Pg 311] deepest sympathies to the afflicted ladies."

He was off with so light a foot, that even the ghost of the poor deceased would have found itself too heavy, if it ever came to finish the jumping-match. And then Argyrophylla glided in, looking like a silver aspen leaf in a coil of black ivy, as she took my hand.

"Oh, Mr. George, what a hateful old man! I heard what he said, and I saw him run away. And my brother has married his daughter! Cowards, how they fly at the very thought of death; and when their time of life should make them so glad to know more about it! But you are not like that, are you? Though it must be most sadly distressing for you. To attempt to thank you would be so absurd and hopeless. How proud my brother must be of such a friend! If I live to be eighty, I shall never forget you. But I came to tell you two pieces of good news, if there can be such a thing as good news now. Dr. Golightly has called upon the Coroner, and got him to dispense with an Inquest, as the case had been medically treated before. And then Aunt Gertrude is coming to-morrow, and she will bring Selina Petheril, who was at our school at Brompton."

Of Selina Petheril I knew nothing, but this Aunt Gertrude was the relative from whom Tom had great expectations; and her arrival made things much better, and relieved me of some anxiety. She approved of all that I had done; but I found it impossible to leave the house with any security that all was right, until the third day after the funeral. I had written to my sister, and heard from her once or twice, so that there could be no uneasiness at home. But of my dear friends in the valley not a word had reached me, though among all those dismal duties my thoughts had been with them constantly.

It is not for me to pretend to say whether I acted well or ill. But to one thing I can pledge my honour, that no small motive and no tender claims of beauty in distress detained me. If Pilla had been the plainest girl in the county of many acres, my behaviour would have been just the same. I never said a word to her that was not of the purest pity and good feeling; neither did she think [Pg 312] twice of me, except as a willing and warm friend. There is nothing in me to attract any girl; and even if there were, any man who imagines that a loving daughter in deep affliction would set up a flirtation with a stranger, the same is a bad man, and proves it by measuring women by his own low mark.

However, no more of that. Enough that when we heard by telegram that Tom would be at home that night, I took the mail-train to London, and got home at breakfast-time on Sunday morning, having thus been absent just nine days.

CHAPTER XXXVI [Pg 313]
GONE, GONE, GONE

A small and well-measured breakfast-party, with the tea and the bacon and eggs provided, to expectation and experience, should not be disturbed by the sudden irruption of a rough, unshaven, crumple-shirted, and worst of all, unfed young fellow, who cannot remember when his last meal happened. Therefore I only sent word of my arrival, and went for a swim in Stoneman's lake, as my custom was throughout the year, while Sally was preparing me some bread and milk. But while I was getting through this, and thinking of putting myself into church-going gear, my sister Grace ran in, and embraced me, as warmly as if I were on the Stock Exchange.

"Oh, George, I think you are so noble," she declared, as if she had found me at last too large for her understanding, "to stay away so many weeks"—I had not been away for a week and a half, but let her have a girl's arithmetic—"simply for the sake of other people's affairs, without even appointing anybody to look after your own, all that long while. I thought that I was almost as unselfish as anybody ought to be. But I am not sure that I could quite have done all that."

"You don't understand things, my dear girl," I replied, with that superior tone which used to have a fine effect of closure upon the large feminine parlance. "I knew that hay was going up, and that Mr. Joplin would have to put five shillings on to every pound he offered me in October."

"Hay indeed!" she exclaimed with scorn. "George, it is sweet hay—sweet hay—sour hay! And you have not made it, while the sun shone."

"Speak no more in parables. Speak plain English. What in common-sense are you driving at? [Pg 314] There is no hay in the county to beat ours. And I defy any rain to have got into the ricks."

"But suppose the ricks are all clean gone. Oh, George, how stupid you are at metaphors! But if they are gone, without letting you know—oh, I never could believe that, of foreigners even! And after all the great things you have felt for such great people!"

"Out with it!" I said, while my spoon went dribbling. "You mean to tell me, I suppose, if plain English can ever be got from a girl, that Sûr Imar, and his people, have left the neighbourhood."

"His people indeed! Well, if you can take it in that lofty spirit, you may as well know everything. I was quite afraid of telling you. But men are all alike, at least old Sally says so—though what she can know about it, the poor old soul——"

"When did it happen?" I asked quite calmly, for I wanted no pity about it; least of all from a girl who had never entered into any proper view of the question, because I never chose to run and gush to her.

"That is more than we can tell. They must have packed up very quickly, unless they left all their dogs and diamonds behind them. But we only heard of it yesterday, through Slemmick, who had it from Farmer Ticknor. That seems a little rude, considering that you were to have taken me down so soon, to fall at the feet of the Lesghian Bandit. But of course we must not judge them by our own ideas. Perhaps, as we had never called upon them——"

"They would not have troubled their heads about that. They look at things from a higher level. But perhaps they might have sent a boy to tell me, if they had found any time to spare. My dear child, in a quarter of an hour I shall be ready; and then we will go to church together."

Let any man tell me what else he would have done, and I shall be much obliged to him. Not that it could help me very much, for such a thing can scarcely happen twice to any fellow; but that I should like to compare his view of it with what went on in my own mind. Nothing is easier than to [Pg 315] talk, when you see the thing a long way off, or (which is even better) only read about it, or give a bold verdict without a glance; which is the wisest course of all.

All that I can say about my part, is that reason did not count for a halfpenny in the business. Pride (which is often a matter of temper, or self-esteem set up to crow, but when it arises in a modest nature is the proper power to keep it sweet)—pride said to me: "I am well aware that you never stuck up for being humble. You hate any fellow that goes in for that, because you believe him a hypocrite. And so he is, ninety-nine times per cent; the one per cent being a true Christian,

a quantity altogether negligible. You are not up to that mark. But you are a self-respecting Englishman. Show it, my fine fellow, by whistling at people, who have not known you better than to snub you."

I listened to this, and it all seemed true, as beyond all doubt it ought to be. And I went through everything so well that Grace (who was watching me with tender interest, to learn perhaps how the Stockbroker would take it if she vanished out of his investments) did her best to be pleased for my dear sake; and yet for joint-stock sake afforded me as cold a kiss, when she said good-night, as any man insisting on the abstract woman can hope to receive from the concrete.

This alone was enough to show me that I was on the wrong tack altogether. Women are delightful in their talk, if nobody contradicts them, about their finer nature, and purer standard, and higher mission to ennoble us. All this we acknowledge, and should feel it more if they said less concerning it. But the worst of it is, that if any man regards them as they demand to be regarded, he may stand with his back to the wall while they go by.

Now a man, however dull-witted he may be, has sense enough to know that in any nice point touching his behaviour to the better half of life, a member of that half can show him what to do far better than he can discover it. Nothing could be clearer than that Grace despised the haughtiness and the hardness which she herself would have shown in her own case. "How her [Pg 316] eyes would have flashed!" thought I—and then came a vision of other eyes, gentle, true, deep-hearted eyes, sad with some dark mystery perhaps, compelled to keep their tears unseen; but wavering, jiltish, deceitful—never. And then I began to recall her kindly, and found it very comforting.

For when the sweet face came before me, with the soft radiance of those eyes, and the play of those lips that trembled lest they should open themselves unduly, and the movement of a heart that wondered whether it wanted itself to be understood, and a multitude of other little waverings which a man is too dull to interpret,—when all this came home to me with unknown power (because I wanted it and nothing else)—

"Away with this stupid pride!" said Love, clinging to my breast, and whispering; "the Power that made mankind made me, and ordered me never to be far off in the worst of your tribulations. But I must have faith, as even He requires in all His dealings with you. I have offered you as fair a chance as ever was given to a clumsy mortal,—the loveliest creature, a child of my own, as much too good for you as I am. Because the Wicked One has raised a mist, in his loathing of human happiness, are you fool enough to be untrue to me, and shut your blear eyes, and never open them, until nothing is left worth looking at? Go your own way. I have plenty of finer fellows to stand by me."

Though he may not have said it so distinctly—and he is not the fellow anyhow that should talk about a mist—it produced the same effect upon me. I felt myself, after a little thinking, very many cuts above Jackson Stoneman and his slippery stuff among the pats of butter. His love was as sound as a roach, and as merry as a grig; and he was welcome to it: a thing like a bleak that flits under a film of the water, and jumps at a midget, and so becomes fit to make pearl of Paris.

When the striking-weight of a clock is too heavy, it slurs the hours with such a tug that you cannot even count the strokes; and to me, with that heavy weight upon my heart, time went by untimely: slowly, heavily, and sluggishly, if ever I began to count the ticks; but out of all proper [Pg 317] chronology, at periods when I kept no eye upon it. Moreover, I had a number of little things to see to, which had been neglected in my absence, so that it was Tuesday afternoon when I stood at the door of St. Winifred, and wondered whether she had fallen back into rust and ruin once again. The old wall fringed with ivy looked like a billow with a ruffled crest before the white comb breaks from it, and the slumber of the valley was not shaken by groan or shudder of the water-wheel. No smoke was rising from the buttressed chimneys which had been repaired and pointed, neither was there any sign of life, or sound of the harsh Caucasian gabble in which many idle souls delighted.

In short, the settlement (which had been so long the puzzle of the neighbourhood, and the blessing of the rate-collectors, for Sûr Imar paid always every penny put upon him) was gone, vanished, a vision of the distance; a pleasant resource for the memory, when not too conceptive at dinner-time; a fact that would fade into a legend soon, and find matter-of-fact disproving it.

If I had not been reduced by this time to a meritorious humility—which I meant to keep up, let it suffer as it might—it would have gone hard with our language to forego one of its strongest and briefest words, which the weaker tongues try to pronounce against us, but condemn themselves by the effort. Being of the purest English birth, and therefore (as even our enemies admit) an embodiment of justice, I stood still, and made allowance for all of lesser privilege. They have quite as much right to their own ideas as the largest of us have to ours. And it is our power of perceiving that which has made us beloved throughout the world, or at least by as many as can understand us. Or if they be few, whose fault is that?

While I was full of these quick thoughts, and exceedingly sorrowful over them, lo, two streaks of yellow on the dark-green grass, and the self-possession of Albion was wellnigh rolled over in its own tricks. *Kuban* and *Orla*, as mad as March hares, threw all their wild welcome upon me: kisses, and licks, and the hairiest embraces, and the most lunatic yells of delight; if ever there has been true love, here was the prime of it to knock me off my legs.

Any one may laugh at me and all my pride; for the whole of it went to the dogs in a jiffy. I am [Pg 318]

blest if I could help a gleam of moisture that made it difficult for me to see the loyal love in eyes that never told a lie. "You dears!" I cried, "you faithful dears!" and they would scarcely let me say it before they were smothering me again, and then they rolled on the ground as if they had got no legs, and then they jumped up and looked at one another to be certain of their facts; and then with one accord they made the valley ring with glorious shouts of joy, and the dead leaves tremble on the lonely trees. And behold, they had roused a great figure of a man, who came from a door where I had trembled like a leaf, and put his hand over his eyes, and gazed at me, as if he had never seen a man before. And then a little figure ran almost between his legs, and I halloed to Stepan and Allai.

Stepan showed a warm desire to embrace me, which proved that to him I was guiltless as yet, while Allai put both hands on his head, and bowed almost to my gaiters. Now if I could only make these fellows understand, and then get them to do the like to me, I should learn all about this sudden flitting, for the smallest of the Lesghians had always seemed to be in partnership with the greatest.

But alas! what a conflict of languages we had! I think it is St. James who dwells with great eloquence upon the many miseries we suffer from the tongue; he has not, however, described for us one of its most diabolical conditions, when it cannot hit upon the word it wants, and flies into a fury of perplexity with itself, and indignation at the stupid ear that keeps it so in limbo. Stepan tried English, and that was very bad; then I tried Lesghian, but that was much worse. He could see that I wanted to know why his master had broken up their English home so suddenly, and without so much as a word of farewell; but all that he could do towards telling me was to shake his head, and make a great noise in his throat, and box the boy's ears for laughing at him. Then something not altogether devoid of true insight occurred to him, for he shouted in a mighty voice, "Stepan dam fool!" and gave Allai some order, which sent him to the buildings like an arrow.

Something had occurred to me also, so often are ideas simultaneous, and while the messenger was gone, I took that leaf of which I have spoken, from my pocket-book, and handed it to Stepan. [Pg 319] He looked at it with great surprise, and then put it to his lips and on his forehead, and then tore off a fibre and tasted it. "Adul! Adul!" or some word that sounded like that, he repeated frequently, and did his utmost to show me that he felt great curiosity about it. Upon this I pulled out a pencil and drew a rough sketch of myself being shot at, taking poetic licence to show the bullet in the air and the leaf dropping from it. Also I tried to represent a man crouching in a bush and popping at me, and although not a glimpse had been vouchsafed me of the villain on that occasion, I allowed imagination to indue him with the plumed hat of Prince Hafer. This I had no right to do; but surely a little liberty is pardonable with a gentleman who has taken a shot at one in the dark. At any rate Stepan fell in most briskly with the inference of this costumiery, and seemed rather pleased at the confirmation of his own moral estimate and foresight.

Until I began to think, I was surprised that he should be so calm about that black attempt to annihilate me; but remembering what he had been through, I let him take it according to his nature. He liked me, he approved of me, he thought me a good Englishman; and yet it would have been no more than the finish of a bear-hunt to him to have carried me home on the hurdle I jumped, when I went to the rescue of Allai. And I looked at him, with some disappointment.

"Enemy!" he said; it was the word that had long been hanging in his windcrop; and now he was so delighted with it that he said it three times over. "Good Englisk; dam enemy. Stepan see all—all right, dam enemy!"

His wondrous baldric (better smocked with cartridge-loops than a parish-clerk could show of plaiting on his Sunday front, in the days when his wife was proud of him) bulged on his mighty chest with the elation of this grand discovery. And then he said, "Bad man, bad man!" in a manner which appeared to me too abstract and philosophical. "No doubt you consider it very fine fun," I replied with some warmth of feeling, but the knowledge that he was no wiser.

Then up ran Allai, at a speed which made him resemble a hunted grasshopper, and I took from [Pg 320] his claws a sealed letter, and looked at them both, in disdain of any hurry. "This will keep," I said very quietly; for though they knew not the meaning of my words, they might be asked afterwards how I received it, and they should have no flurry to report. So I put it in my pocket, like a Briton.

Stepan, and Allai, and one other man not equally well known to me, had evidently been left to finish the packing of some of the heavier goods, and the bales of books which had been printed, and to take them, as well as the beloved dogs, perhaps by some slower route, and rejoin their master by arrangement. I knew that Sûr Imar had long been preparing to move, when his period of banishment expired, but I was sure that he had no intention of departing so suddenly, when I had seen him last. Stepan contrived to let me know that the luggage was going by a smoker in a day or two from London pond, as he called it; and having no further business there, I took leave of him and Allai. The Lesghian giant was dignified and impressive in his long farewell, and gave me his blessing—as I supposed—and his invitation to the Caucasus. Also this comfort—"Enemy gone. No more shoot good Englisk," which was some relief to a heavy mind. But little Allai, and the two dogs—I could scarcely get away from them, so loving and so sad were they. The short November day was darkening, as I left the valley, where I had found so much wild happiness, and so much deep sorrow to humble me.

CHAPTER XXXVII
LOVERS MAKE MOAN

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Now when I had read Sûr Imar's letter, which I hastened to do by the light from the west at the very spot where he had told his tale, there was nothing (at least to a clay-headed fellow) affording definite answer to the questions which concerned me most. The first of these was—why on earth had my friends broken up and departed so hastily? And the second—no less of a puzzle to me—what had I done to give fatal offence? All Sûr Imar wrote was this, wherein I found that although he spoke our language so well and fluently and with better command of it than I have, he was not quite so familiar with the mysteries of our spelling. But let that pass unheeded.

> My dear young Friend,—So I desire to call you still, because I am old, and an old man has learned that he must not listen to everything, neither yield without proof to assertions which contradict his own experience. My belief is that you are as full of honour as I was at your time of life; and it is always most hot in the young, until they are taught that justice is the first thing to be aimed at. And I have a firm belief from my observation of you, that any mistake you may have made was caused by the influence of the moment, and without any intention to do wrong.
>
> I am grieved that I shall have no opportunity of meeting you again in England. We are obliged to depart at once, having heard of an adverse incident, which threatens all my prospects of success. Probably we shall never meet again; and perhaps you will not desire it. But Englishmen go everywhere, even to the inhospitable Caucasus; and I would try to prove to you that the epithet is undeserved, if you would afford me the chance, and show that you still think kindly of your old friend,
>
> Imar, the Lesghian.

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Vexed as I was with painful wonder as to the charge against me, I could not help admiring the large and peaceful nature of this man. He thought that I had wronged his child, the hope of his days, and the heart of his life; and yet not a bitter word did he employ, nor even show a sign of scorn. Not in vain had he passed through the mill of tribulation. By loss of faith in woman's goodness, he had lost all the delights of love, of family bliss, and home, and comfort for the residue of his time on earth. And the lesson it had taught him was to doubt of evil in mankind, or at least in those whom his friendly nature led him to approve and like. Oh! why was not his daughter of an equal trust and largeness? Not a word had she sent me, not even one reproach, which might have told me that her heart was sore. If after all her knowledge of me, all the proof which her eyes alone must have rendered to her mind, one lying tale, whatever it was, had been enough to scatter to the wind all her faith and all her love, then none of it was worth having. So I reasoned, and yet in vain. The stronger my conviction grew, the less was I convinced of it. My heart was all with Dariel still; and let the mind argue as it would, had logic ever looked at her? Any cold dribble may be crystal clear; but the current in the veins of man should be warm and red and glowing.

Under that sudden cloud could I rest without looking up to inquire what it was? All I could do was to guess and guess; but I had no guilty conscience, which is the quickest of all conjecturers. If for one moment of charm, or caprice, any lure of the eye, or bewitchment of a smile, I had gone astray from my one true love, the memory would have come up at once, and suggested to my shame that I was served aright. But there had been nothing of the kind. I had only done what seemed at first the simple duty of friendship, and after that sunk my own delights in the stress of deep affliction. If for this, and no more than this, I was to be treated as a scoundrel, I had a right to know who had put that twist upon it.

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Therefore, on the following day, I took an early train to London, and a cab from the terminus to Hatton Garden, and found Signor Nicolo finishing at leisure a delicate and skilful breakfast. He received me very kindly, and unpinned the napkin from his Italian velvet coat, and offered me a glass of something fine, which proved a great deal too fine for me. My impatience seemed to please him, and he was in no hurry to allay it. And his first words seemed to me to contain some rather impertinent assumption.

"The great point is to be calm, Mr. Cranleigh. To be quite calm, and look at things quietly—ah, yes!"

"I scarcely know what you refer to, Mr. Nickols. What is there to prevent my being calm? I am simply come to ask about some friends, as a—as a matter of business. You were kind enough when I was here before——"

"Come, come now. This won't do. We are not having a deal for a diamond. I know all about it, as well almost as if I had been in the thick of it. Ah, yes! But you find yourself bothered, don't you?"

"Certainly, I don't like it much," I answered, as his black eyes flashed at me, and a merry smile lifted his long moustache. "I did not expect to be treated thus. And I was strongly attached to Sûr Imar."

"And to *Kuban* and *Orla*. Ah, yes, I see! And to Stepan and Allai, and all the rest. What a pity there were no ladies there! You might have become attached to them as well."

"I call it very kind of you to spare me so much time," I answered rather stiffly, for I would have no

vulgar chaff about Dariel; "I was almost afraid of encroaching upon business."

"Duke of K—— at eleven o'clock, Serene Highness of L—— at twelve, King of the Malachites at half-past; and a bigger swell than all of them put together to a devilled bone at 1.30. Therefore we must touch the point. You want to know why our interesting friends have bolted so suddenly; and still more, why they did it without ta-ta to you. That last point I am not clear about, though I have some shrewd suspicions. But I think I can tell you why they made a brief adieu to the [Pg 324] neighbours who never came near them. You will acknowledge that they could not be expected to stand on ceremony there."

"You have got the stick by the wrong end altogether," I broke in, for the sake of justice; "we let them alone, for the excellent reason that we knew they wished to be let alone. No Englishman ever endeavours to push through a gate that is always bolted. Our neighbourhood took no notice of them, because it was known from the very first that they came there for that purpose. And living in a wilderness of ivied ruins——"

"You appear to have turned against them, even more than their behaviour warrants. But for all that, Sûr Imar is a really great man. He looks at things differently from you and me; and it is not for us to judge him. For, like all men who go in for what we don't care about, he is set down as a crank, a dreamer, a man with a tile off, a fellow you would like to toss for sovereigns with, and everything else that a cad of the gutter pities and sucks up to. But I can tell you that the Lesghian old man, as the idiots would call him at forty-five, may defy a Polish Jew to cheat him. For I don't call it cheating a man, when he knows it, and lets you do it, because he scorns you and the cash alike. When you cheat him you are like a man who steals his house-water from a horse-trough, and you deserve to get glanders for it. But what I call fine cheating is to get twice the value of a thing out of a wiry old screw, whose money is his life, and his life all money. Oh, yes! There is some joy in that."

Signor Nicolo rubbed his hands, and then put them into the feeling of his pockets, with a warmth of some rich memory—not very old, I daresay.

"But you would never do such a thing as that?" I asked, with a little doubt quivering in the question. "You would be far above all such ideas?"

"Would I? Of course I would, when I couldn't get the chance. And I would never get the better of a real friend, beyond twenty-five per cent at maximum. And he would make seventy-five on that at the West End. But when a man I hate with a fine religious strength, comes here to get the best of me, screwing up his mouth, and looking righteous, and as cordial as a stewed Spanish onion [Pg 325] —'oh, dear, how lovely! A little flat in the culet—would be perfect but for that milky spot below the zone,' and so on; for what did the Almighty make a man except to chisel such a curmudgeon? Ah, yes, I have done it a hundred times, and hope I may be spared to do it a thousand more. It is not for the money, it is the intellectual triumph. Everybody knows what I am. Come to me fairly, and I treat you fairly. Must have my living wage, of course. But no more, unless you try to rob me. Then you have got the wrong pig by the ear. And it's the very same thing in love, Mr. Cranleigh. Have you tried to take a rise out of Dariel?"

This would have made me very angry with at least nine people out of ten. But I knew that I had a queer character to deal with, and that he meant no harm, but only to get to the bottom of the matter. So I told him that if there was anything of that sort, I thought it was rather the other way. And then I was quite in a fury with myself, for putting it as if she could have done a shabby thing. And I praised her ninefold, and could have gone on for an hour.

"You are all right," he said, "that is clear enough; you are as infatuated as a Goddess could require. We have all been so, some time or other. But you should have seen her mother, ah, yes, ah, yes! Signora Nicolo cannot bear to hear her name, though she ought to be grateful, for it kept me good, and plunged me, I do believe, into matrimony. A sweet woman never knows the good she does, any more than an impudent flippant one can measure her own mischief. For the sake of that noble Oria, as well as of Sûr Imar, who saved, my life, I would go anywhere and do anything, to be of service to Dariel. And for her own sake too, I can tell you, for she is a most charming creature, though a little too soft, like her father. Ah, that's where the mischief will come in! How can you save a man from himself? After all the lies he has suffered from, and the wreck of his life —I know all about it now, though I didn't when I saw you—would you believe that he is spoonier than ever about doing good to those cursed fellows? Saving their souls! Why, they've got none; or [Pg 326] if they have, what are ours to be called? As different as quartz from opal, which are much the same thing though in different form. And as for their bodies, they are big enough already, and dirty enough, and as hard as nails. Let them all kill one another, is what the Lord intended, and Nature does her best to help him. Why, the country ought to belong to us; we could do some good with it. It should have been ours long ago."

"No doubt of that," I replied, for that seems to be the duty of every land; "I knew that Sûr Imar meant to go, and for years he has been preparing to civilise his people; but what has made him go so suddenly?"

"Well, I think it was through a tall young fellow, who has been prowling about for a long time. 'Prince Hafer' he calls himself, Prince of the Ossets, who are next-door neighbours to these Lesghians, when they have any door at all, I mean. I won't pretend to know much about him, but what I have heard is rather shady. He bore a most wonderful reputation among his own niggers, if I may call them so, for the Ossets are rather a dusky lot—never had there been such an Angel

seen; too good, too benevolent, too holy. But Apollyon, the Prince of this village of ours, has been too many for our Mountain-Chief; and he has carried on rarely at the Hotel Celestial, and other sparkling places. If he had not been a Prince, they would have had him up at Bow Street; but he talked about Russia, and they thought he was too big. Moreover, our noble Policemen saw that there was nobody likely to interpret him; so they took it out in coin, according to the custom of the Country. He paid for a mirror and three electro-plated pots; and with mutual esteem they parted. But what a fiend of a temper he must have! For he never gets drunk to make us sponge him with our tears."

"That is most unjust on his part. I have seen him twice, and nearly felt him once. But never mind that. I shall square it up, some day. I beg pardon for interrupting. But how can Sûr Imar ever listen to him?"

"When you are as old as I am, Mr. Cranleigh, one thing alone will surprise you. To wit, that you were ever surprised at the folly of the wisest of mankind. But I have no time for a homily. You want to know how I have learned these things. Have you ever heard of a certain Captain Strogue?" [Pg 327]

"Yes, and I have seen him. And I formed a strong opinion, though all my impressions seem worthless now, that Captain Strogue is a man of honour. In his own way, I mean, and according to his views."

"Not a man who would try to pot you in the dark? I believe that you are quite right so far. Strogue is a man of honour, according to his lights. But, alas, an inveterate gambler; and that saps the foundations of honesty. God made honesty, and man makes honour, and shapes it according to the fashion of the day. Strogue has been here, he has sat in that chair, with his head in his hands, and shivering; for he is also a very hard drinker. I am well known all over Europe, as a purchaser of fine diamonds. Strogue had given an I. O. U. the night before for £500, which he could not redeem. He had been fleeced, and he knew it too well, by paltry little all-round dealers, hucksters at the very bottom of the trade, who have only one test for gem from paste. If your brother Harold were a bit of a rogue he might have a fine game with them. But Strogue had the wisdom at last to come to me. Poor fellow! He has a very fine nature. He absolutely burst into tears, when he saw all the value he had thrown away. 'Signor, I am very hard up,' he said—which is just the right way to begin with me, though the very worst with any other in the trade; 'this is the last and the best of my jewels. A good judge has told me it is very fine. Unless I can raise £500 to-day, I shall have to put a pistol to my head. How much will you give me for this affair?'

"I examined it well, though a glance was enough. Then I tested him as to his ownership, to keep him on the tenterhooks, as he richly deserved; and then I said, 'Captain, I will take it, at a thousand pounds. But only upon one condition.' You should have seen his eyes. It was a lamentable sight to discover such joy in the face of a man, who had done such wonders in his better days. 'My condition,' I proceeded, for he could not speak, 'is that you shall sign a pledge prepared by me.' 'Anything, anything you like,' he answered; and in two minutes he had signed an undertaking upon his honour to abandon every form of gambling. Whether he will keep it is another question; but so far he has kept it, and I think he will hold fast. That is what I call doing good. And the stone was well worth the money." [Pg 328]

I thought that it would have been still more beneficent, if the stone had not been worth the money. But who could expect that, and of whom? Signor Nicolo looked for praise, and I gave it warmly.

"But you did not pump him, on the strength of it?" I asked; and meeting an indignant glance, I qualified my question. "What I mean is, you did not exactly endeavour—your duty towards Sûr Imar, and your desire to protect him from the schemes of that other fellow did not induce you to inquire, I suppose, what this pair of rogues could be driving at? I am not sure that I should have let him go without that."

"To a limited extent perhaps I did," Signor Nicolo answered with a candid smile; "not that I put any temptation in his way to make him turn traitor to his master. But simply that casually, as things came about, he cast away in some degree that cowardly veil of caution, which is always so abhorrent to our better feelings. Nine people out of ten would have cross-examined him. But I did nothing of the sort. Only from some things he let slip I gathered a fair general idea of the game those two are playing. Or rather that other fellow; for to Strogue it can make no difference, unless the bargain is—no play, no pay. Hafer's game is to get possession of the lovely Dariel, as you must have suspected long ago; not for her beauty—those fellows out there pitch-and-toss for that kind of thing—but for the start it will give him, in the universal race of robbery. You must not be mild enough, Mr. Cranleigh, to suppose that you have seen any sample of the Caucasus in the noble Sûr Imar, and his sensitive daughter, or even in the model henchman Stepan. If the camp in your valley had been of the general type, you would not have had a sheep left long ago, much less a cock with a crow in his throat. 'Ragamuffins' is the proper name for most of them. And although these Lesghians, take them all in all, are about the pick of the basket, you would be in the wrong box altogether, if you took them for sweet innocents. They are simply under their chieftain's thumb; and by ancient tribal law, he can chop off their heads when he pleases. This keeps them in order; and they pay for their milk, instead of lifting cattle. Prince Hafer, however, is not under any fealty to Sûr Imar. So far from that, his great aim is to be Lord of the Ossets, and the Kheusurs too, and Karthlos Tower, which is a noble place, and might defy an army for a twelvemonth. Hafer is cunning, but has too much temper; and worst of all, he has not steered clear of the many traps set by civilisation for a young savage with his pockets full. He has fallen [Pg 329]

among a bad lot, a company of young rakes, contemptuous of women, and yet thoroughly in their power."

"What! would he venture near Dariel, after being in such vile company? We have heard that he was almost too good to live. She gave me so grand an account of him, that I thought it was all up with my poor chance. But what a falling off is here! The Prince of all virtues, the paragon of modesty, the hero of all chivalry—and now he won't even sham! Can you explain it, Mr. Nickols?"

"No; that's no business of mine. Nature does it. But I shall hear more about it soon, and get a flood of light let in. In London you never know anything well, from hearing such a lot about everything. But it is not quite the same in the Caucasus. You don't hear much there; but you attend to it. And now you will be surprised to be told, that after so many years of hearing next to nothing of that part of the world, and never seeing one of their celestial peaks, except in a dream, I am likely to know more about them than when I lived there. Ah, if I hadn't got a wife, and three daughters,—and I have let out so much, like a jolly fool, that they won't have French stuff on their birthdays,—I should be ready to be off again; though I could never do the *djedje* now; and the love of sport is not in me, as it is in all true-born Englishmen."

He looked regretful, and perhaps remorseful against his mingled parentage; for there was a vein of the Israelite in him, which saddens and deepens the outlook, without showing any sport, except a gold disc to shoot at.

"Never mind," I answered him, though sorry to have to do it; "you get your little excitements, in your way. And although they are not like ours altogether, they pay ever so much better in the end." [Pg 330]

"Let us come back," he said, thinking in his heart, perhaps, that he could do very well without my sympathy; "my proceedings only bear upon your case in an odd sort of way, which may come to nothing. You remember that I told you of my Russian friend, whom I met at Odessa, twenty years ago, or more. Through him I first went into those savage parts, where he lost his life; and it was a narrow shave that I survived to tell of it, for which I have to thank Sûr Imar. You may have forgotten, but I think I must have told you that my Russian had a brother, an officer in the army then closing round the forces of Shamyl. Very well, who should call upon me a few days after I told you about that, but the very same Russian officer, now second in command of the Caucasus Division, General Stranglomoff himself. He was in London, about some military business, and knowing my intimacy with his poor brother, he did me the honour of calling to hear some particulars of the sad occurrence. I described it as well as I could; and then he said, brushing up his English, as I brushed up my Russian, whenever there was a gap between us—'I am not a jeweller, Signor, and of precious stones I have not any knowledge; but place thine eyes upon this, is it good?" He wore a white glove of soft rat-skin, and upon it was the rich green light of the finest emerald I have seen since I was at Warsaw.

"'Plenty, plenty, twenty, fifty—ten, a thousand! I pray you to accept this pebble, Signor, for my brother's sake,' he said with a very graceful bow; 'he was taken away through these, and I desire no advantage of them.' And with that he shed a tear, which made me think how much we undervalue that fine race. There is no kinder-hearted man on earth, and no more perfect gentleman, than a Russian of the highest order.

"Well, sir, I sent my own nephew out—Jack Nickols, a wonderfully plucky fellow; not much eye for a stone; but sure to stick to his orders, and tell you the truth. If you can't be satisfied with that, good-bye to your chance of keeping anybody very long; for the sharp ones will soon begin to rogue you. Jack is as good a bit of English Metal as you could pick up from the lias to the granite. And not too clever. In fact, Mr. Cranleigh, you remind me of him, at every turn." [Pg 331]

I bowed very deeply at this lovely compliment, with a glance which I meant to be ironical. But Signor Nicolo was too busy with his thoughts to perceive the stern justice he had done me.

"Emeralds are going up," he proceeded, as if I were one of them, "and I should not be surprised if the true grass-green became the rage for the next few years. There are only three gems that will always hold their own, diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. The rest go up and down, according to the fashion; and emeralds have been unduly in the shade. But now they are worth looking after again; and my nephew is the boy to do it. Hit or miss, he will do his best; and we have made an arrangement with the Russian General, under which he is bound to back him up. Jack is not very strong at letter-writing, and the post is not too brisk out there. But he has been on the spot for some time now, and he has made a very good beginning."

All this to me was little more than cold and cloudy comfort. Here was the winter close at hand, the winter of the frosty Caucasus; the friends I loved become strangers to me, and lost to my sight among savages; my own fair fame in some mysterious manner assailed and blasted; and the only hope of further tidings, or redress, yet visible lay in the chances of a roving jeweller's commission! Nickols might take it all quite calmly. His heart was set, and cemented—as one might almost say—upon precious stones, and hard enough, as it seemed to me, to grind them for trade purposes. But in my impatience I wronged him there.

"You must try to make the best of it, Mr. Cranleigh," he went on, as if he understood my thoughts. "You have been horribly slandered, no doubt; and the sweet young lady has swallowed wicked lies, all the more readily because she is a sweet young lady, and for that reason credulous and jealous. But there are a lot of things in your favour still, if you will let me set them before you. I have not the least idea what you are charged with, any more than you have. But whatever [Pg 332]

it may be, the charge will grow fainter, and the faith in it weaker, as time goes on; and the inventor of it will become more hateful. Probably Hafer has invented it; and even while she listens to it, her heart will turn against him. I know what a good woman is, because I have had to deal with them. A man who runs women down, is either a bad lot himself, or a most unlucky fellow. Moreover, she dislikes that cousin of hers, if he is her cousin, for his violence, and roughness, and haughty ways. All that will increase, when he gets home again, and contrasts all their hard and uncivilised life with the luxuries and joys of London. She will turn against him more and more; and her father will never compel her to marry against her wishes. Moreover, there is likely to be some time yet before his schemes come to a head. My young savage has overthrown his cast, or that of his mother Marva. In his urgency to get them back straightway to the land of the mountain without the flood, he has sent them round by St. Petersburg. He insisted so much on the peril they were in of losing all their Lesghian rights, that Sûr Imar resolved, very wisely as I thought, to assert them at headquarters. So Stepan and others were left behind to take the heavy goods straight to Poti perhaps. This was a floorer for Prince Hafer, and he gnashed his teeth, which he dyes yellow; for he is the Devil, and no mistake, when he can't have his own way. You don't consider me a suspicious man, Mr. Cranleigh, do you?"

"A little too much the other way; as is the case with all fine natures," I replied, according to my thoughts; for he was evidently taking my part now.

"In that case, listen to my firm belief. I am not at all up to the tone and style of what those mountaineers do now. And of course I may be as much behind the age, as Sûr Imar wants to be in front of it. But to my mind men are men always, and you can't improve them suddenly. A lot of sham comes in with some races; but not with stubborn chaps like these. Sûr Imar may print a million copies of the Sermon on the Mount; but it won't go down with them. Or it goes down, and never comes up again. You may as well pour gold into a cesspool. My firm belief is that this Prince Hafer intends to get our noble friend out there, marry his daughter, and then shoot him, and combine that heritage with his own. Ah, yes!" [Pg 333]

Nickols had a very quiet and even pleasant manner of imparting the most atrocious thoughts, that could ever drive another man out of his mind. I looked at him to ask whether he could mean it; and he smiled and answered, "You may take it for a fact."

"But his own sister, his twin sister, the darling of his childhood—Marva! How could all such wickedness go on without her knowledge? It is impossible to imagine that she would allow it."

"She sent her son to England for that very purpose," Mr. Nickols replied, in a tone of deep conviction. "It may not sound sisterly; but it is true. There is the blood-feud between them. That they have been in the womb together only makes it deadlier. I know what I am talking of."

If he did—and he spoke as if it were an ordinary matter—I can only be certain that I did not. My brain was quite stunned with such horrible ideas; and I almost felt as if Dariel herself would be too dear, at the price of any connection with such vile and blood-thirsty savages. Then I felt bitter reproach at blaming a sweet, gentle darling for what she could not help; and after providing for quick communication, I hurried away, with my heart in a whirl.

CHAPTER XXXVIII
BLACK FRIDAY

[Pg 334]

In whatever condition a man may be placed, under the will of Heaven, there is generally something to alleviate it, if he seek perseveringly; and always something to aggravate it, without any exertion on his part. In my present trouble I had several consolations; and the best and sweetest of them was the kindness of my sister Grace. She had leaped, without looking for any signal, or even any ground to jump from, to the solid conclusion that her poor brother George had been treated most cruelly, shamefully, shockingly, and if there be worse than this, put it on the pile. And yet she never spoke of it—never at least to me (though she may have filled the world with it to her beloved Jackson)—but let me know her sympathies by a silent lift of cover, as a large and capable ham-boiler does,—when a tin saucepan would have blown its top off. A man loathes sympathy if he is of English race; nothing irritates him more than for other fellows to come prying down into what goes on inside him. Even to his dearest friend, he does not stretch out his heart, like a washerwoman's line; what may be inside it is his own concern; and, like a gentleman, he must not be too curious about that, so long as it leads him into nothing mean. All I can say is that I never felt inclined to be savage towards the female race, because one of them had disappointed me. And the beauty of it was that I could not hold one spark of rancour against her. The great generosity of love was in me; and all the fault I had to find went abroad among her sex, but never touched herself. So do jilted poets wail about all other women, but acquit the one they love.

But Grace showed her sympathy more delicately, according to her sex and education. What pleased me most in her behaviour was that she never brought her own little whiffs of love—and lovers are always having either whiffs, or tiffs—into her placid pretty interviews with me. She even broke out against her own sect, now and then—for the women had begun to make sect of sex even then, as they feign to do now altogether—and expressed a contempt of them, which any man would have been extremely rash to acquiesce in. She meant it for the best, and I was much [Pg 335]

obliged about it; but not the faintest fibre of my heart was put in tune by it.

Then all of a sudden it became the duty of my life to comfort her. One evening, getting on for Christmas-tide, I was sitting in my beloved den, after a rather hard day's work, as glum as a Briton can wish to be, but soothed by my pipe, and the smell of saddles, when in came Grace very quietly and kindly, but without saying anything at first, as if I were too busy to notice her. She began to sweep a trifle of tobacco-dust which had dropped on the table contradictorily—for I am a wonderfully tidy fellow—into the pink cup of her palm; and then she went and put something straight that was straight enough before for any man; and then she pretended not to hear me, when I asked—"What is the matter, dear?" for I knew as well as a thousand sighs could have told me, that she was in trouble; and being up to every trick of hers, I was sure that her eyes were full of tears, although she would not let me see them.

"Butter returned on your hands again?" I suggested in a feeling tone; for there was an old lady, quite a double patent screw, at the further end of the parish, who was never tired of boasting—as old Croaker told us more than once—that her butter was made by a baronet's daughter, yet sent her such messages as no Duchess would think of sending to her dairymaid. "Returned on my own hands," Grace seemed to mutter, and I let her take her time, unable as I was to make this out. Then without caring properly where she might be in the narrow little room, she hit upon, by force of a gleam from the fireplace, that very same cracked and spotted looking-glass, in which my friend Tom had admired himself. With infinitely better reason—however feminine and wavering— [Pg 336] Grace Cranleigh might have regarded herself, and defied any one (except Dariel) to peep over the snowy shoulders. But instead of pride, what came? I know not. Only that I flung my pipe away, and had my darling sister in my arms, where she cast away all pretence, and would have spoiled any waistcoat that was not worn out.

"He—he—he," she sobbed. And I said—"What he?" and she answered "him," as if there was only one man in the world, though he might go into fifty cases. "Jackson?" I asked. But she would not have it even at such a crisis.

"My Jack," she declared, looking up at me, as if every George was rubbish; "my own Jack—will you never understand? And when I was getting so fond of him."

"Getting indeed! Why you have thought of nothing else, for at least three months. You have made too much of him; with the usual result, I daresay."

"Oh don't touch me! Don't come near me! No wonder your Dariel ran away. You have not the least sense of noble things. What have I done, to have such a brother?"

"There must be a crack in the family," I said, as she cut away into a Windsor chair, and fixed all her soul on the fire, as if it were the only warm thing left on earth.

"Wonderful, wonderful," I pursued my own reflections, till she should come round.

"And you don't even seem to care to ask what it is he has done to me!" Grace began to show her pretty nose over her left shoulder, while I snuffed the candles, and began to fill a pipe. "Though you know the high opinion I always have of your opinion."

"You had better not say a word about it," I answered in the kindest manner; "no doubt it is the usual thing. You told me that all men were alike, till you made such an idol of poor Stocks and Stones. Now you see that he is just like the rest of us."

"I have long ceased to hope for any greatness from you; but I did expect some fairness," my sister spoke as if I had not allowed her to say a word all this time: "you know that I cannot argue, [Pg 337] George; or at least you pretend to think so, which comes to the very same thing with a man. Then how thoroughly ashamed of yourself you ought to be, as soon as you can spare me time to tell you the simple truth. Mr. Jackson Stoneman, the gentleman you with such admirable taste and such lofty humour call 'Stocks and Stones,' is not tired of me, as you kindly imagine. In fact he thinks more of me than ever. If you had only seen his face——"

"Don't cry, my dear child. Now don't cry any more. I am very sorry if I misunderstood you. But how could I help it? You do take such a time. What can be his reason for behaving in this manner?"

"Because he is ru—ru—ruined!" She never was much of a hand at crying; but this terrible word, and her effort at it, served as the cord that brings down the shower-bath. "Hoo—hoo—hoo!" she went, and it was no good for me to say anything. "Oh that Dariel were crying for me like that!" was the thought that came into my selfish heart. "I should not mind being ru—ru—ruined, if I could only hope for that!" Then Grace got better, as girls always do, if you let them have their cry out.

"What makes it so—so distressing, so heart-breaking, is that the whole of it has been through me —through me, whom he chose without a single penny—me, who had nothing more than poverty to bring him, poverty, and faith, and a very ordinary mind! And then, not content with that, I must do my best to rob him of every farthing of his noble fortune. Perhaps one of the wealthiest men in the world, until he set eyes upon unlucky me. Oh George, it will never be in your power to understand my pure contempt for money! Yet you ought not to rob anybody of it; and I have robbed the noblest man that ever lived of every penny, every penny!"

"In the name of the forty thieves, and Morgiana, and the man they cut into four pieces, how can

you have done all this?" I asked, being certain that there never was a girl more reasonable, yet remembering how the wisest of them love a little speculation.

"To anybody but you, George, it would be too self-evident to require any explanation. Why will you drive me to a thing so painful? Do you mean to say that he does not love me?" [Pg 338]

"Better than his life, I believe; and better even than his money. But how does that bear upon the matter? They don't quote love upon the Stock Exchange."

"Oh George! And you think you are a business man!" Grace smiled gloriously through her tears, possibly through her triumph over me, probably through the joy of my assurance. "Can anybody do two things at once? Could my Jack attend to ups and downs, keep his whole mind intent on Argentinas, contangoes, fundangoes, holdovers, and holdunders, and even unspeakable Turks with fifty wives, when the whole of his pure heart was down here? Why he only went up about once a-week, if he could get me to go out nutting with him."

"Alas, I see. Neglected business. Left understrappers, and dashing young clerks, and trusty old codgers with pens behind their ears to stick to the stools, while he made sweet hay. But there must be something more than that."

"You turn everything into vulgarity, George. And you are capable of laughing at the most sacred things. But there was more than that, and a great deal more than that. You may have heard him speak in his grand confiding manner of a man named Franks, who has been with him many years. He has promoted him from place to place, and trusted him with almost everything; and I do believe that Franks had no intention of doing anything crooked. And he spoke in the most enthusiastic terms of me, though of course they never mention such a subject in the office. And when Black Friday came, as you know it did, through some very stupid error of the Government, Jack only laughed at first, except for the sake of some dear friends of his, who were hit rather hard; it appeared so ridiculous to suppose that a firm like his could be affected. But there proved to be something, I cannot quite understand it, although I keep my books so clearly that I know every farthing owing to me, something, some involvement, some terrible affair, which will force him to give up the Hall, and the shooting, and the pedigree Butterfly cows, and even me."

"Don't let him do it. Don't hear of it for a moment. You will never get such another fellow;" I exclaimed, as she turned away to wipe her glistening cheeks. "He'll come round as right as a roach in the end. You didn't let him off on that tack, I hope?" [Pg 339]

"As for letting him off, dear George, is he a trout that I should treat him so? He is not like a slippery fish for a moment, but a deep-hearted, true-hearted, wonderful man. Why his conversation is as different from yours—but I will not depreciate you, unless you go against me. Only I should like to know how I can help myself. When a gentleman says—'I am truly sorry, but I can't have any more to do with you'—oh dear, oh dear, what can any lady do?"

"Lay hold of his coat, and say, 'None of that nonsense! I am the best judge of that question, and I have settled it the other way; unless you put up the bans within a month, you must favor me with the address of your Solicitors.'"

"Don't laugh at me. I have never laughed at you. I did tell him over and over again that the money could never make any difference to me, and indeed that I was very glad, except for his sake, because then nobody could ever say—but he talked of the duty of a man, and so forth, and the crime of allowing me to sacrifice myself, and a Cranleigh the wife of a bankrupt, and I don't know what else, for I broke down then, and he was obliged——"

"Of course he was—any amount of physical sustentation, as the reporters call it. But leave it to me, my dear. Where is he now? Too late for him to go back to London, I should think. But I wonder he didn't come to see me."

"He did. But you were not to be found. Oh George, I am thinking of every one of us. What shall we do? The Hall will be thrown upon our hands again, at a time of year when you would as soon live in a hearse. And Harold has made another of his great hits, which always cost a hundred pounds, and never produce a penny. How often I wish that I were like old Sally, without any pedigree Butterfly blood, and allowed to go and rout my husband up, just as Mrs. Slemmick is!"

"She routed him out from the root-house, last week," said I, being glad of any frivolous turn that might bring the dry colours into the rainbow; "she believed that he was gone for ever, without leaving his wages in his Sunday waistcoat pocket, and Snowdrop Violet Hyacinth just wheezing into the whooping-cough. But no; she underrated the nobility of man. He had tucked up his legs on a big flower-pot with a pipe in his mouth; and his heart was so full that he was going without breakfast. Are women alone to be considered faithful?" [Pg 340]

"You mean that I am worse than Mrs. Slemmick." Girls never take the moral of the proverb aright. "Very well, I daresay I am. But I will never tuck my feet upon a flower-pot, and wait to be coaxed home, when the tea is getting cold. There is something very large in the character of Slemmick, and he shows it by his confidence in feminine affection. At the same time, it does appear a little small of you, to quote Mother Slemmick against me. She is married, and cannot help herself."

"Hear, hear!" I cried, leaving her to put the point to it; which she did with a blush, and a very cheerful smile. Then she gave me a kiss, to make up for little words; and I set out to see what I could do for her.

I found the poor Stockbroker looking stock-broken, and sitting on a hard chair, with his long legs crossed.

"Off for the Mediterranean?" I asked; and he said—"Bay of Biscay, or Bay of Fundy. Going to the bottom anyhow."

"Rot!" I replied, with less elegance than terseness. "Don't try to make me think that you would ever throw the sponge up. I know you a bit better than that, Jackson Stoneman."

"*'Rot!' I replied, with less elegance than terseness.*"

"Would you like me to be a thief, George Cranleigh? If I choose to be a thief, I can slip out very lightly. But if I prefer to be an honest man, there is very small chance of my doing it."

He told me in a few words what his position was, owing to a panic which had ended in a crash, through the roguery of a few, and the folly of the many; and how his own firm had become involved in thoroughly unsound transactions, mainly through his own inattention and his confidence in a very clever fellow, who had cut things a little too fine at last, as very clever fellows nearly always do. [Pg 341]

"We must lose a quarter of a million," he said, "even if we pull through at all, which is more than doubtful. All depends upon to-morrow. But it is not for myself that I care, George. It is for your darling sister—the best, and the bravest, and the most unselfish girl—why she wanted to stick to me through everything! She behaved as if it could make no difference between us."

"I should hope so indeed. I would disown her if she did otherwise. Did you think that she was going to have you for your money, Jackson?"

"I am not quite so bad as that, you may be sure. Still you must excuse a modest fellow for thinking his money the best part of him." Here I was glad to see one of his old dry smiles. "But the point of it is this, as you know well enough without my telling—I can have nothing more to say to Grace, who was worth all my cash, and my credit, and ambitions, and everything except my conscience to me."

"That is all very fine, and very lofty in its way," I answered with a superior smile, which refreshed him, as it was meant to do; "and among City people it may hold good, or the big world of the Clubland. But no sound Englishman takes it so. You don't suppose that my father approved of your going in for our Grace, because you then were a wealthy man, I should hope." I spoke with strong confidence; but perhaps the strength of it was chiefly in my voice.

"God forbid!" he replied with horror; while I tried not to doubt that God had forbidden. "No, I am

well aware that Sir Harold disliked it from the first, and Lady Cranleigh even more. It was nothing but the goodness of dear Grace. And that makes it such a frightful thing for me. Why, that Angel was ready to stick to me, like—like a brick, if I only would allow it. A man who knows the world would never believe it for a moment."

"Then he must know a very bad world, and be a worthy member of it. What do you suppose I would have done to my sister, if she had been mean enough to shy off, because of your misfortune?"

"How can I tell, George? You are one of the most pig-headed fellows going. But you could not [Pg 342] have been angry with her, for not being quite as stubborn as you are."

"Jackson, this is what I would have done. I would have taken the mane-scissors that hang above my mantel, and shorn off her great crop of hair to her ears. No gold for her there, if her heart were all pinchbeck."

Stoneman looked at me with outraged feelings. "Not even a brother could do that," he said, "brutal as brothers by nature seem to be. But without any humbug, George, do you really mean that you wish it to go on?"

"If I did not, I should be a wretched snob. It was not for money that you wanted Grace; and you insult her by fancying that she wanted you for yours."

"All this is very pleasant doctrine, and an edifying parable for little boys and girls;" the Stockbroker had a peculiar trick of showing his keen eyes as if in a gable, when his mind was puzzled or excited; "but it would not hold water, George, either in a court of honour, or a council of wisdom. Grace is entitled, both by birth and beauty, and I am sure that I might say by intellect as well, to a position which high rank alone, or wealth on her husband's part, can secure. High rank I cannot give her. Wealth I could have given. But the prospect of that has vanished, and with it vanishes all my hope of her. Oh that she had only thrown me over! I could have got over it then. But not now."

"Now look here," I said, as a Briton always calls attention to the knock-down blow he is delivering; "all that would be worth listening to, if it had anything to do with the matter. But, as it happens, my sister Grace doesn't care a flip about position, any more than I do, or you, or anybody else with a ha'porth of common-sense. We value the opinion of good people; and we like money for the comfort of others, as well as ourselves. But as for that mysterious affair you call 'position'—the more you poke your head up, the harder cracks you get on it. Grace will be contented with whatever pleases you. That holds you together, and you never slip away. People who have only got a lawn enjoy it a thousand times as much as a lord enjoys his park. And a man who loves his wife does not want to lose her among a thousand men and women he has never [Pg 343] heard of, all pushing about to please themselves, and sneering at them both, by way of gratitude."

"You will make a fine domestic character, George, if you only act up to your theories. I shall never forget your true friendship and noble behaviour in this matter. I shall take my own course, however, as I always do. I know what is right: and you may talk for ever. There is only one voice that could move me, and that one shall have no chance of doing it (even if desired) for her own sweet sake. But everything will depend upon to-morrow; if things are as bad then as they have been to-day, there will be no escape for me. Grace shall never be a bankrupt's wife. If her sense of honour urges it, mine forbids. And it is not only honour, but common-sense, my friend. Your family has fallen in the world too much already. It shall not be dragged lower by any connection with a defaulting Stockbroker."

His face showed no sign of emotion now; and I owned to myself that from his point of view no other course was possible for a man of honour. Whether his point of view was right or wrong, is quite a different question; but in spite of all my reasoning, I have very little doubt that I should have done as he did.

CHAPTER XXXIX [Pg 344]
FRANGI, NON FLECTI

"Jack is getting on like a house on fire," Signor Nicolo wrote in an envelope enclosing a rather grimy letter, which I received on the following morning; "he has not had a classical education, and so you can always make out what he means. Specimens to hand confirm his opinion. Perhaps I shall go out in the spring. Could not stand the cold there now. Come and see me whenever you think fit."

When this was put into my hand, I was ready to start for London, having promised to meet Stoneman outside the Exchange, at one o'clock. This had been my own proposal, for one can never be certain how a man may take great ups and downs of fortune; and although I had not much apprehension as to Stoneman's fortitude, it seemed to me that a good friend should be at hand and do his best for him. So I read the letter of young Jack Nickols, on my way to London-Bridge, and found it very straightforward and simple; and who cares for spelling after that? The rising generation gets on very well without it, and a thousand school-boards do their utmost to

destroy its memory.

"Never did see a place so mountanious,"—this young fellow said, where I first began to read, for the Signor had kept the first page in his pocket, or leather bag, or steel safe, so far as I could tell—"you never get up to the jag of one knife-grinder, before you have got to fetch your wind, and grind your bones for another. The Alps is nothing to it; they goes up gradual, and is ever so much smaller to my mind. And you don't get big chaps here to shove you up and keep you straight. These fellows cackle at you with a horrid voice, and they squat in a ring and stare at you, if you want to go up any clumsy sort of peak, and they tell one another that all Englishmen are mad. But they are as sharp about the rhino as Petticoat Lane crossed with a New Cut costermonger; and you can't bring them to book, as you can a thief at home. You have to do it all through a chap who knows their lingo; and you can't make out what he is saying to them, and you can't be sure, without your revolver ready that they won't stick their skewers, which they call jingles, into your spine, without letting you look round. I had a poor time of it at first; but they seem to be getting now to make me out. [Pg 345]

"When you come to know them, you might find worse fellows; for I cannot call them treacherous exackly. They would skin you to your spare-rib, if you let them have the chance; but they won't stick a knife into you, until you aggravate them. I am getting rather thick with some of them, by making out a little of their crack-jaw words, though there seems to be no end of them. But talk about jaws, I need not tell you, as you have seen too much of them. There was a man in Yorkshire, about fifty years ago, who could get through a lamb, and then three quarters of her mother. But one of these fellows would eat the whole sheep first, and then take her little ones for desert. But you must remember that their sheep weigh less than ours, and I like to see a man make a hearty dinner. But it is hard lines to pay him for the sheep; and then let him come to dine with you, as he must do, so that you never get a taste of it.

"However I am not complaining. The country must be beautiful, when the snow lets a fellow look at it, and you think the more about it, because it is out of sight. Tell Rosa that the girls are not a patch upon her, and she would laugh to see how they put their hair up. The men are not refined enough to think much of the women; but make them wear swabs upon their faces, and the insects are tremenjious in the summer-time. We have got more than we can do now to keep any road clear to get at the pocket where the stones are, just a soft place between two tremenjious rocks; down comes the snow again, and you could scarcely find it out, unless you leave a black tar-pole sticking up, and then you must fix it wonderfully firm, or you won't find it in the morning, for the wind does blow, I can tell you. We shall have to knock off for three months, I am afraid, and where am I to go to all the time? The Russians are not half bad fellows, only some of them too pious when you come to know them. Only you may be glad of that sometimes, because when they go to say their prayers, you get the best place by the fire. I don't care for quite so much tea myself, and I have not tasted a good bit of tobacco for a month. But everybody says that when some great man, who has been living for several years in England, and I do believe I have heard you speak of him, when he comes back they say he will change everything, all the thieves of the mountains will begin to say their prayers, and nobody will stick his best friend for nothing. If this can be managed, it will be a true excelsior. [Pg 346]

"But you remember what the people said, the year we went to Yarmouth; and it is out of the question for me to say what I would give to be there now. They said, and you could not deny it when you wanted a bloater before they came in—'Sir, we lay ourselves out to oblige all the gents that come from London, but we cannot make a red herring swim.' I could not see exactly how they meant it, but it is just the same thing in the Caucasus.

"For a long time I could not see my way to be sure of not being struck at any moment. But I got over that idea, as we must, if we mean to get on anywhere. I will not say that my life is sacred now, as people express it in London; but ever since the popular opinion began to identify me with the Devil, through their ignorance of English manners, I have had a much better time of it. Tell Rosa, that in spite of uncommonly rough victuals, I weigh seven pounds more than I could pull, when she came to see me off at Wood-Green station. Nobody ever weighs anybody here, for after all they are not cannibals; though I told her so, to make her kiss me. But the steelyard I brought goes to half an ounce, and has saved me a lot of money. And tell her, if you think that it won't be too encroaching, under the peculiar circumstances, that I am not quite turned into the Devil yet, though she might say so if she could see me; and even if the climate had done it, an Angel like her need not be afraid of him. Hoping to come home with a sackful of emeralds, believe me, dear Uncle James, your most affectionate nephew, John Nickols." [Pg 347]

At the bottom of this very vague and disjointed, but as it proved afterwards too true description, Signor Nicolo had written in pencil: "Rosa is my eldest daughter; but I shall have to put a stop to it."

"My noble countrymen!" as Sûr Imar used to call them,—it would take a long time to fetch them up to that mark, according to this English boy's account, and the enthusiastic chief could not begin too soon. It appeared to me that as many generations as he could trace from Karthlos

would scarcely be enough to restore them to the level of antediluvian "culture." No wonder that he was in a hurry to begin; and if I am doomed to wait for the completion of his task, *erit altera quæ vehat Argo*, there will be another ark on the top of Ararat. And sure enough, here is another Babel to begin with!

For in the absorption of the thoughts above recounted, I found myself caught in the whirl and crush and uproar of a crowd as wild as any savage land could show. A crowd not of paupers but well-dressed people roaring and raging and besieging the portals of the Stock Exchange. Battered hats, and coats in tatters, fists thrown up, but unable through crunched elbow to come down again, faces black with choking wrath, wherever the brown mud peeled from them, grinding teeth and cursing lips, and chests that groaned with the digs they took without any chance of returning them—I thought of Lord Melladew's father and the bullock compressed into his clover-hay. Only let me keep outside the pack of the central squeeze if possible; for once in there, no strength of man could get me out or let me out. So I put up my knee, which was a dangerous thing to do, for if I lost my feet good-bye to me; when a gentleman, with whom it [Pg 348] would have been a joy to dine—so comely, and well-liking, and well-to-do was he—being unable to get at me with his fists, let out at me with language I had never heard the like of. I attempted no retort, for he had already got the worst of it, and without any knowledge how it came to pass, except that there must be more luck than wit in shoving, here I was with my clothes still pretty sound, outside the drum of squashed figs and squealing pigs.

But another poor fellow was not so lucky. "Let him go, slide him on, he'll be dead in half a minute. Serve him right. No, no. How'd you like it? Don't tread on him, more than you can help." It was a solid man upon the ground, but likely to be hollow, before ever he could be an upright man. I had got a short knob-stick in my hand (which I always carried, since my faith in human nature had waned through that dastardly bullet) and in the most blundering and selfish manner I set the knob against my breast and the stub-end foremost, and charged into the lump of figures across me. Considerable yielding, and heads running into heads, and yellow waistcoats sloping like sheaves of wheat in shock, and big boots toeing up at me, and a hail of blows in flank—it is impossible to say how I got on. But there must have been a hollow place somewhere in the mass, for they fought into a lane, and allowed me to lay hold of a pair of yellow shoes, or at least they had been yellow, and tow out the prostrate body on its back, and feel it for the signs of life or death. "Ain't dead yet," said a hoarse and husky voice; "never fainted in my life, and don't mean to do it now."

I admired the pluck of this poor fellow; for indeed he was in a frightful mess, and another half-minute must have silenced him forever. With the help of a bystander, who only cost a shilling, I was able to get my trodden friend across the street, and into a double doorway, where a score of people came and stared at him. "Well, if he ain't a tough 'un. Cut the poor bloke's collar. Stand him on his pins, and blow to him. Give him a drop of brandy." Advice poured in on every side, more freely than assistance.

"Don't you know who I am, you fools?" The injured man sat up with the aid of one hand on the [Pg 349] stones, and gazed defiantly. "All over the world I've been, but never saw such cursed idiots. Captain Strogue, sir, of the British Pioneers."

He glanced at me with hazy eyes, which told of many strong waters, and would tell of many more, if Heaven permitted; and then he tried to bow, but a pang in his chest took the grace from that salutation. "All right! Down the alley, three doors to the left."

He shoved away all who pressed forward to lift him, but allowed me to help him with his knees still hanging, to the place he had indicated. And sure enough everybody knew him there.

"The Captain, the Captain, the bold British Captain! He have been in the wars, and no mistake!" Out came the landlady and the barmaid, with tears in their eyes—for he had promised to marry both—and an ancient potboy with all his wits about him brought a rummer and a teaspoon, and stirred up something hot. "That's the physic, ma'am," he said; and the lady smiled and offered it, and met with no refusal.

In a word, Captain Strogue was in the right place now, and after helping to bestow him snugly upon a horse-hair sofa in a small back room, I was at the point of leaving, when he put up one hand and stopped me.

"Owe you my life," he said; "not worth much now, but has done a deal of service to civilization. Near St. Paul's, ain't we? That's where they'll put me. Know your face very well, but can't remember."

He seemed to be dropping off into a doze, having finished his strong potation; but I told him my name and where I had met him, for I was eager to be off to keep my time with Stoneman.

"Don't be in a hurry, sir; you have helped me, and I can help you. Strogue pays his debts. Somebody else will find that out." His eyes shone fiercely, and he pressed his knuckles to his side. "Widow Lazenby knows what I am—don't you, ducky?"

"Oh, Captain! And at such a crisis!" the landlady murmured, after looking round to be certain where the barmaid was. "But, sir, he have described himself. Wonders he have done, without [Pg 350] wondering at himself."

It is a righteous thing that men of such achievements should have their reward, where it is

sweetest. Fame they may never get, for that is all a fluke; gold they scarcely ever gain, because they are no grubbers; love they cannot stop to grasp, and see but savage frames of it; rank they laugh at, having found it the chief delight of black boys; but to get his grog for glory, and his victuals for victory, is the utmost any English pioneer can hope of England.

"Cranleigh, you can go," said Strogue, for his manners were not perfect; "you are involved in this little shindy, and you want to know all about it. These thieves shut shop at one o'clock on a Saturday, some one told me. But if you will come back by two, I shall have set this rib by then, and have rump-steak and oysters. Join me, without any ceremony. I owe you a debt, and you shall have it."

I had seen too many strange things now to be surprised at anything, as I might have been six months ago; and it was plain that this companion of the hateful Hafer meant to do me some good turn at a private opportunity. So I promised to return by two o'clock, and hurried to Stoneman's business place, avoiding the crowd that still was yelling at every approach to the House of Mammon. "Bless you, sir; it is nothing at all compared to what it was yesterday. Ah, that was something like a row!" a big policeman told me; "there was fifty taken to hospital, and the barriers snapped like hurdles. Why, there ain't been half-a-dozen ribs to-day. You can't call that no panic."

Neither did I find any panic at Jackson Stoneman's offices. A stolid old clerk was putting things away, and evidently anxious to get home to early dinner. He told me that his principal had been disappointed at not meeting me, and concluded (as the train had been in long enough) that something had occurred to stop me, and so had departed on his own account. When I asked how things had gone that morning, old Peppersall eyed me with some indignation, as if it were impossible for anything to go wrong with a firm so stable and majestic. "Well, how did the senior [Pg 351] partner look?" I asked; and Peppersall replied: "He was a bit put out about a sixpence that rolled off a desk in room No. 8, till it turned up under the wainscoting."

"You'll do," I said rather rudely, for this rebuff was not too courteous, and he stared at me as if there could be any doubt about his doing. "That is the sort of fellow for a business-man, instead of any new young manager"—was my reflection, as I strode with good heart towards the rump-steak and oysters.

Captain Strogue had been sponged and darned and brushed and polished up—so far as he was capable of polish—by skilful and tender hands, and was sitting in a brown arm-chair, as bolt upright as if his ribs had thickened, as a barn-floor does, by the flail of many heels upon them. "Keep 'em like that," he said, "for about two hours, and fill up well inside, and it stands to reason that they must come right—can't help themselves. Doctors? None of them for Bat Strogue. The only doctor I ever knew was any good is down your way now, a queer German cove. Say grace for me, and carve for me, and fall to, my son. Take me for your guest; and you might have a more squeamish one."

CHAPTER XL [Pg 352]
TWAIN MORE THAN TWIN

In spite of all anxiety, it was impossible to be anxious for the moment, in the company of this extraordinary fellow. Doubt is the most hostile and hateful element to all human pleasure; and doubt was at once kicked out from the society of Captain Strogue. Certainty stood in its place, as firm as—well, I might say as firm as Strogue's own nose, for I can think of nothing firmer. Short and thick and straight it was, like a buttress to support his bulky forehead, and keep his bright and defiant eyes from glaring into one another; for they had a little cast towards it. Certainty also in the strongest point of all—that whoever you might be, or wherever you had been, never till now had you come into contact—or collision, if you liked that sort of thing—with a member of your race so far above all little weakness, and yet so ready to participate in it, if you would pay the bill for him, as your new but true friend, Bartholomew Strogue.

"Imar is an exceedingly fine chap," he said, as he lit a long clay pipe, after a dinner which impressed me with the truth that the more a man sees the more he feeds; "you are too young, friend Cranleigh, to have any powers of reflection. But you may take it from me, that there are only two ways now of being fit to consider yourself a fine chap. Of course I don't talk of nincompoops, who think themselves wonderful always. What I mean is in common-sense; and there you can only be above the ruck, by despising the human race, as I do; or loving it, as Imar does. I have found nothing in them to admire, though I have seen the inner side of many [Pg 353] celebrated men; and as for loving them—well, I suppose the Lord puts that into you, and bungs up your eyes. The man who can do it is the happiest of his race, and a great deal too good to be left among them. No fool can do it; for a fool always goes by facts."

"Sûr Imar is the largest-minded man I ever knew," I broke in upon Strogue with some indignation. "He looks at the best side, as all good people do. He likes human nature, because he judges by himself."

"Contempt is at the bottom of it. Amiable contempt, if you like to call it so. The contempt of an equitable mind, that knows the faults of its owner, and loving them, makes allowance for the like

in others. Bless your heart, Cranleigh, I like people well enough; but I despise them, because I despise myself. Come now, that is fair play. I am not argumentative; no man of action ever is. But that view of the case is a puzzle to you."

"Not a bit," I answered, with a smile of modest triumph; "you despise mankind, because you think they are like you. Sûr Imar loves them, because he thinks they are like him!"

"Bravo! I like a man who tries an honest rap at me. Bat Strogue never takes offence at truth, because he very seldom gets the chance. But I did not fetch you here to argue with you. I believe that I can be of service to you, very good service, such as you have rendered me; though perhaps you would not have pulled me out, if you had known who it was you got hold of?"

"Yes, I would; and with all the greater pleasure. I thought that you were a decent Englishman; though I saw you in very bad company, that day!"

"A decent Englishman! One of the most celebrated travellers of the age! Such is fame. Wait until my book comes out. I might have been the lion of the season, if I liked. What are S. and G. and L.? What have they done in comparison with me? However, let them have it for the moment. Bad company, Cranleigh? You are quite right there. Many scurvy tricks have I been played; but none to come near what that blackguard has done. The fool, the besotted fool he must be. I was told [Pg 354] you were far away in Yorkshire, and engaged to be married to a lady there. Nothing of the sort? If I had known that, I would have come down to see you. He thinks he has got everything his own way; and he has thrown me over on the strength of it. Much more than that—much worse than that. Oh, what a pretty mistake he has made! Nobody ever fooled Bat Strogue yet, without paying out for it. Things are gone far, very far, my friend; but we may be even with them yet. I see things now that I never dreamed of. But tell me first of your own share in them."

I told him briefly what had happened to myself. How after winning a pledge for life from Dariel, and the approval of her father, I had been suddenly called away to the wedding of my oldest friend, and had been kept there for several days by the sudden distress of the family. Then as soon as I could get away without inhumanity I had hastened home, and been utterly astonished to find the valley empty, and no message left for me, except that cold letter from the man who had been so kind. And then I told him also what I knew from Signor Nicolo, and his black suspicions as to Hafer's object.

"It is impossible for them to be too black," Strogue replied with an ominous smile. "Sûr Imar's life is not worth the lump of sugar melting under this glass pestle. Hafer's heart is vile enough, but a viler heart, and a brain ten times as resolute and as deep as his, are set upon poor Sûr Imar's death. I see it all now with the help of what you tell me. I took it in quite another light before. There is one thing still that I cannot understand. I fell out with that miscreant first, because I found that he wanted me to lend a hand to get you put out of the way, as if I were one of his tribesmen. What puzzles me beyond everything is that he never tried it."

"He did try it, and a very narrow shave I had. It was the very night after I saw you with him." Then I told Strogue the particulars of that cowardly and cold-blooded attempt, and Stepan's conclusion about it.

"It is impossible to doubt it. The murderous sneak! One thing I can tell you, young man; that marriage of your friend has saved your family the expenses of your funeral. Two days more in [Pg 355] that part of the world would have sent you to your last account. He would never have shot at you again; such is their superstition, that he believes you invulnerable by bullet; but he would have put a long dagger into you, springing from a corner in the dark. At that game you would have no chance with him, even if you were on the outlook. You are stronger than he is, I daresay; but he is the most lissome fellow I have ever met, and I have handled a good many twisters and skippers in the way of savages. And to think that I should be almost trodden into dust, like the emmets in a hymn I used to learn, by a trumpery lot of common cockneys. It was contempt of the enemy that did it, a thing that generally ensures defeat. None of that now, that won't do now. Cranleigh, we shall have to do all we know; and the chances are that it will never be enough. It is not for Hafer, so much as that fiend of a woman, who stands behind him. One of the worst that ever walked this earth, and that is no small order, I can tell you. A bad woman is blacker than a man, as many shades as gas-tar is than Stockholm pitch."

"But who is it? Who is it? You have hinted that before. What woman in the world would hurt Sûr Imar, who looks upon them all as angels, in the reaction from his great mistake?"

"I will tell you who it is, by-and-by; and you will be surprised a little. But first a few questions; and very important. The luck has been terribly adverse. Most of all in this, that I should not have known, until it was too late to stop him, the scoundrelly schemes of this Hafer, and his abrupt cut-and-run. But if I have made a mistake, so has he. Bat Strogue is hard to beat, young man; though he thinks so little of himself. But now, first of all, is there any chance of catching Stepan? He is a thick, of course; as all faithful servants are. You could not make head or tail of him; but I know their scabby lingo. Do you know what ship he goes by?"

"Not I. The fact is that I was quite upset, and felt that being so thrown over I had no right to pry into their arrangements. All the heavy goods were going by some cargo-steamer. Blackwall was [Pg 356] on the canvas-wrappings. That is all I know about it."

"Then we are too late for that. Those heavy boats sail on a Thursday. But the one point in our favour is that Sûr Imar goes first to Petersburg. He has good friends there; but in spite of that, if

I know anything of Russian ways, it will take at least three months for him to get a stroke of business done. And he will not want to take his daughter to her new surroundings, when the furious winter rages there. His enemies thought to settle him, this side of Christmas, and have three months to gorge him and hide the spoil, while all the passes are blocked with snow. But they have overplayed their game, and they never dreamed of that stroke of his, which may give us time to save him. He has no idea of their plot, of course, but has acted with his usual simplicity. One more question—can we obtain any idea of what goes on there, through Nickols, or any of his jolly miners? I am sorry for them. What a dance they will have on Kazbek, with frost-bitten toes! But they can't get away now, that's one comfort."

"How can I tell? I know nothing about communication with those deserts. That is more in your line, and you know the country."

"There are not many countries beyond my knowledge," the British Pioneer replied, with a gaze as if the whole world lay before it; "but even I cannot always quote all the breaks and jerks of wire and post. However, I can easily find out. They were laying a line to Kutais, I know; but I don't know whether it is working, and if it is it won't help us much, when all the tracks are impassable. One more question; young man, excuse it, but are you still nuts upon that lovely girl, who is too good for any but an Englishman? I don't hold with matrimony, mind. So you need not mind saying if you have slipped off."

"I wish she were equally nuts upon me," I replied with a glance of contempt, which should have pricked him. "But she has vanished without even a good word. I shall never hear anything more of her."

"Stuff! Remember—'faint heart,' etc. She has been humbugged with lies about you. And I know the pride of all that race. You shall have her yet, if you show pluck; and you won't be like [Pg 357] yourself, if you fail there. But you want to know who the dark enemy is, the one who is resolved to have Sûr Imar's life, as well as everything else that belongs to him. Very well, it is his own twin sister, Marva."

"What! Marva, the widow of Rakhan, that rascally Prince of the Ossets, whom Imar very justly slew! So justly, that even he felt no compunction. Marva, who knew of her husband's falseness!"

"That's the woman, and a nice specimen she is. I know one or two fine things about her, from what Hafer, her own son, let out. Ah, she is a deep one. It is a lucky thing for Imar that she sent Hafer, instead of coming to manage the whole affair herself."

"You forget one thing, Captain Strogue," I interrupted, for this view of the Princess did not tally well with Sûr Imar's own account. "She pitied him, there can be no doubt about that, after his terrible calamity, though as yet she did not know the worst. She pitied him, and proved it by her distress at the death of his little boy Origen. And when a woman once lets pity in, there is no room for malice in her breast. I read that the other day, in a very great writer."

"I don't know anything about that. I only know that she hates him. All the wreck of her life she ascribes to him, because he would not pay her portion. She has been brought up very differently from him, you must remember. And when she was so kind about that poor little devil, she had not the least idea that her husband that very day had fallen by the hand of Imar. Very likely she loved her husband all the more, without knowing it herself, for his behaviour to her. Some women do, there is no question about that; and there is queer morality in the Caucasus. She hates Imar, with all the power of her heart, which is anything but a weak one; and even if she loved him, she would be bound to kill him; for the blood-feud is between them."

"You talk of it as if you were counting coppers; whereas it makes my blood run cold, cold and then hot, as if it boiled with a shudder."

"Ah, but I have seen the world," said Strogue. [Pg 358]

"Very well, then tell me this. In the name of common-sense—if such a faculty is known among such brutes—why did not Hafer put a bullet or a dagger into Imar, as he has had fifty chances and more of doing, instead of taking a steady but unlucky pop at me? Explain that, Captain, if you can."

"Nothing is easier, friend Cranleigh. In the first place, he is not the one to do it, without ruin to their scheme; for though he might marry Dariel, after that there would always be something between them. And what would make it useless for him to do it, is that the blood must be shed, as you might say, for the sprinkling of the doorstep. To kill him in England would not count, because nobody would be sure of it. Hafer might have made a hit, but he could not have scored it, and the revenues would not have fallen in for years."

"It makes me sick to hear you talk." I had no intention of being rude; but to see this man making balance of lives, as a grocer puts chocolates into the scale, was beyond my gifts at present. "Strogue, you make me hate you."

"My dear boy, you should not do that. I admire fine British indignation; and I had a lot of it at your age. I am not free from it now, by any means. But it must be governed and guided, when we deal with inferior races. A Frenchman never discovers this, and therefore he cannot colonise. He lets out his natural ardour at brutality, while we accommodate ours, and fetch it into better purpose. You must not suppose that I sympathise with a savage, because I do not shoot him."

I begged his pardon; for I knew nothing of such things. And he made allowance for my outburst; while I thought that I would rather play the French than the English part, in such a case—which was far from my usual sentiment.

"You need not make a fuss," he said, "all these things are an allegory. The wisest of men has been young and green at some time. Bat Strogue is not the boy to sing for starch in bibs and tuckers. Cranleigh, you may look at me, and some day you will tell your grandson—'Ah, you should have [Pg 359] seen Bat Strogue! An Englishman of the old sort he was. Forty-six inches round the chest, and not a lie to be found in him.' Give me your hand, young man, I like you."

It occurred to me—so mean our nature is—that the brandy-and-water, which he quaffed like milk, was beginning to perturb a spirit even so ubiquitous. But his gaze was clear and bright as it had not been in the morning, and his voice impressive.

"You have only to go home, and wait. I have a friend who is on his way at this moment to St. Petersburg. I shall telegraph to him to-morrow, to keep his eye on Sûr Imar. He will have no trouble about that, the man being so conspicuous. I shall know when Imar thinks of leaving, and then we must look sharp indeed. You want to save him; so do I. And more than that, to blow to pieces the plans of this vile Hafer. He has treated me infamously; I will not bother you with that now. He little knows what Bat Strogue is. I might have starved, but for Jemmy Nickols. Just for the present I am in cash; but money never sticks to me. If the sinews of war fail, I shall not scruple to ask your help, though I know that you are not a millionaire, George Cranleigh. But I am a man of honour, sir. Though not a swell, I am no sponge. And I have some chance of a good windfall which is keeping me in London now. 'Never say die,' is my motto, sir; and if I get what I ought, I will lend you a hundred pounds as soon as look at you. Strogue is of Yorkshire family, sir, and a Yorkshireman always does what he says. But that Hafer is a cur, as mean a cur, and as fierce a cur, as was ever begotten by Cerberus. He made a scoundrel rob me of five hundred pounds, by false cards; as I found out just too late, and they split the swag between them. A burglar is a trump in comparison with them; and he has taken out young Petheril instead of me. Cranleigh, do you ask me why? Then I'll tell you in two words; because he can get him cheaper, sir, and because he has got no principle. Strogue must travel like a gentleman, as he is by birth and behaviour, and all that; Strogue maintains his rank, sir. You try to shove him into any skunky [Pg 360] corner to save a few copeks in passage-money, and he lets you know—ay, you soon find that out, and you won't forget it in a hurry. But this fellow Petheril, that's his name, he would make any skunk's hole skunkier; and you wouldn't care to touch him with a pair of tongs. And another reason I can tell you too, Petheril doesn't know the little things about that beauty of a Marva, which have come to my ears, though I never saw her. Shows what my reputation is —'Bartholomew Strogue, The World,' would find me from any post-office in it. Though when you send me a hundred-pound note, it would be as well to be more precise. But I am not proud of that; it is a nuisance to me. I open a hundred letters, when I find myself in the humour, and there is not a penny in one of them; but they all want me to do something."

Fearing that he was becoming inclined to go off on the rove, as great travellers must, and being in a hurry about Stoneman and Grace, I asked him to say in a few words how Prince Hafer came under his charge in London.

"Simply because of my taking a little turn into the Caucasus," Captain Strogue replied, as if he had gone off into a side-walk in some Hampstead villa garden. "I was tired of the monotony on the northern side of the Caspian, where the people are too much alike, with plenty of barbarous customs; but when you have seen one, you know them all. There is not the variety which can be found in the mountain regions only. In a very rugged land, the human race cannot get so confoundedly chummy as to take the variety out of them, like peas in a pod perhaps a thousand miles long. The Caucasus is quite a small affair, compared to the Andes, or Himalaya, or half-a-dozen other mountain-chains. But it beats them all in this, that it was peopled earlier, or at any rate more thickly. And there the fellows are; no two lots at all alike; and if it was the cradle of the human race, as the ethnologists used to tell us, it was lucky that we tumbled out of it. Mind, I don't run them down; there are some of the noblest samples, so far as the body is concerned, that you could find on the face of the earth. And many of noble intelligence too, but with little chance [Pg 361] of increasing it. As a rule, they hate work, both of body and of mind; and without proper work, we all relapse into monkeys, or advance into devils. You say, 'Strogue, then which are you?' You were longing to ask it, but too polite. Very well, Cranleigh, I am neither. I have done as much hard work as any man living. And I hope to do more, if my life holds out, although my joints are getting rickety. But my rule is—either work, or play. And I never mix the two together."

"But," I inquired, to bring him back to the point, for he seemed to be rather fond of talking about himself, "what was the reason that Hafer, if he was sent to fetch his uncle back, was not despatched to the camp at once, the old place in the valley, I mean, where his countrymen had taken up their abode. That would have saved all the London expenses, and the need for a guide and interpreter, and a lot of other trouble, as well as kept him out of mischief."

"True, my son; but it would have ruined the whole scheme. Hafer's nature would soon have shown itself, for his temper is simply horrible; kinjals would have flashed in the Surrey sun, and no Dariel would there have been for him. Even as it was, he contrived sometimes to make himself unpleasant to her. You remember our catching your little friend Allai, and putting some strain upon his loyalty? That was to learn a few useful facts from him, especially one about the lady and her father, and some points as to your proceedings. If you had not interfered, we should very soon have succeeded, for there is no great power of endurance in them. No, no. His mother

knows too well what Hafer is, to quarter him on a quiet gentleman. And he never would have stood it. He came here to have his fling, quite as much as to carry out her plot—and a jolly wild time he has had of it. There is no steady love in a man like that, any more than there was in his father Rakhan."

"Foul scum of the earth, low blackguard! How dare he come near Dariel?" For the moment I lost my self-command. "How can I wait, Strogue? Am I to sit and count the time, while Imar and his daughter are going to their doom? Why not set off for Petersburg and try to keep them there? Or [Pg 362] at any rate warn them, and go back with them, if they must go, and face that wicked woman and her despicable son. That seems to me to be the better plan by far. It would cost a lot of money; but I would beg, borrow, steal—"

"Won't do. You must follow my directions. In the first place, you forget what a cloud you are under. Probably Sûr Imar and his daughter would refuse to see you if you followed them. Or if you got over that difficulty, would they listen to your story? You know nothing about Marva's scheme, except through me, and I have no proofs. It is all suspicion, or inference from little slips of Hafer's and so on, and what I have heard since he departed. Mind you, I know it, as well as if I saw it; but there is nothing I could lay before Imar, to convince him that his sister intends to have him murdered, and to make her son the Master of Karthlos, and Chief of that branch of the Lesghians. Be in no hurry, my good young friend. I shall prick you up quite soon enough. It is the jerking that spoils everything. We were a nobler race five hundred years ago than we are now; because we took our time to think, and mind kept time with body. These fellows also take their time. They learn it from the way the snow falls; and they know that the snow tells a deeper tale than fifty thousand thunderstorms. In the Caucasus a tragedy—and they have no such thing as comedy—goes into ten acts at least, and lasts for generations."

[Pg 363]

CHAPTER XLI
A CROOKED BILLET

Once I saw the solid keeper of a well-known elephant (a grand mass of sagacious substance, gentle, good, and amiable) try his hand among the monkeys, creatures in their way as worthy, but of different fibre. These too knew what kindness is, and had their sense of gratitude, but could not stop to dwell upon it, and let it ripen in their hearts. The keeper, accustomed to slow ways, and leisurely though deep emotion, exerted all his charm of eye and benevolence of whistle, and offered baits to cupboard-love, and even deigned to winsome ticklings of places not too hairy to be touched by human tenderness. He gazed with zoologic pride at the manager of the monkeys, who was putting a new lash on his whip; then his glory flew into a shriek, for his thumb was bitten in twain, and a jabber of general joy endorsed it.

So it is too sure to be with any man, who drawing reason from her higher sources, applies the product of his skill, even in homœopathic doses, to that irrational creature—love. Strogue had no idea of the meaning of that word. A traveller gets too-far abroad, too loose, and large, and vague, and shifty, shallow with glancing instead of gazing, skimming the world instead of letting it cream. Therefore to me there was scarcely a crumb of comfort in all his assurances; and the only thing to stroke the long anxiety the right way of the grain, and smooth its tissue, was to keep on steadily with the labours of the day. And when these can be carried on out of doors, under the sky, and (if so I may say) with the eyes of the Lord smiling down on them, it is not to the credit of [Pg 364] any young man, if he kicks about under his blanket and groans, when the night makes all things equal. Unless he has bodily pain, I mean—which is another pair of shoes, that can never be unlaced by any effort of our own.

Moreover, to see one's dearest friends escaping from some black distress, and coming back to their usual cheer, and jokes, and pleasure in the world around, takes or ought to take a lot of lead out of our own handicap. Although my sister had never been by any means painfully sympathetic with my misfortunes in the way of love, I was candid enough to feel that this might be because I had never asked her. Such an affection as mine was far beyond her understanding, a thing too holy to be discussed by any girl with yellow hair in love with a member of the Stock Exchange. But I quite forgave her all short-comings, the moment she fell into real trouble, and I wiped her eyes almost as softly as if they had been Dariel's. And this renewed our deep attachment, which had lost perhaps some little of its warmth, when she took to finding virtues in that marvellous Jackson Stoneman, which she had pronounced a hundred times to be sadly deficient in her brother. However they revived and flourished now; and I was not so mean as to ask how they came back, but was proud of their possession. Let us take all the credit we can get, from people who are fond of us; there will scarcely be enough to plug the holes our other brethren pick in us.

Stoneman, too, having turned the corner by the narrowest of shaves, with the paint shorn from his shaft and felly, but his box and axle as sound as ever, was much improved for the present by the increase of humility. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say, by the birth of that quality within him; for if it had existed heretofore, it had been so true to itself as to recoil from all recognition. Except of course in his first love-time; for if a man cannot be humble then, Lucifer is no match for him. It is needless to say that the losses of the firm were spread from mouth to mouth at any figure that occurred to the imagination, long before the senior partner himself could lay a loose measure along them. But he managed to stick to the Hall and the Park; though [Pg 365]

he gave up his yacht, and the hounds, and other enjoyments now too costly, and at Grace's urgent order clave to money-making all the week, and left the love for Sundays.

There was even some little talk about my throwing up the plough, and harrow, pitchfork, flail, and stable-bucket, and quitting in despair the land that had now become too honest to maintain mankind. To wit, I was to join our Jackson, not as a partner (for the solid reason that I had no capital), but as an agent, an assessor, or I forget what they called it. My father wished it, and so did my mother, and every one except myself; and I was doubting whether the sense of duty to my relatives ought not to outweigh my own tastes and wishes, when all my thoughts were upset again, and all my mind unsettled, by a letter just as follows:—

> "Dear Sir,—I must seek pardon for neglect or carelessness about something. But it did not enter my thoughts at first, that the letter enclosed belongs to you, or perhaps to the lady to whom it was written. And we have been on the railway, or at sea so much, and in strange hotels, that I could not procure it from my boxes. I hope that it is of no importance; but I now perceive that I have been guilty of a sad want of attention, which may have caused blame to fall on others. If so I beg to be pardoned by them, for I had no intention of retaining what could never belong to me.—Your obedient servant,
>
> "Dariel, daughter of Imar."

The letter enclosed, or rather the note, was one of several little billets, in which I had answered questions from Tom Erricker's sister, Argyrophylla, during that most melancholy time, when there was no one else to support her. She behaved, all through that terrible period, in a faultless manner; such as even Dariel herself would have found it hard to equal. Argyrophylla was just as mournful, just as trustful in the Lord and the depth of heartfelt sympathy, just as determined to overcome her own feelings for the sake of others, as the nicest girl that was ever born, and [Pg 366] therefore has to deal with death, could be. Any man who could be cold to her (with her father just dead, and her mother scarcely more than alive enough to moan) deserved to be screwed down, I say, and find no one at his funeral. But I never care to defend myself. It is clear enough what any one must think of this, being told that it was all about some crayfish soup, which was more for the lawyer's delectation than for mine:—

> "My most kind and thoughtful Pilla,—What matter for such trifles now? Remember that all I care about is to be of service to you. It would have been a weary day but for that consideration. Do exactly as you feel inclined, but how happy I should be if you would come down to dinner. [This I only wrote that I might try to make her eat a bit, because she would not even take her gruel.] For the sake of the many who love you, think a little of yourself, if a heart so unselfish has the power. You must never speak as if I wished to be elsewhere, unless your desire is to grieve me. You shall hear what the lawyer has done for us by-and-by; but his chief wish is to please us. You know quite well what mine is.—Ever yours, George Cranleigh.
>
> "P. S.—The canon most readily promised to officiate."

Now that such a simple letter, written when the cloth was laying, and the room grown shadowy, yet full of thoughts of dinner-time—for Pilla through her tears took care to keep the kitchen-jack alive—that a few kind words like these of mine should start up as wilful enemies, is a proof of that which men like Strogue might take into some dry coil of brain, having filled it more with the study of mankind than with converse of their Maker. To wit, that whenever any human being yields to the goodwill towards his fellows which has been implanted in him, he is making a fool of himself, without doing a bit of good to his brethren. Let Strogue think so, if he likes, and prove it by a thousand instances; he will not get me to believe it, or at any rate to act as if I did.

And here you will find, if you go on, that it was not so even in my own case. At first it looked very [Pg 367] bad indeed, and I made a grievance of it, as any but a perfect man must do; and him I have still to meet with. How on earth could that hasty note, written only for comfort in profound distress, and with the warmth one feels for affliction, have fallen into the hands of some vile enemy, who had used it to destroy my Dariel's faith in me? Over and over again I read the words I had scrawled in a hurry; and the more I pored over them the more distinctly I saw what they might mean to Dariel. One most unlucky reference too would quench any doubt she might try to cherish. In my brief account of that sad affair at Sheffield, I mentioned, or should have done so, that Mr. Erricker's old and trusted solicitor was gone from home at the time of the sudden calamity, and his place had been supplied by a junior partner, a peaceful young man, who would never take the lead. His only anxiety was to keep within the possibility of mistake; and this (as the widow was so ill, and entreated me to act for her) compelled me to be content with legal sanction rather than counsel. But Dariel knowing nought of that, or of the affliction in the house, would naturally conclude that the lawyer was come to arrange for my marriage with poor Pilla. "Well, this is a kettle of fish, and a kettle of devil-fish," I thought; "but one great joy there is—my darling has not thrown me over through a toss-up."

All my love (which had never been away, longer than I could live without my heart) came back with a rush of double power, and a wild condition prevailed with me. That cold letter of dismissal bore no date of time or place, and afforded not a trace of the writer's whereabouts or intentions, except that it bore the post-mark of Dresden, and a date now four days old. Sûr Imar had told me more than once of his love for art, and deep regret that his stormy life had allowed him no acquaintance with it. Also he had shown me a very ancient—daub I should have called it, but for

the subject—supposed to be a portrait of our Lord on panel, which according to legend had been brought by St. Peter when he came to preach in the Caucasus. Although he was not sure of that tradition, the Lesghian chief attached no small importance to this heirloom, and was anxious to [Pg 368] compare the face, or as much of it as could be descried, with some of the first presentments, or conceptions, to be found in Europe. He was gifted very richly, as all great men are, with the power of moving slowly, not only abstaining from all attempt to rob Time of his forelock, but also offering that old robber plenty of leisure to tug his own. Thus the father of Dariel might stray through many a gallery, museum, and cathedral, before he reached the Russian capital; and wherever he was, there beyond a doubt would be his beloved daughter.

With this belief, I lost no time in going to see Strogue again, at least to hear what he had to say, though I expected little comfort. The place to which he now belonged, though it seemed more truly to belong to him, was that ancient tavern "The London Rock," so called perhaps in transcendence of the London Stone, which was not far off. An old-fashioned, overhanging house, with windows like the stern-galleries of a veteran three-decker, and a double door with big brass fittings, and glass panels glancing; the whole withdrawn as with an inner meaning, and prim sense of private rights, even from the organ-grinder, who dictates to the alley, and the babies who tripudiate, with tongues that can keep time, whenever dirty feet are weary. Strogue had seen all the world almost, and was come back to the beginning of it, smiling at the glee of childhood through the majesty of a placid smoke.

You never could take that man aback; perhaps because that sort of thing had been done to him once too often. He sat in a hooded chair of state, with a long pipe casting garlands of the true Nicotine forget-me-not, like a floral crown for his emerit head; but his legs were in front of him as they ought to be, and the day being still in its youth, no car of Bacchus had begun to jingle through the calm realms of baccy. Or at least, there was only one cool tankard, and the crown of froth was gone from that.

"How is the rib?" I asked in my usual stupid way, for all enquiry was out of place in a paradise so tranquil. And then I proceeded still more ineptly by begging him not to be disturbed. [Pg 369]

"What rib?" enquired Strogue, with as much surprise as he could reconcile with his dignity.

"Why, the rib that was broken the other day," I answered, with some sense of trespass on his constitution.

"I remember now; and I call it very kind of you to think of it. But I understand my own inside, and can very soon put it right again. How are you getting on with your love-affair, my boy?"

I did not see my way (as people always put it now, when they don't want to do what you want of them)—I did not see the fitness of discussing Dariel in this draught of echo, and with the bar in the background clinking pots and mumbling chaff.

"Hold my pipe, while I get up," the Captain said magnanimously, for his feet were on a leg-rest, and it was very good of him to move; "I never take anything so early in the day; but I don't judge the juniors. Come along, and bring my pewter."

When he had led me to an inner room, which appeared to be his sanctum, I told him what had happened, but could not by any means bring myself to show him Dariel's letter. And he did not ask for it; with all his bluffness, at heart he was a gentleman.

"Cut up rough, of course," he said; "would not have been worth her salt, if she hadn't. Only two things are added to our knowledge. One that they have been at Dresden, and the other that Hafer has been at work with that musk-rat of a Petheril. He sent him to Sheffield after you; that is plainer than a pikestaff. He could not have gone on his own hook; for he knows nothing of English ways, and very little of the language. He found that I would not do his dirty work, and so he took up with that blackguard. And cleaned me out, sir, cleaned me out! That is where I shall never forgive myself, until I cry evens with him. Would you look for any green lines in Bat Strogue, a tyke who has been round the world?"

He stared at me so fiercely that I could scarce help laughing. Then he laughed at himself, and said, "All right, by-and-by. You go and see if Jemmy Nickols has heard anything. I can tell you one [Pg 370] piece of good news. I told you what I was in London about. It has turned out ever so much better than I thought. Those confounded lawyers would not let me have a copper. But I put the enemy's lawyer at them; and by Jove, sir, I expect to get five thousand pounds. Not in a lump, mind; that would be too good for an unlucky son of a gun like me; but a thousand by the end of January, and the rest when some business in Yorkshire is wound up. So I need not come down upon you for a penny; and more than that, my boy, I will pay the piper, and you can pay your share, when your ship comes in. We will have a grand time among the niggers. Don't thank me, or I'll never forgive you. You have done me a good turn, and I'll repay it. Bat Strogue is a Christian, because he backs his friends up. But he doesn't hold with forgiving his enemies. He will have Hafer by the hip, and you shall see it. Stop a moment; you know some great swells, don't you?"

"One or two people of title I know. But none of them are in London yet. I could write to them, of course, if that would do as well."

"That never does as well. But they will soon come back. Parliament meets rather early this year. And we must not expect to stir a stump till March. My friend at Petersburg is not a great gun; of about my own mark, but not of my distinction. Bless you, I can go to Court anywhere, and plenty

of bowing and scraping; but a tankard of malt is worth all of it. If you could get a line under cover from a friend to our Ambassador at Petersburg, he would pass it on to Sûr Imar when he gets there, and you might make it right with your lady-love. I suppose that never occurred to you. Strogue knows the way to go to work. What do you think of that, my friend?"

"I think it is a very good suggestion, and very kind of you to think of it. If I had not been in such a hurry, I daresay it would have occurred to me."

"Not likely; but Nickols might have thought of it. And I daresay he knows great guns too. All those diamond-mongers do. You will manage it easily one way or another, and the sooner you do [Pg 371] it the better. It will put a spoke in Hafer's wheel, but not the one I mean to put. Ask Nickols what sort of a winter they are having out that way. It might make a great difference to us. They very seldom have it as ours is, generally the very opposite. We are having it mild, so the chances are that they have got a stinger. All Azof was frozen up, and a good bit of the Black Sea, the last time I came that way, and in London and Paris there had not been one day's skating. However, you keep ready."

This was the very thing I meant to do, as soon as ever I could get the chance, and pick a little money up, for it was not likely that I would let the Captain bear the charges. With many thanks to him, I took an omnibus, and had a short conversation with Nickols. As soon as he had heard my story, he approved of Strogue's suggestion, and quite agreed with him that we should both be ready to start as soon as we could do any good. At the same time he said that there was not much chance of any mischief for the present, and he doubted whether Hafer had even returned to his native country yet. It was much more likely that after his taste of the sins of high civilization, which must have gone far to destroy the zest for dull Caucasian villainies, he would hanker for another sparkling draught, before going home to be frozen up. And now he had Petheril with him, to guide and interpret all sweet baseness.

"Petheril! where have I heard that name? Not only from Strogue, but somewhere else," I exclaimed, but could not remember.

For the rest, Signor Nicolo knew little, except that his nephew Jack was getting the rough side of British enterprise. His last note was short without any sweetness, unless it were a waft for Rosa, to whom he was all the more faithful, while frozen.

"All been snowed up ever so long," he was tersely graphic with his middle finger blue; "nothing to do, and less to eat. How I wish I had only stopped away! Saved our lives with a goat that was frozen to death, but had to eat him stiff, for the fire was frozen too. Tried to think of mutton at [Pg 372] Simpson's in the Strand; but imagination not warm enough. Snow is white, and emeralds green. Shall never see anything green again, unless it is gangrene in my toes. But you know that I never do complain."

"True enough," said the Signor, as he warmed the letter that he might not take a chill from it, "my nephew never does complain. But sometimes he exaggerates, and that made my daughter like him. I shall not let her know a word of this, or she might put some of the blame on me. I know that it is sure to be cold out there, when you go too far up the hillside. However, let us poke the fire up. You look rather chilly, Mr. Cranleigh. Rosa knitted him two pairs of mittens; but perhaps he put them by for keepsakes. Boys are so confoundedly romantic. But the wind has changed since yesterday. Strogue is the only man I know who understands the weather. He would warm poor Jack in no time."

"You had better send him out with another pair of mittens," I said, with some natural indignation. But the Signor had a pleasant gift of deafness to anything that twined against his twist.

"I shall see Strogue from time to time," he continued very comfortably; "there is a great deal of good in that man, when you get over his little oddities. And I am heartily glad to hear of his coming into property. Probably he will not drink now so freely; because it would be his place to pay for it. I know a fine fellow who was saved like that, when you would not have given twopence for his life. However, your course is clear, Mr. Cranleigh. Patience—what is it about the mulberry leaf? You should certainly write to St. Petersburg at once. Your brother-in-law, the Earl of Fitzragon, is sure to know some one who will do the needful for you. Or if not, I think I could manage it. You have been very lucky in falling in with Strogue, a man of great natural powers in his way, and very wide observation. Allow me; your coat is a little on the twist. You shall hear from me, if anything turns up. Ah, we want a little frost to kill the slugs, though we don't want to live upon frozen goat."

CHAPTER XLII [Pg 373]
FAREWELL, SMILER

In proof of the critical, exacting, and thankless nature of the noble Briton, my father used to tell a little story savouring perhaps of the fable. Three excellent gardeners and botanists, representative of our "three islands"—as a learned Frenchman calls them—were searching some torrid mountain slope, as travellers for a great London nursery. When ready to drop with heat and thirst, for they had missed their supply of water, they chanced upon a vine in a sheltered spot, bearing three fine bunches of ripe grapes. Like good men and just, they tossed for choice;

Paddy coming last, as his destiny decrees. His bunch was gone in no time, skin, stones, and stalk, while John Bull proceeded with a calm and steady munch. Sandy, however, stood contemplating his,—the finest cluster of the three,—holding it against the burning sky, with its dewy purple glistening like amethysts of ice. "Arrah, then, why don't ye ate it?" cried Pat; "if ye can't, it's meself that knows the bhoy as can." "Hoot, toots, mon, a' was joost conseederin'," the Scotchman replied, as he held it out of reach, "what a bonny boonch she wud a' been, gin I had only had the loock to come along aboot twal' weeks bock wi' my theening scissors."

Perhaps I was not quite so hard to please as that. But instead of being grateful for the many strokes of luck vouchsafed in my present strait, I did nothing but grumble at all that went amiss and growl at the heavy roll and everlasting lurch of time. However, let every man act according to his nature, or his own perversion of it; but I was not going to be beaten thus. It would never do [Pg 374] to leave the chance of obtaining some news from St. Petersburg to a casual traveller, like Strogue's friend. I must try to learn a little more about that. Therefore, as I would not go to Lord Fitzragon, it came into my mind that really I owed some amends to Lord Melladew; not for the peppering of his spats (for I had not even used a gun that day), but for my tolerance of such a stupid business, and the absence of wrath in my sorrow for it. The Earl had employed his lame time in writing a fine poem upon Russia, which had received a little private circulation; and a cultivated Russian, who had seen the poem, pronounced it the finest thing in the English language. Without going to that extent, I knew that his lordship was now a "Persona grata" (which means properly a welcome mask) at the Court of the Northern Universe.

When I met him at his club by appointment, for he was still in some terror of his mother, he showed himself as cordial as any young man who operates mainly with his intellect can be. "We never have mutton-chops here," he said, glancing along me, as if I were a hedgerow, with the side-look that comes from living always in a street; "but the view from the window is pleasing, George; and I can show you spots quite historical."

"Much obliged. But history is no good without age; and our own affairs are no good, when they get it."

He saw that I was going to be a plague, and he sank into a gimcrack velvet chair, which was handicapped too heavily, even with such weight as his, and he waved his hand for me to do the like; but I found a thing like a music-stool having more satisfactory understanding.

"How I have longed to be down your way!" Conversation with him reminded me always of holding a skein of tissue silk for a lady to wind while you bob your thumbs. "Any sign of spring, George? Willow catkins? Elder-leaves?"

"No, nor yet younger leaves," I answered gently. "Lots of frost to come yet, I daresay. Lovely time for fruit-growers—cut their noses off in May."

"I hope not. That bugbear must have been exploded. If I come down to see the budding year, dear George, could you—I mean, could you tell me where to go? I want to write a paper for the R.H.S. [Pg 375] I began one on the Kentish pear and apple bloom last year, with a County Council lecturer who came down that he might be certain which was which. But the wind chopped round suddenly, and we got snowed up, and naturally all the fruit failed that season. But the year before that, there would have been a splendid crop, except for that gale on the 1st of September; I daresay you remember it. When I went to make an estimate of the saving to the country by growing its own fruit, with my usual luck I could find no proper specimens. The walks were so strewn with green fruit that my feet were too tender to get along among the heaps, without two men with brooms in front of me; and even so I could scarcely get upstairs that night. But how is our good friend Bandilow?"

"Becoming rather nervous, I am afraid. His family did their best to keep it from him about that other poor grower towards Godalming, who made that frightful application of his gooseberry-knife. But poor Bandilow had a sharpish tiff with his mother-in-law, as he could not see his way to keep her; and the cruel woman sent him full account of the inquest, with the lunatic doctor's evidence, and the balance-sheet of several years' jam-boiling, underlined in crimson ink. He told all the parish at the Bell-tap on Friday, that the only plantation he should ever make now must be in a box, and grow up into a stone."

"I hope not, I trust not most heartily," said the Earl, brushing his eyes, for he was very tender-hearted. "But let us turn to more cheerful subjects. I feel sadly upset about it. Let us have a glass of port."

After that he appeared a little stronger, and gladly undertook to forward any letter of mine to a friend of his who was attached to our embassy in Russia, and he felt no doubt that as soon as Sûr Imar appeared in that capital, it would be placed in his hands. Without losing an hour I wrote my letter, and left it in his charge, for there could be no harm in being too early, whereas it would be fatal to all my hopes, if I were even an hour too late.

My letter was short, and not too cordial; for really, when one came to reflect upon all the [Pg 376] circumstances, my Lesghian friends had scarcely allowed me fair play, or so much as a chance to right myself. No man can be sure what he would have done, in a case which has not hit him in the breast, although we are very fond of talking so. Nevertheless, when I put a bit of spirit into my own consideration of myself, I could not help thinking that I would have given any one who fell into a sudden cloud of dust with me, more opportunity to clear the dirt away, and a fairer chance of asking from whose chimney it had come.

For weeks and weeks, I kept on waiting, looking out for anything that might throw light on the whereabouts of my wandering friends, but obtaining disappointment only. The mildness of the winter continued here; but a bitter frost prevailed in Eastern Europe, and the Danube was frozen over at the Iron Gates. Strogue heard from his friend at St. Petersburg that the ice on the Neva was six feet thick, and they could scarcely keep the railways open. And Signor Nicolo was compelled to hope all he could about his nephew Jack, and comfort his daughter Rosa with tales of a cat who lived three months in a snow-drift, and the horse who got into a hay-rick near Durham, and ate his way out again when the thatch began to drip. But he told me in confidence that he never was more pleased to have a bad leg than when Jack's mother came to see him. For sweethearts, being young, may shortly take up with another; but a widow with one child has locked up all her reason in him.

However, there was this advantage in the long suspense and waiting, that it gave me time to make all preparations leisurely, and get the money ready for a costly expedition. The cash I could have had from several quarters; Nickols, Strogue, Tom Erricker, and Stoneman, now beginning to recover from his troubles, all in the kindest manner offered to advance me a good round sum. But wonders, when they once set in, are like boys playing leap-frog. Over each other's back they vault, and then down they drop with hand on knee for a taller one to top them. And surely now came the tallest one that ever rolled in at a tithe-barn door, or struck the lintel of a giraffe-house. [Pg 377]

Hitherto I have felt throughout that every word must be believed exactly as I tell it, not on the faith of my character only, but from internal evidence. This has made me careless perhaps; but now I mean to be very strict, confining every vocable to its first intention, and every numeral to its precise notation. For if any other person had related as follows, my interjections probably would have made him knock me down!

The days were beginning to pull out a little, and the wind was gone round to the east—as it always does, when too late to be of service for skates, or wild ducks, or golden plovers, but in good time to kill all bloom and foliage—and having had my bit of bacon in my Privy Council Office (as Grace now called the harness-room), I was dwelling on my bad luck; than which there is no messuage more insanitary for any man to inhabit. When in came my brother Harold, with his hands in his pockets, and his usual slouch, and soft melodious whistle. I had wanted him many times, when I could not find him, especially to show him to Sûr Imar; but now I could see little chance of turning him into any value.

"Not fool enough to want a fiver, I suppose," he said without offering to shake hands, for if ever there was a careless fellow about forms, here you had him.

"To have one to spare is what you mean to say. If a man is a fool who wants a fiver, I know a very clever fellow, who is a great fool always. But he can't get it out of me. *Nulla bona.*"

"George," said my brother in that slurring tone, which means that any care of pronunciation would be wasted on the muff before you; "you can have some, if you like. But don't let me force it upon you, George. There are several other fellows after me."

"In that case," I answered, simply for his benefit not my own—for I did not expect to see anything worth counting; "that old tobacco-jar is empty; out with it, and let me put the top on. Is it from the sneezers, and the Local Board?"

"Who ever got a penny from a Local Board? If I could invent a machine to do that, I should beat [Pg 378] the great man in America. My sneezers, as you call them, will be household words, when reason has a voice in sanitation. But this new discovery is of a million times the value, because it is for the destruction of mankind. It will kill a thousand men, before they can call upon the Lord; and there will be no pieces left for the Devil. I had scruples at first, because of the wholesale carnage, and some of the victims might deserve to live; but the kindest-hearted man alive, and the chairman of five or six humane societies, ridicules that objection, and has taken shares. At the first blush it may seem too strong a measure; but when you know that it puts an end to war, you are reconciled to a few harsh moments."

There is a certain sound, enjoyed more often by bankers and brewers than by delvers of the earth, a silken harmony of thoughtful notes, silvery and sensitive, suggestive also of golden tones yet mellower. Seldom, alas! do we find it thrilling through the music of our spheres. Once heard, it is never forgotten; and now I heard it murmuring in my tobacco-jar, as it flowed from the lyre of my brother's fingers.

"Hold hard!" I shouted. "What the deuce are you about? You villain, you have been forging! I was sure you'd come to that. But I doubt whether even Free-Trade makes it honest."

"Nice gratitude," he answered, "when it is all for you. One would think that you alone had the gift of making money. But it would take you a long time to make that, my boy. Now help yourself. Don't be shy."

"Harold, you have worked hard for this." As I spoke, I regarded my elder brother with respectful sympathy, such as he never had inspired until now; "and I cannot perceive that I have any right to make a hole in your hard earnings. Do you think that I would do anything so mean? But how much do you suppose you have dropped into that jar? If you heartily desire to make me a little present—"

"Perhaps there may be about two-fifty there. They got up a company, you see, to work my patent

Slaughter-ball. That makes everything straightforward. The investors throw in, to get other people's money, and it is their own look-out about keeping their own. But peg away, George; peg away." [Pg 379]

"You are indeed a noble fellow." I spoke heartily and generously; when the facts come to this, between two brothers, how can there be either grudge or greed? "But you would only run through every penny, my dear brother. The wisest thing probably would be for me to secure for you some five-and-twenty."

"You had better take larger views. But I leave you altogether to your own devices." He jerked a chair over, and put his heels upon the hob, and whistled to the modest fire, with his back toward me.

"Fifteen, twenty, twenty-five," I said, "thank you heartily, my dear fellow, I call it very kind of you." He gave me a nod, without stopping his whistle, and that made me look into the jar again.

"Well, there does seem to be a jolly lot. I have a great mind to go a little further down. In all probability, you would only waste it, Harold." He gave me two nods this time, as if to say—"I will not deny it, if you take that view."

"Fifty would be quite as well, while one is about it. Forty, forty-five, fifty. Ah! you may not see me again for months, my dear fellow; even if I ever come back alive. I am going to the most dangerous part of the world, where they stick a thing into you they call a kinjal. Harold, we have always been fond of one another, although we are so different. Well, fifty then; but only as a loan, mind."

"I tell you what," he said, turning round and looking at me with resolute authority, "I am your elder brother, George, and know more of the world than you do. In fact, you are nothing but a farmer; and even the Government, stupid as it is, can make game of a farmer. Now if you don't take a hundred pounds, as a gentleman and a brother should, you may go to the Devil, and how shall I ever see you again, while you are there? So take your choice, and have done with it."

"'I tell you what,' he said, turning round and looking at me with authority."

How could I part with him on such terms? And it struck me suddenly, that if he were going to knock over all the human race, or at least the non-British branches of it, nothing could stand him in better stead than to be able to say that the first-fruits of his discovery had been used to set a true Briton upon his legs. With a grateful heart I left him at least a hundred and fifty pounds of his money, reminding him at the same time of that duty towards our parents, which he alone now would have the privilege of fulfilling. He promised to leave at least fifty pounds for that; and then [Pg 380]

he went into particulars about his "astrapebolia," as he called his discovery for visiting mankind with a human touch from heaven. This I could not understand, and therefore make no pretence to remember it; for my brain is not mathematical. Only I know that he pleased me by a promise that he would always keep behind the guns, when he sent them into action.

He went away suddenly as he came, being always of the comet order, but as lovable as the evening-star, whenever you could get hold of him. And when I had clapped a patent padlock on the first product of his genius, a dark terror seized me that my only brother, so endeared to small people like me, by his largeness, might be tempting Providence too far, and meddle too freely with fulminates, just as they began to pay. I longed to write to him upon the subject; but no post ever knew where to find him.

Then I was suddenly called away from vague apprehensions to perils at arm's-length, and even closer than that—blows eye to eye, and cheek by jowl, and tooth to tooth, such as a peaceful Englishman would never face, if he could help it; but must take as the will of the Lord, when they come. Sith it will no better be; he is sorry for himself, and does his best to make his enemies share his dejection.

In token I need only say that when I was going on peacefully, sore at heart with outraged love, but too proud to allow it to be mentioned, and girding myself for the work of the spring and that duty to the earth which a farmer must discharge even in despair of recompense—a dirty yellow envelope was put into my hand, as I came home with two faithful horses as tired with dragging as [Pg 381] I was with guiding, but all of us ready for the manger. I leaned against *Smiler's* sweaty chest, which looked as if lathered for shaving, and read the words which took me away from all smiling operations, almost forever.

> "Sudden news. Fear to be too late. All gone crooked. Tidal train to-morrow. Meet me at Charing, 12.30, all packed. BAT STROGUE."

Short notice indeed for so long a journey, and not a word said about passports. But I concluded that the old traveller would see to that matter for both of us; and having long since prepared my friends, and arranged home-affairs for a sudden departure, I was almost glad to exchange suspense for even headlong action. My father was kind enough to say that he would do the best he could without me; and Stoneman would even have come with me, if his business could have done without him. My mother was just what a mother should be, faithful, tearful, hopeful, and my sister Grace implored me to forgive sayings and doings on her part, which I had long ago forgotten. Everybody went on as if I had no chance of being seen alive again, and yet expressed a world of confidence in the care which Heaven would take of me.

[Pg 382]

CHAPTER XLIII
THE LAND OF MEDEA

In the days of yore, whenever any new pestilence or distemper fell from heaven upon the sons of men, the first thing to agitate the human mind was a strong and bitter controversy. Chiron, the son of Philyra, and Melampus of Amythaon, instead of attacking the common foe, fell pell-mell upon one another, maintaining or spurning their various doctrines—contagion, infection, epidemism, conduction by water, by earth, by wind—until they were driven to run away headlong, or lie down forever. Such questions surpass our understanding. But one malady there is, contagious, infectious, endemic also as well as epidemic, grandly contemptuous of pill and bolus, sticky as a limpet, while as slimy as a slug, and the name of this blessed disease is—"The Blues." And the beauty of it is, that everybody who has got it believes that he alone of all the people in the neighbourhood is free from every atom of a symptom of it.

As his luck, or perhaps mine, would have it, Strogue was in the blues, when he came to Charing Cross. He received me with a grunt, and would say nothing, except to be down upon the cabman, and the porters, and shove his way along as if there were no English language. This is a very useful way to go to work, whenever you can be quite certain that you are the biggest fellow in the place, with no one to try to think otherwise. But unless there is money right and left behind it, at a big railway station it does not succeed.

"You are not among the niggers yet," I said, being always polite to everybody, and indignant at not being allowed to speak, while his voice rang along the glazing. But he deigned me no answer, [Pg 383] not even a glance, but shouted out "Third Class! Where the devil are you driving to? Have you never seen the Chairman of this Line?" The porters were too wide-awake to do anything but grin, and touch their caps ironically, and then he said "First Class," whereupon they all believed him.

Not a word however would he say to me, though we had all the carriage to ourselves at starting; so I took him at his humour, and went to the other window, and drowned all my anxieties in "The Money Market." Possibly his heart was heavy about the landlady of the "London Rock," or the barmaid thereof, or the daughter of the Boots, if a maiden there were in that capacity; or perhaps a traveller even so well-seasoned could not bid adieu to his native land once more, without emotions honourable to his head and heart alike. Then the contagion of his low spirits began to spread around me, like the influenza vapour; and if he had tried to talk, I should not have cared to answer.

Such tacit respect and mutual affability of silence do more to endear two heavy-witted Britons to one another, than a folio of flippant words. Strogue was kindly pleased with me, and I thought well of Strogue, when our lofty regard for the sea-sick passengers, as we had a rolling time of it, opened, as with one accord, the valves of communication. "Give us a light, old chap," said the Captain, as he clapped me on the back; "come out of the sulks, and talk a bit."

After all the temper he had shown, this was rather ludicrous; but I let him put his own interpretation on it, for he was in this predicament for my sake, quite as much as to please himself. But strange as it may seem, we both avoided all important subjects, until the question of route compelled us to consider them. Then I told him that money need not stop us, only mine must be put into proper form in Paris; and then we discussed the whole question.

It seems that he had ordered this sudden start by reason of something that came to his knowledge only on the previous afternoon. In St. Paul's churchyard he encountered quite by [Pg 384] chance, according to his view of it, a man well known through his travels in Central Asia, and most interesting account of them. Strogue took him back to the "London Rock," and there entertained him hospitably, for a traveller has generally acquired the power of feeding upon any wayside bench. By and by the two great wanderers came to a subject pretty sure to be handled by them, but never with unanimity. Strogue thought highly of the classic charms of the fair Ionian ladies; but Sir Robert B. called them a brown and skinny lot, and declared that there was not a girl of any Hellenic race fit to walk beside a maiden he had seen at Athens, not more than a month ago, and who was said to be of old Caucasian lineage. Knowing that the ladies of the Caucasus are not much addicted to travel, the Captain began to enquire into this, and although he had never met Dariel, and had seen Sûr Imar at a distance only, his friend's account left him in no doubt whatever that the pair he had been so vainly seeking, by letters to half the capital towns of Europe, were in Athens at the end of February. Not only did the description tally with all he heard from me and Nickols, and that scoundrel of a Hafer, but also Sir Robert, while making enquiries about the beautiful stranger, had been told by some facetious Greek that she was worthily named indeed, the daughter of Himeros, of love, of passion, of delight, and yearning. And again he had learned at the hotel, where they were staying, that their journey to St. Petersburg had been prevented, or at any rate deferred, through the extreme severity of the winter surpassing any season within memory. This I could well understand, for I knew Sûr Imar's dread of bad weather, not on his own account but lovely Dariel's.

Father and daughter were still at the ancient centre of civilization, when Sir Robert left it, and their intentions were unknown to him. But he was inclined to think, from certain purchases which he saw them making, that they were more likely to be on their way home than to proceed to Russia now, and if so there could be little doubt that they would make their way first to Constantinople. Therefore it seemed to be our proper course, though beset with much doubt and [Pg 385] perplexity, to betake ourselves at the utmost speed to the Turkish capital, and try to intercept them there, or if too late for that, to follow them. For everything now would depend upon time. In a few more weeks the golden sun would have captured the mountain parapets, and begin to swing open with summer light the bars of the steepest citadels; and then if Sûr Imar were a day before us, what chance of overtaking him? And his foes were not likely to hold much parley, when once they found him in their hands.

Out upon it! Who could imagine such a crime overlooked by the Power that rules the world? A loyal confidence possessed me for a while, that Heaven would protect its noblest produce, the few who ever think of looking up to it, from the venom of its abject spawn.

"It will never do to take it in that light," said Strogue, though he always attributed his own escapes, which had been manifold as well as narrow, to celestial perception of his merits; "no, you must never trust to that cock's fighting. Sometimes it will, and sometimes it won't. And where are you then without your revolver? And one thing you overlook altogether; setting aside all holy motives—which those fellows take revenge to be—when a savage wants your property, does he dwell upon your character?"

"Then they ought to be all exterminated. What are the lives of a thousand savages, in comparison with that of one great good man, who lives only for their benefit?"

"If you kill them, what good can he do them?" Strogue asked, being always more captious than logical. "Imar is in front of his age; and the age makes martyrs of fellows of that kind and leaves the future to make saints of them, if their ghosts turn up, within memory. Our business is to act, and not to argue. Now look to your luggage, my boy, and the most important part of it is firearms."

So we took our course along the chord of Europe by abominably slow lines, whenever there were any; and at last without any line at all. It gave an Englishman the tingles to see everybody crawling, as if time were a tortoise with the gout, and the hours the produce of a coprite beetle, [Pg 386] which he slowly travels backward to bury. The slowest man on our farm, after eating two days' dinner, was a swallow with a nest to feed, compared to any one I saw throughout the east of Europe.

There was a little more vigour at Constantinople, and plenty of fellows with fine pegs to stir, if they could only see the use of it. But as for any briskness, and punctuality, and eagerness to get a job and do it, the loafer who stands by the horse-trough on the green in any Surrey village would have his hands out of his pockets and stand on his head, before their eyes were open. And yet we are told every day of our lives that it serves the British farmer right to starve, because he has no

activity!

We had spent two days without any possibility of avoiding it in Paris, and but for Strogue it would have taken me twice as long to make the needful arrangements; and now we lost four days in the City of the Sultan, making search for our friends in all probable quarters, and procuring what was indispensable. Without obtaining any further clue, we set forth on the 10th of April, by a poor little steamer very badly found, for a place called Poti at the mouth of the Rion, one of the four chief rivers of the Caucasus, formerly known as the Phasis, whence the bird, whose lustre shames the glories of the golden fleece.

Strogue had shown in very early days the quick force of his genius by running away from school, and defying pursuit, and beginning earnest life in a wherry. "You are picking up the lingoes very smart," he said, as we churned the muddy waters; "but I can't stand affectation, George, and I won't have the old Ark called the *Argo*. Besides, she never came here in her life; she drew a deal too much water. She went to pieces on Ararat, I tell you, and Satan took her upper deck and put it on top of Elbruz. Why? Why, that people might go against the Bible, as they are only too glad to get an excuse to do. And he put about a story that she grounded upon Elbruz, which she could not have done from the shape of it. No, no. Holy Writ is what I stick to, and as long as I do that, the Lord will always stick to me. I won't hear another word about it."

However, though he would not have the Argo even mentioned, he made no objection to the golden fleece; in fact he confirmed it, having seen some gold in the upper waters of the Rion; and as for Medea, when I told him all her story, her treachery, incantations, murder of her brother and even her own babes, he became quite excited, and vowed that she must have come to life again as the Princess Marva. Upon that I begged him to tell me all he knew about that extraordinary lady, for I had never understood from her brother's description that her nature was particularly fierce and unforgiving, though she certainly behaved in a cold and distant manner, when she informed him that his wife was gone. But that might arise from nothing more than the sense of the wrong she herself had received through her faithless husband Rakhan. And would a ruthless woman feel such emotion at the casualty to another person's child? [Pg 387]

"Not knowing, can't say," the Captain answered in his favourite short style; "but you must remember that I have not heard that story as he told it. And another thing, he was not there to see it; for he was far away settling that other fellow's hash,—and his own too by being in such a blessed hurry. But I have got a very shrewd suspicion, my boy; you will laugh at it, I dare say, and there certainly are some things that pretty nearly knock it on the head. What do you say to this? Suppose it was her own child that was killed, and that she contrived to change them, fearing that she would never have another, and so would lose her position altogether. For among those Ossets, as I have been told, the childless wife of the chief must eat humble-pie at every corner, and is apt to be superseded after six or seven years. And she might have other motives too for getting Imar's heir into her possession."

"The idea is ingenious, but most improbable," I replied after thinking for a moment. "Not that she could not have done it, for there was no one to observe her, except her own nurse, whom she could easily silence. But her own conduct now proves that it cannot have been so. Shows that she had not gone for that game, I mean. They may be a lawless lot, everybody says so; but even your Medea would never send a man to marry his own sister." [Pg 388]

"I hope not. It is too horrible to think of. Though it might be part of her hideous scheme for revenge. I tell you, Cranleigh, it is but a very stale thing to say, that a woman of the lowest depth of woman's wickedness is as far beneath any man's deepest pitch, as a good woman is above his highest stretch. I don't go by what they tell you in the books. I have seen a big lot of men and women—civilized as they call themselves, and savage; the latter on the whole more trustworthy; and you know that I never dogmatise. Only a fool does that: and though I am an ass very often, especially when I yield to my feelings about right and wrong, you can't call me altogether a fool—now can you?"

"Captain Strogue," I answered warmly, perceiving that he asked for it, "fools are always numerous enough. But if you are one, I wish that they were universal." And in saying this I was no hypocrite.

"There is not such a thing as a wise man now," he proceeded, after one quick glance, which showed that he liked my testimony. "We don't want them. They would never suit the age; and so the Lord abstains from sending them. The two or three last, who pretended to come, spent all their energy in scolding, which shows that they were not the proper stuff. But about this Medea—is that all you have got to say, to show that she is not trying on this little game?"

"No. I have a much stronger argument than that. No one could imagine for a moment that Sûr Imar, the most benevolent man on earth, could be the father of a hateful, spiteful, low-minded scoundrel, such as Hafer is."

"You have put it fairly. No one would imagine it; and therefore it is the very thing that may be true. I am not a scholar; but such things have been, and will be again, while the world endures. From bodily likeness you may reason more than from the greater things you cannot see. I have never seen Imar close at hand; but they are both tall, strong men, straight, well-built, and active. Imar is fair you say, and Hafer dark. That proves nothing."

"It is a vile idea, and I will not listen to it," I replied, with some inward sense of outrage on our race; "I have never seen Hafer for a close examination, and am not sure that I could swear to [Pg 389]

him, if he stood before me now. But from the glimpses I have had of him, I know this—he is as different from the grand Sûr Imar, as a blackberry bush is from a Muscat vine."

"Yet the one may be grafted on the other, I believe. The difficulty is not concerning that, George Cranleigh; the difficulty is about the woman's motives. Prove that it would suit her purposes to bring such a horrible affair about, and the horror of it is no obstacle to the fact. What makes me doubt my own suggestion is, that I cannot see how the scheme would work for the benefit of Madame Marva. All other objections on the score of human nature, or what human nature ought to be, are as nothing to the will of such a woman. Remember that she has a double object—to make herself the Queen of both the tribes, and to avenge her husband's death."

Wicked, and ruthless, and inhuman, as the sister of that lofty and noble-minded man might be, I could not bring myself to believe her capable of any such horrible design. But the misery, agony, and anxiety for the pure and innocent Dariel, and her father already so cruelly tried by the dark decree of Heaven, also my deep and abiding fury at bloodthirsty treachery, and the terror of being too late for the rescue, all together these drove me to the verge of madness, when the rotten old hulk they called a steamer yawed to this side and to that, and quivered, and rattled, and groaned, and the decrepit engines panted, and the craven crew fell upon their knees and wept; and it was announced in three languages, that we had done miracles of daring, and must tempt the Lord no longer, but thank Him for saving us from our own valour. The Rion was in such high flood that we must cast anchor, and wait for three days outside the Bar, till the rush of snow-water subsided.

CHAPTER XLIV
THE LAND OF PROMETHEUS

[Pg 390]

There are thousands of people (Englishmen especially, and Germans universally) who would find terrible fault with me—if they ever heard of it—for the absence of calmness and self-command, which I ought to have helped, but couldn't. Taking myself, as it ought to be, and always is in theory, I must have gone out of it, without asking leave, or even knowing that it took leave of me. Others, who have been in the like condition, and perhaps they may be counted by the million, will freely allow for all I did, and all I said—which was a great deal worse. Even Strogue, though acquainted with many languages, and tolerant of all their excesses, admitted at last that there must be a power in our own, beyond all foreign scope.

"You never use a wicked word," he said to me; "or at any rate none that could be scored against you, by any angel that understands our tongue; and yet you contrive to put things in such a way, that I would rather not stand by you in a thunderstorm."

That of course was rubbish; for I spoke most mildly, and if ever I used a strong expression, the sound of my own voice hurt me. I was trying, throughout the long trial, to be of the large mind, which I admired so much whenever to be found for certain, in any human beings within my knowledge; and these being unsatisfactorily scarce, I went back to the many I had read of, in my early days at Winchester, and did my utmost to believe in them, and shape myself accordingly.

But this was of very little help to me. Epaminondas, Timoleon, even the grand Aristides, and the Roman who sacrificed his own son, were nothing but shadows on a cloud, while I was the [Pg 391] shivering form inside it. Strogue himself was limp and grim, and could not see how to get out; and it was not in his mouth to talk of angels, unless it was to give them more to do. He might say what he liked, but he tried my temper, a great deal more than I trespassed upon his. Moreover he had made a very serious mistake, and one which would probably prove fatal. If we had only gone straight to Odessa, instead of losing time at Constantinople, we might have been at Kutais a week ago, supposing we had caught the proper steamer. This he could not for a moment deny; and all he could say was, that as I knew so much more about it than he did, although I had scarcely heard of this part of the world before, the best thing would be for me to command the expedition, and conduct it entirely in the English language. But I pointed out to him that my remarks must not be distorted in that manner, and that all of them were intended as compliments, though he had not for the moment perceived it. Upon this he came out of his anger, and said that every allowance must be made for me, and that if he were fool enough to be in love he should have carried on worse than I did.

At the same time he announced, when at length and at last we had got our *podoroshno*—or something like that, which cost a lot of money at Poti—that from what he was told about the condition of the passes, his plan of the route must be abandoned, and we must go first to Tiflis, though far to the south of our proper course. There we should get into the great Russian road, which cuts the main link of the mountain-chain, and find a course open in almost any weather, and vehicles of some sort to be had for hire. Moreover it was not at all unlikely that our Lesghian travellers might be there, waiting for the spring to tempt them home.

For people in haste and having baggage, any railway (however vile and utterly profane, both in itself and all its consequences) is better than the best carriage-road, or horse-track, likely to be found in the same direction or anywhere near it. So we took to the new line (the wonder of the age, to all Oriental intellects, and made as nature requires by Englishmen), and instead of leaving [Pg 392] it, as Strogue had first intended, at Kutais, or further on, we followed its rugged course

throughout to the "City of languages," as the world calls Tiflis.

Until the weather becomes too hot this is the usual residence of the Commander-in-Chief of the Caucasus, and Strogue suggested that we should call upon him, so as to start well with the authorities, in case of any violence being done or suffered by us among fierce tribesmen, who might not look at things as we did. For what could two men, even though of English birth, avail among so many? Strogue himself spoke Russian very fairly; and even I could make out a little by this time, after taking much trouble, and undergoing a crick in the hinges of both jaws, for in certain conditions of the human mind nothing seems too arduous.

His Highness Prince L. received us most politely, and at the Captain's request allowed us the privilege of a separate audience; for if it should once get wind among the tribes of the upper Terek that we were coming to meddle with their affairs, they were likely to show us nothing more than loop-holes studded with rifle-muzzles. The Prince, who was a very fine and handsome man, listened attentively to Strogue's account, and then (after telling us that he feared Sûr Imar was already in the net and beyond our reach) he took a course which puzzled us altogether, and made us look rather foolish.

"Gentlemen," he said with a pleasant smile, "observe that I do not question the accuracy of your account. In fact I believe every syllable of it, and it confirms my own opinions. But unless you have brought me attested depositions, or are prepared to make them from your own knowledge, and recent presence on the spot, I have no power to do anything. Have you any such evidence to lay before me?"

Strogue shook his head, and I was compelled to do the same. "We did not intend to apply to your Highness," I said in the best form I could muster; "that was only thought of afterwards, lest we should do anything against the law."

"It is fortunate for you that you have applied," he answered not unkindly. "You are doing nothing against our law by entering the country with our passports; but you are defying tribal laws, and outraging all their customs, by interfering with the private affairs of their ruling family. Have you at all considered what the result of that is? Captain Stronger, you have travelled on those mountains. Did you find encouragement to treat the people thus?" [Pg 393]

"Your Highness, the conclusion I arrived at was—the further I keep away from all of them, the better."

"It was wise. It shows your great abilities. The same conclusion is mine; and I regret that we have been obliged to embody them. But if we had not done so, it is certain that you would. But for years we must deal very carefully with them. All we endeavour is to keep some sort of order, and encourage them to try to live without much thieving. Work they will not, even for the four months, which is all the time many of them could work, if they tried. Gentlemen, your sympathies are wasted in such quarters."

"Your Highness, I should like to shoot them all; and probably in your position we should have done it." Strogue had not travelled for nothing, and he held up his thumb for me not to contradict him. "You are the great civilizing power, as England begins at last to acknowledge. We did not come here with the audacity to think that your Highness would help us in a private matter which does not concern your authority. But we know that this Lesghian chief, although he was compelled to side with Shamyl in his boyhood, and has paid the just penalty by long exile, is now the warmest friend of your great Empire. The object for which he has returned is this, to bring the barbarians into peaceful ways, and make them good Russian subjects, able, and at the same time glad, to pay good taxes. This gentleman with me, of the highest English family, is an intimate friend of Sûr Imar, and he will confirm every word I have said. Speak up, Sir George, and tell his Highness what you know."

"How many times more am I to be Sir George?" I muttered to myself in English. And then as the Prince's eyes fell upon me, I said very bravely, "It is so, your Highness." For everything was true, except perhaps about the taxes. [Pg 394]

"And will the Commander-in-Chief allow," cried Strogue, getting stronger in his eloquence, "a faithful and fervent Russian subject to be murdered by barbarous Ossets, the most cantankerous and anti-Russian tribe remaining in the Caucasus?"

The Captain made a true hit here. The gorgeous decorations rose on the ample bosom of the Prince, and his strong eyes flashed, as if in battle. But a Russian of high rank keeps his head, and he answered rather formally.

"As I said before, I cannot interfere. But in case of any savage tumult, I will give you a letter to the officer on duty in the Kazbek district, which you will not present unless needful. And now, gentlemen, I wish you well. You must bear in mind that you go with your lives in your hands, and we are not responsible. There is a little band of your countrymen on the northern side of Kazbek, who hold our permission to quest for minerals. Two of them were frozen to death last winter, through their own imprudence. But that has not prevented more from coming, in the manner of your country. You may find them of service to you in the matter of supplies. Farewell."

We took our leave with many thanks, not daring to put any further questions, although we concluded that he knew more than he saw fit to tell us. An officer brought us the promised letter, and looked at us very curiously, as if we were even more insane than the English race in general.

I wanted Strogue to question him; but he said that it would be a breach of etiquette, and might set the Commander against us. So we made our bows, and went back to our inn, which was one of the queerest places ever seen.

And this reminds me that I may have been expected to say something about the many noble and wonderful sights of our long and tedious journey. But the plain truth is, that they passed me by, without leaving any clear impression, or even creating the interest which at any other time must have swallowed me. I looked upon the grandest scenery of the world, without even thinking of its grandeur, caring for nothing but to leave it behind, as another obstacle gone by. Scarcely would I even lift my eyes to the majesty of giant Tau, or peak that towered in dazzling white (like the hand of God spread on the heavens), or the sombre awe of mountain forest, deep with impenetrable gloom. Yet in after times all these came gliding along the slides of memory, and now and then they stand and hold me, when I want to think of something else. [Pg 395]

But what we had to think of now was to get along the roadless roads from Tiflis into the black abysses and white steeps of the mountain range. Many of the passes still were blocked, although the strong sun scorched our skin, and the road was swamp or flood, whenever it was not crag or boulder. Strogue, being accustomed to such doings, took them with grim philosophy; and I cared little what they were, except for the delay they caused. The Prince most kindly sent a couple of Cossacks for our escort, and we had four men with their hired ponies, as well as an interpreter, for Strogue might often be at fault even with the Lesghian tongue, and we might visit places where that and Russian were of small avail.

So bad was the season, and the ways so roundabout and rugged, that not until the 3d of May did we enter the deep defile which leads to the foot of the crag of Karthlos. We threaded the narrow pass, and looked up at the fearful heights, from which those playful children fell, when frisking on their little legs among the treacherous snow-drift. And then we saw the rocky elbow of the dark ravine where Imar's father Dadian fell to the stealthy shot of Rakhan. The lonely gorge, where a man felt half afraid to provoke an echo, seemed to be formed by nature for the darkest deeds her sons can do. While the pale slant of declining sunshine, webbed with quivering vapour, here and there came partway down the walls of rent and jagged rock, but nowhere reached the bottom. There was not a sound to make us think of life in this unfathomable grave; even the Cossacks shuddered mutely under the gloomy chill of awe.

"Thank God!" cried Strogue, when one of our horses, less romantic than the rest, or lulled by power of contrast into a dream of clover, set up a lively neigh, which rang like a peal of bells along the chasm; "my son, thou shalt taste oats for that. This old hole never used to frighten me. The 'London Rock' must have spoiled my nerves for rocks that have got no chimneys. Here we are, George; let me see if I can blow. I used to know how. Or you try, if you like. You are more of a huntsman." [Pg 396]

We had stopped at a place where a steep, narrow channel cut the north wall of the gorge at right angles, and a battered old horn of great size hung from a staple at the rocky corner. I made a sign to him to blow, and blow he did, to such effect that the tattered grass, hanging here and there on either side of the chasm, shook as a matted cobweb shakes when a stag-beetle tumbles into it. In the midst of the solemn desolation, and my own profound anxiety, I could not help laughing at the Captain's face, as his great cheeks puffed with the rush from the lungs, and his fat chin went into plough-lines, and his grizzled eyebrows into gables over his wet projecting eyes.

"Laugh at me?" he said; "then do it better." But I could not do it half as well; and we all looked vainly up the steep ascent, whose winding hid the house from us—no one came, neither any answer, nor sign that we had moved the air. Suddenly it occurred to me, how poor Sûr Imar had stood where we were standing, and blown that very same horn in vain, with the flush of bright hope, and the glow of home, on the day that broke his life in twain. Some men are content to accept the tricks of others and of fortune; not from their own want of power, but because of their contempt of it.

Strogue, who was not by any means of this too lofty order, glared and stamped, and shook his fist at all the void magnificence from which he could get no response. "Up we go," he said at last, "if the mountain won't come down to us—but keep your revolver ready."

One of the Cossacks came with us, according to his orders; the other stayed with the horses and their owners in the trackway. The ascent was easy enough for any one not encumbered with four legs, though the rope that skirted the worst places was cut away, or worn out by time. And then we mounted some big steps, with a slush of snow upon them, and struck a heavy ring of brass upon a great gate of some dark wood. The mansion, or tower, or whatever it should be called, rose large and lofty before us, gazing with a dull and ancient aspect down a wilderness of craggy clefts. For about a third part of the year the scene must be all majesty, and for the rest all melancholy, even with life inside it. But now it appeared as if it did not care for any outlook; winter or summer, good or bad, could not matter much to it. [Pg 397]

"Nobody at home. They don't keep bailiffs in this part of the world," said Strogue, "or I should think some of those lovely fellows were having their steak in the kitchen. Down, George, down behind the parapet, or you'll never wear a hat again!"

Like an accomplished traveller, the Captain ducked his head out of shot. But I was too slow and stupid, and had caught the despondency of the place. "Fire away," I said, "if you can strike a

light; I don't believe that you can hit me."

Want of faith is infectious, and the silver mop behind the rail, on which was resting a long brown barrel, arose very slowly, and behold, it was the uncovered head of a very ancient man! Long white hair flowed down his shoulders and over his breast, and I heard a hollow sigh. "Blow me, if it isn't old Kobaduk!" cried Strogue, who was taking a cautious peep; "don't be in a funk, George; he knows me. Hold hard, old fellow, and keep your powder dry."

The old gentleman seemed to be in doubt about his eyes, till the Captain went down a flight of steps and round towards the kitchen-entrance where the ancient watchman stood. Then a few words of Lesghian passed, and Kobaduk leaned his gun against the rail, and flung his wrinkled arms round the thick form of Strogue.

"Is he coming? Will he never come again?" That much I could make out among his many trembling words. "Is old Kobaduk to die without seeing him? without ever hearing his voice again?"

Then he tottered to the corner of the steps, and spread his hand over his brows, where the sunset struck through the glare of snow, and he leaned on the ramrod which he had picked up, and gazed, with his wrinkled eyes casting forth a bushy sparkle, down the lonely passage from the road below. "Take it easy, old chap," shouted Strogue; and he answered, "I am too old to take it easy." [Pg 398]

Thereupon his long beard fell lower on his breast, and his lips, which were far out of sight behind it, mumbled some sadness which we could not understand, and he shuffled his feet to be sure that they were there, and made off for the kitchen-door, without another sign to us.

"Hospitable I call that," said Strogue; "the poor old beggar doesn't know what he is about. But we must put up here, willy, nilly, for the night. We will make him rout up a bit of grub, and stir the dregs of his ancient brain."

CHAPTER XLV [Pg 399]
AMONG THE GEMS

The Cossacks had discharged their duty now, after seeing us into friendly hands, and in the morning they rode off to rejoin the detachment at Tiflis. We sent a letter of thanks by them to the Russian Prince, for although we had not been molested, we owed our exemption in all probability to the presence of the uniform. We had passed through a district especially delightful, even among their many happy hunting-grounds, to the heart of the only men among these mountains [unless it be the foreign gunsmiths, and a few of the timber-dealers] who have a profession and practise it with any decent diligence—I mean the gallant brigands. But they must not be quoted as a real exception to the rule of sovereign indolence; because they are not true Caucasians, otherwise they could never get through half of the robberies they accomplish.

The rest of us spent a whole day and two nights at the poor deserted tower, partly to refresh our horses, which were sent to the post-house down below, and partly to consider our plans, after receiving from the ancient steward the feeble light he could contribute. Although he had recognised Strogue so suddenly and with such affection, he forgot him entirely, and with equal speed, until we began to talk in English, and then he broke forth with the declaration that our language was sweeter to his ears than the murmur of a hive of bees breathing their last among their honey, or the first music of the waterfall that has broken the chains of winter.

When Strogue translated this to me, I felt some gratifying surprise; for our language is not so wonderfully mellifluous, or melodious; though our voices are not such a cackle as theirs. But the old gentleman soon revoked his claim upon my gratitude by explaining, as interpreted by Strogue, that the words indeed were strange and hideous, like the sound of a saw on a flinty rock; nevertheless, he loved them always, because they brought to his mind the years that had unrolled day after day, as bright as the rising of the sun, and as smooth as a lake at the foot of the mountains, where no wind comes blowing. [Pg 400]

I could not quite see what his wits were driving at; but Strogue, who had very little reverence for anything, from seeing too much of all things, sang out, "Signor Nicolo?" and Kobaduk took it to his heart (which works much longer than the brain does), and came up to us, and touched both of us, with a shrivelled finger, upon either chest. "It is the name of the happy time; the time of the beautiful lady, and the noble lord, and the lovely babes; and nothing to do but to laugh and eat."

"And sleep," I suggested in his own language; and that completed his round of perfection, for he sent up the roots of his beard in a grin, and said, "Thou hast hit the mark." And then he sat down upon a swab to do it.

"Very fine, old codger, but beyond his time." Strogue gave him a tender poke with a stick, to make sure that he was not shamming; "we used to have faithful stuff like this in England; but education has vanquished it. He is sure to have a wife about twenty years old. Let us go in and stir her up. The wives are nothing but head-servants here. They are not sentimental, but they can cook, which is the highest duty of the female."

My feelings were shocked; but I left them so, because victuals alone could relieve them. The faithful retainer had overdone himself by that sudden outburst of decrepit hope. But he had got a young wife, which I thought too bad, until she proved the contrary by making us very comfortable, with a number of hot little barley-cakes, and some grilled kid flesh, which put a shine upon our faces. Then she poked her ancient husband up, and he came and fed, and played the host, and made runaway knocks at the time-worn gates of his memory.

The worst of it was that we could not be sure how much truth, and how much fiction, or at any rate confusion, issued from that antique repository. The older the thing was, the more it might be trusted—a truth which holds good with the bulk of modern work. Whenever we brought him to recent affairs, and the state of things now existing, he shook the silver tissue over his bright black eyes, and stared at us. "Kobaduk forgets, too long ago," was his chief perception of yesterday. However, we fetched him nearer date, by speaking of the Princess Marva. [Pg 401]

Then the old man trembled, and turned his head away; and his fingers (which looked like empty bean-pods) fiddled at the cartridge loops which hung, like the smocking of a Surrey parish-clerk, on the quivering of his sunken breast.

"For the sake of God, who made us all," he mumbled; and although he had been feeding well, his wife offered him some brown bits in vain. "Let him be," said Strogue, "perhaps he'll have more pluck to-morrow."

But it did not seem to be so at all. He went up a ladder to bed that night in a loft that reeked of onions, and he dragged his old gun after him; but how he got his crooked knees up the rungs, and how he failed to shoot himself in the stomach, were difficulties not to be explained even by the miraculous powers of habit. "The old cock will come down like a lark to-morrow," Strogue prophesied, as the trap-door banged. But larks are more famous for going up, and the Captain's prediction was about as correct as his reference to natural history.

"What a set of funks these people are! Is there no one here to tell us anything?" we exclaimed almost with one accord, on the evening of the following day, the only one we spent at Karthlos. We had asked at the post-house, where Sûr Imar used to keep his horses, and we had tried Mrs. Kobaduk the fourth, and a grandson of the steward who hung about the house, and a woodcutter who came home sometimes, and a fellow called the huntsman, and everybody else we could come across. Most of them sat down and stared at us, and feigned not to understand what we meant; and then when we put the interpreter at them, all they would do was to shake their heads, and [Pg 402] stretch their lazy hands westward. As for old Kobaduk, if he was like a lark, it was one who has a skewer through him; and all we could get him to do was to show us where the Princess Oria and her baby lay.

Alas, what an end for the loving and lovely, the passion of a warm life cold in dust, and the sad shadows creeping along the sadder grave. But I knew a heart in which she lived still, and a life as lovely as her own—were these to share her fate, or have a doom yet worse, and not even be restored to her in the silent home of death?

"I'll tell you what we will do, my boy," Strogue said to me after supper that night, and after we had puffed and spat and stamped at the noxious vapour of the native weed (which we should have to come to in the end, unless our own end spared us that), the frightful stuff, grown badly, and cured worse, which they dare to call tobacco; "this is a very grand place in its way, and the tradition of good victuals lingers still about. But the fragrance of the past is not enough for a man getting on in his forties. Hardships I have endured by the hundred, and could do it again like Elijah; though he only went forty days, which is nothing to my record. But you must understand, my son, that the fun of it is not so evident, when a man has got into napkin ways, and wants to lean back in his chair, and think of the things he has done, instead of doing them. Don't be in a wax, George, I am not thinking of cutting the expedition. Bat Strogue is made of too good stuff for that, and he means to have his little revenge as well. Only he must keep his headquarters somewhere within hail of the jack-spit. That sound has become of importance to him, and his nature is not ungrateful. The world is not made of love alone, or precious little there would be of it. Listen to the words of wisdom. Men who work hard must live well. Miners work hard, therefore they must live well. I never learned logic, but that sounds square."

"Very well, I am not going to controvert your logic. But how does it bear upon the present state of things?"

"Thus, thou wooden-headed Saxon. Nicolo's fellows are at work again. That much I found out [Pg 403] yesterday; and you know the Prince as good as told us so. Kazbek is their diggings, a pretty large district, but not so extensive as Elbruz. It will be easy enough to find them out; then we hear a civilized tongue again, and get something civilized to put upon it. Here we can learn nothing; there we may get news. In the morning let us start for Kazbek."

I was only too glad to have it so. For although not belonging to those up-and-down natures, which are either at the zenith or the nadir, I found myself many pegs below the proper mark, among all this great breadth and vast height, with nothing to touch, or lay hold of anywhere. If Strogue was lost in sentimentality of stomach, which had been regarded with an excess of feminine tenderness at the "London Rock," I could feel for him heartily—though nobody might think it, through the affection of an organ of my own, which is not so far distant as the poets do imagine. So I said, "You are right. We will start again to-morrow."

This we did, and our spirits began to rise, as we left that grand but ill-fated place behind. From a

rise of the mountain-track we saw it, magnificent in its dark command, and vastly improved by the distance. And then we struck into the great Dariel road, the causeway of the Caucasus. This we followed as far as the Russian fort, where we presented ourselves, and our letter from the Commander-in-Chief, and were entertained most hospitably. The Colonel was as kind as man could be, and showed no reserve or reluctance in answering most of our questions. My experience is too small to be of any value; but Strogue, who had seen a great deal of Russian policy and management in the vast tracts added to their empire, always maintained that the common talk about their grinding tyranny is jealous exaggeration; though they can be very stern and hard when they meet with savage treachery, even as we ourselves have been.

And now this officer, a very capable, active, and intelligent man, told us plainly that his orders were to hold himself entirely aloof from all the private feuds and quarrels among the mountain races, unless they revolted, or refused to pay their very moderate taxes, or were guilty of open violence, or outrage upon travellers. He had heard of Sûr Imar, as still the legitimate chief of an important tribe, for many years an exile now, but regarded kindly by the Government, and still in receipt of the larger part of his revenues through a Russian agent, who had been appointed upon his kinsman's death. But of his return or present whereabouts he knew no more than we did. [Pg 404]

Then we asked him about the Princess Marva, and he smiled mysteriously. "We don't talk of her so freely," he said, as Strogue still pressed him. "She is a lady of very strong will, and has given us some trouble. But we hope that she is improving now, and her son is a pattern of excellence. If he would only take the command, which according to his rights he should have done long ago. But he is mild and submissive, though endowed with great abilities. Many of the village headmen are indignant that she does not retire, for he is beloved, while she is not. But we never interfere in such matters; we let them settle their own successions. Only in case of absence, such as that of Imar—"

"But Hafer himself has been long away," I interrupted him in some surprise, and with faulty words, which made Strogue smile, but the Russian was more courteous; "he has been for months in England."

"Of that I was not aware," the officer answered, after some reflection. "But the winter has been the worst ever known, and almost all the passes blocked, except those we kept open. But, gentlemen, as I said before, we do not interfere in private matters. You are going on, you told me, to that place upon the mountain, where certain Englishmen with our permission are in search of minerals. They may know more about such matters; for I believe that the lady has demanded payment from them, and does not recognise our licence, though Kazbek is not within her boundaries, or certainly not that part of it. If you will take my advice, which I offer simply as a private friend, and one who admires Englishmen, you will trespass as little as possible upon the domain of Madame Marva. I hope for the privilege of entertaining you, upon your return from the mountain."

This was plainly our dismissal, and his horse was waiting at the door for him. So as the sun was still high in the heavens, and the weather very favourable, we resolved to try to reach the mine that night, or rather I should say the diggings, for it had not attained the dignity of a mine, and was not very likely to do so. We took a young goatherd for a guide, and leaving our horses at a hut, set forth in search of the emerald-hunters. [Pg 405]

Although we had no very great height to ascend, for the diggings were far below the summit, and there was a fair track nearly all the way, and a rope laid along the worst places, it was close upon sunset before we reached the magnificent gully where the miners had their camp. They were just leaving work for the day, and marching almost like a squad of soldiers to the cells they had scooped for their dwelling-places under the shelter of an overhanging crag. Each of them carried a rifle on his shoulder as well as a strong iron rod with a crook at the end, and a tool something like a spud, and a hammer with a long peak of steel. The captain, or master, or foreman, came last in the file with nothing in his hands but a deep tar-pot, and he proved to be Mr. Jack Nickols, a sturdy young man with a round red face, active, resolute, and profoundly contented with his own endowments.

"Halloa! Haven't you got a word to throw at a brother Englishman?" Strogue was sadly short of breath, but still capable of indignation, as these twelve or fourteen men regarded him with some suspicion, and not a token of hospitable emotion kindling in their bosoms. "We are not come to steal your dirty stones, or to set up shop against you. We are of the highest English birth, cousins to two Dukes, six Marquises, and a good round dozen of Earls. And what will touch you up more, my boys, if you are driven against nature to be Radicals, we have got three pounds of fine tobacco left; and if you are good, you shall have half of it."

This was an outburst of "Altruism," as the people who ought to be in Bedlam call it, which found no echo in my breast (because we were beginning to smoke our ashes), but set up an irresponsible rub-a-dub in theirs.

With one accord they all turned round; though bound for their suppers (as their mouths would have frankly declared, if sure of having more than they could do with), still they proved their higher value, and their sense of the fine arts—such as we cultivate now with picture-frames on Sunday—by stopping and pulling out empty pipes, and dropping their thumbs from the barrel to the bowl. [Pg 406]

"Plenty of time," said Captain Strogue, who was up to all those little things; "fine fellows all of

you; but you don't get a whiff till I know more about you. The laws of Great Britain hold good all over the globe, because they are righteous. You may shout in vain for Bacco, as the heathen gods did in their time. I am not a man of many words. We have had to smoke a lot of poison ourselves, and not a blessed son of a gun among you tastes a shred of the genuine weed, till I have got all I want out of you."

I thought that they would have turned crusty. But such misgivings showed that I did not understand my countrymen. An Englishman can put up with everything but humbug. Bar that, and he begins to think of you.

"I want a young fellow called Jack Nickols, the nephew of my old friend, Jemmy Nickols," Strogue went on with louder shouts, as he saw that the men were taking to him; "you are a rough lot, and you know it. But I have been round the world seven times; and take you as you are, I would rather have you than any other fellows I have ever come across. You are no wonders, mind you; but you know what's what. And more than that, you do it."

This was rather vague, though it sounded so precise. And I whispered to the Captain, "You are as good as John Bright." But he shoved me with his elbow, while his eloquence went down. Then the young man with the tar-pot came up mildly, in the presence of a larger spirit, and said, "Captain, you must be the celebrated traveller;" and Strogue looked at him augustly, and said, "Young man, you are right."

After this it is impossible for me to tell the glorious night they made of it. They had spent all the time, when they could not work, in making themselves more comfortable; and all the starvation they had been through was avenged upon itself by its own power. I have seen a good deal of eating; and Strogue had both seen and done a great deal more; and the voice of travellers is unanimous that the Caucasian native acknowledges no superior in that line. It is not for me to contradict them, but the impression I formed that night, and with my own mouth confirmed it, was that the British settler can in that, as in less important matters, adapt himself to his environment. The sheep of the mountain are but small, and we furthered nature's ordinances by making six, or perhaps I should say seven of them, smaller still. For the valleys were spread with the verdure of spring, and it covered their saddles with sweet white fat. [Pg 407]

"One little slice more," Jack Nickols said; "this is the best of the batch, I know. What would we have given for a cut out of him last winter! But we were obliged to leave this place altogether. Forty feet deep the snow was here, and not a bit of firing to be got for love or money. You heard that two of us were frozen to death; but we never lost a man. We set that story going, and it did us a lot of good, and choked off another lot who wanted to come here. We have got it all to ourselves at present, and mean to keep it. You saw my tar-pot. Capital plan. An invention of my own. We have scarcely gone underground at all as yet. We scratch the crannies, and the dribble-places, and I stand by and watch every fellow. Wonderfully honest, and all that, no doubt; but just as well to look after them. Every bit of green they find, I drop it in the tar. They can't get it out again, even if they could find it, without telling tales on their fingers. Nine out of ten are not worth keeping; but we have got a few real beauties. There is one stone I wouldn't take a hundred pounds for, and a lot worth more than fifty. I'll show you some of them by daylight. It's the flaws, the flaws that murder them."

"We don't know anything about stones," replied Strogue, "and I would rather look through a good green bottle than all the emeralds that ever came from Peru, or wherever they get them. What we want to talk about is quite another pair of shoes, and I know you will help us if you can. We gave you that letter from your uncle. He will be out here this summer if he can. But we cannot wait for that. We must set to work at once. When the rest are gone, I will tell you all about it." [Pg 408]

"We will go outside, if you don't mind. I can show you a very cosy place where we do our cooking, and the ashes warm the rock all night. Let us have our pipes there, and leave the tag-rag here."

We followed him gladly to the open air, and sat upon some bear-skins in a snug alcove of rock, with the stars shining on us, and the embers of the fire doing better service still. And here we told young Jack Nickols all our story, a great part of which he must have known already.

"You will never go home alive," he said, "if you are going to meddle with that woman. Let her have her own way. She always does. What right have you to conclude that she wants to murder her own twin-brother? It is likely enough, mind, from what you say, and in fact I have little doubt about it. But for all that, you don't actually know it, and if you did you are not the Russian Government. Let her alone, for God's sake."

We told him that this was the very thing we had sworn to ourselves we would never do; and that he must stand by us, like an Englishman, and like his uncle's nephew. "Stand a long way off more likely," he replied, "though I don't call myself a coward, and I hate that woman. But I will try to contrive something, and let you know to-morrow."

CHAPTER XLVI
QUEEN MARVA

[Pg 409]

Discovering nothing of any kind, concerning Sûr Imar and his daughter, after they had quitted

Athens, we made up our minds that the proper course was to pay a visit to the Princess Marva, and try to get some inkling of her plans. It was not very likely that a couple of clumsy fellows, like Strogue and my humble self, would prove a match, or even a serious check, for a subtle and ruthless woman, commanding a reckless tribe, and probably well informed of all the plans of her unsuspicious victims. So that if we appeared in our own characters, or even let her know that we were here, our days in this land, or indeed in any other visible except to the eyes of faith, were likely to be brief indeed.

But for the sake of those who mean well, and desire fair play on the whole, whenever it leaves a chance for them, Providence has been gracious enough to lay down one universal rule—that every wicked person has some special weakness, some nick in his black shell for the oyster-knife of justice; so that a simple and straight mind, like Strogue's and mine, may find its way through, and turn the whole to righteous uses.

"I have hit the mark," Jack Nickols said, when he came home to breakfast with his tar-pot; "when the sun comes up these rattling peaks, instead of down over them, is the time to think. I could not see things clear last night, though you know how little I take, Captain, compared with anybody else about. But when the sun came up from under to me, my brains, which are bright now and then, began to work. I thought of you snoozing in the ashes, and I resolved to do my best for you."

"Go on, my son," said the Captain kindly, with the tolerance of a gentleman who is offered lager- [Pg 410]
froth, instead of solid Bass; "there is no doubt that you have fine ideas. A man who turns out so early picks up something."

"Then what do you say to this?" cried Jack. "You might roll over fifty times, till nine o'clock, as old gentlemen do in England, and yet never find it occur to you. That Clipper of the mountains"—"Cleopatra" was the word in his mind perhaps—"is a terrible oner for money, they say, and we have had a tip or two to that effect. Till we paid her toll, though it is robbery downright, a bullet used to come from some black corner, and my very best hand had a sample through his hat. One must expect that sort of thing of course, in an out-of-way part of the world like this; but luckily they have never been at Wimbledon. I came very near the Queen's Prize once; but I told you all about that, last night. These beggars won't give me a chance. Never mind, it will come some day. But they haven't tried to pot us, since we paid toll. Now why shouldn't you go upon the same tack? Go to Her Majesty, as an opposition company, and offer a premium over our heads."

"Upon my word, you are a clever fellow," said Strogue, looking at him thoughtfully; "I fancied so when I saw the tar-pot. But, Jack, my dear boy, is there any foundation, anything for us to go upon?"

"Yes, there is. And we can make much more of it. I can promise you an interview with the tigress, if you will offer to put stripes of gold on her. You know what those confounded Germans are. No sooner do they hear of any English enterprise than they want to go one better and collar it. They come in, and hoist us out, and get the cream of all our sweat. There was a tremendous man of science, Herr Baddechopps, or Baddechumps, or some such name, poking about here with spectacles last autumn; I have got his card, and you shall have it. We put a rope round him, and two men at either end, and swept him down the hill faster than he came up, and we promised him the loop round his neck if he came back; for I can't stand their jealousy of everything we discover! You go and tell Marva that we have got the place too cheap; that it all belongs to her, [Pg 411]
and you will pay three times the royalty. Take a notary with you, but sign nothing."

"George, I am up for trying it, if you are," said Strogue. "What is the name of her place—Gomorrah? Doesn't sound very inviting, does it? But the lady won't hurt us, if we leave our cash behind. We can get there in three days, you said last night. Let us beard the tigress in her den. I have never been quite in that part before. There is no such thing as a road, of course. All the better for that sometimes."

Nickols advised us to take no horses, lest we should be murdered for their sake; but to hire a guide, and a tent, and half-a-dozen of his men (whom he would try to spare), as well as our own interpreter, and a Tartar or two who were always hanging about the Russian fort. Thus we should be ten or twelve in number, all well-armed, and capable of giving a good account of some thirty Ossets, if they took our expedition roughly; for they are not good shots, and their guns are very poor.

We spent that evening in consultation, receiving many hints from our young friend, who would have been glad to join us, if the state of his work had allowed it. But his mate, as he called him, was away, and so he could not well leave the diggings; moreover, there would have been some danger that he might be recognised, which would prove fatal to our case at once. Yet he promised to help us with all his force, in any great emergency, if we could only give him notice in good time, and this was of no less value to us than a troop of Cossacks. Meanwhile he would send to make inquiry at Vladikaukaz, the chief town on the north, which travellers from Russia would be almost sure to pass, whether our friends had been heard of there. And so, with many thanks, we left him for the present, and spent a day at Kazbek village, preparing for our visit to the Princess Marva.

Against so fierce an enemy, and with so good an object, our stratagem for obtaining an audience was fair enough; but to use the German professor's card seemed to me far beyond the most elastic stretch of honesty; so I threw it into the fire, to save argument, for Strogue took a [Pg 412]

different view of the case. "You may take the lead, and you may call yourself a German," I told him resolutely; "I am a silent partner, and it does not matter who I am. The lady speaks better French perhaps than you do, and certainly much better than I do. You do all the talking, and I nod my head. Cator is drawing up the rough agreement, which we submit for her consideration. The beauty of it is, that if in her greed she even gives a nibble at the bait, we can dangle it ever so long before her, and are sure to find out something of what we want to know. Cator must put it as vaguely as he can, and leave the royalty blank for us to fight about."

Cator was one of Jack Nickols' men, a sharp and well-educated youth, who had been in a lawyer's office, but found a lack of bracing qualities in the air, and left his stool in search of them. And now we gave him a double fee to prepare a document and enact the lawyer's clerk at our interview, for men of law were almost as rare as men of medicine in these parts. A formidable deed it was, with half-a-dozen seals to it, and we wrapped it round a straight black horn from some sheep or goat of the mountains.

The roads were bad, being over-metalled by the melting of the snow. For the roads are the river-courses, and when nature lays too much water on, it is not easy to get along them, even the right way of the grain. And our course now was against the grain, towards the head springs, or mother glaciers of the river Terek; which would have conducted us, when in a proper mood, but now knocked us back again, with a gruff and grey adversity. Neither was there anything for the eyes to spread their rims at, and make light of all the discontent of legs and back. All was dry rock, except where it was wet with dribble, or dirty with reek of thaw; and there was scarcely a tree to wipe the air, or show what way the wind came.

Nevertheless we strove along, following our guide, who cared much more about putting his own feet right than ours. For these men are not like the Alpine guides, whose loyalty is more to them than money. At length, on the third afternoon, we stood before a strange place, which I cannot [Pg 413] describe, nor even give a rough idea of it, unless I may compare it with a great pile of big dominoes, set at any angle, some on end, and some on edge, on the top of a black pillow bolt-upright. And this was the fortress of the Osset Queen.

We sounded a trumpet, but received no answer. And then we made a rub-a-dub on a goat-skin drum, which was hanging on a stump for visitors. And when we left off, we heard a screech of metal going rustily and heavily upon its hinges. Then a muzzle, as big as a small church bell, came out, and we thought it was all up with us.

But Strogue, like a brave man, waved a white handkerchief on the screw of his ramrod, and we pushed the interpreter foremost, though it required three men to do it. What he said was beyond me altogether, though crowded with illustrious but anxious words. And if words were ever known to afford relief, it is fair to acknowledge that they did so then. The great muzzle which commanded all our bodies, so that to fly was hopeless, sank upon its pivot—or whatever it might be—and a ladder, which had been out of sight behind a buttress, came sliding down the base to meet us. "One man first" was the order from the loop-hole; and every one of us quite admitted his friend's claim to precedence. "Can die but once," cried Strogue; "here goes." Upon which I felt my cheeks burn, and said, "Let me." But he answered, "No, you shall come next, my son."

The Captain went up heavily, with the scroll upon his back, and the four-chambered "bull-dog" in his left breast-pocket; and we saw two men receive him on a narrow parapet, and he waved his hand to us to indicate all right. Then he vanished round a corner, and we waited for some minutes, having found a little shelter where it would take some time to shoot us. We assured one another very strongly that if anything happened to Captain Strogue, we would not be satisfied with avenging him, but would have the whole place down, and a British fleet in a position to rake all the Caucasus, when to our great relief he appeared again at the head of the ladder and shouted, "Three more fellows may come up now." This time, I was the foremost to run up. Not that I was really afraid before; only that I waited to know what the others thought, as a man of [Pg 414] modesty and deliberation does, when the circumstances are unusual. Cator followed readily, and so did another of Jack Nickols' men; but the interpreter said that we should find him more useful at the bottom of the ladder. "She is a stunner, and she has got a stunning place," Strogue whispered to me, as he led us through a dark passage into a long low room; "she beats the Begum all to fits."

What Begum he meant I could not tell, having heard him speak of several whose hearts he had broken in his early days. But if he meant some regal-looking woman, he was not beyond the mark in his comparison. For I had never beheld one so stately and grand as the lady who now received us with a slight inclination, reflected by the polish of the black walnut table before her. She was sitting in a chair of purple velvet with a leopard's skin thrown over it, and her dress was of soft maroon brocade, with white fur trimmings at the neck and wrist, and a gold chain flowing upon her full broad bosom. There was not a wrinkle or a spot to mar the shapely column of her neck, or the firm sleek comeliness of her face; and her eyes, if there had only been some sweetness in them, would have been as lovely as they were splendid. Her complexion was darker than Sûr Imar's, and the lineaments more delicate, so that her face excelled his in perfection of form, as the feminine face should do. But as to expression, the gentler element was by no means in its duty there; for the aspect was of one who scorns, mistrusts, and repels all fellow-creatures, and sees the evil in them only.

"These, then, are the members of your company, Herr Steinhart,"—she addressed herself to Strogue, after one flashing glance at each of us, as we entered, and her French pronunciation was a little too good for me to follow all of it, though she did not infuse much nasal twang; "and it

is your opinion that I am deluded by those who are working my mines at present?" *My mines* indeed, how grand! I thought; what would the Russians have to say to that?

"I never speak ill of the poor," replied Strogue, "and we must make every allowance for the British audacity, your Highness. All cannot afford to pay as we can, for the reason that they have not our enormous capital at command. We always find it the wisest course to treat the landowners liberally. We make no pretence to be better, more honest or more generous, than those Englishmen. Your Serene Highness, although so young, has had sufficient experience of the world, to know that all men are by nature rogues." [Pg 415]

"My faith, but it is true! How seldom, though, have the men the good manners to acknowledge that! Rather do they not put the fault upon the more simple and righteous sex?"

"Your Serene Highness," Strogue answered gravely, seeing that this title was not ungrateful, "the ladies perceive at once that they are grossly wronged; but they are too magnanimous, too regardless of gain, to remonstrate. You, for example, how much do you care? You have ample revenues from your sovereignty, and things that occur on the back of a mountain are of small account to you. Nevertheless the right is right, and it ought to be defended."

"And the right shall be defended, when it is my right," said the lady; "I am not accustomed, as you well observed, to the smaller business, Herr Steinhart; but those who defraud me suffer for it. Make your offer, if you please, more intelligible."

This was the very thing we did not want to do, having no offer of any kind to make. But Strogue had gone far enough, and wide enough, to know that a question is answered best by another question.

"Is it possible that your Serene Highness will oblige us with the amount which those arrogant Englishmen have been in the habit of contributing to your lofty revenues? We are a wealthy company, but we cast away no money."

"It is just," she replied, "and my desire is for justice. This is what they pay me now. But they would have to double it for the coming year. The trumpery sum of two hundred roubles. With you I will not treat for less than a thousand, and for one year only at that price."

"Your Highness is very just and moderate," said Strogue, while I turned away to hide my indignation, and sadness, that a woman so magnificent should stoop to such a lie; for I knew that Jack Nickols had paid her only twenty roubles, to last for two years, as she had no title there whatever. "But your Highness will pardon me for mentioning that we have heard a rumour, perhaps an absurd one, that a brother of yours, a great Lesghian chief, who was banished by the Russians, is now returning to his country, and may claim his rights over that desolate spot, and finally establish them. In that case our lease from your Serene Highness might not be so valuable as we were led to hope." [Pg 416]

A deep colour flushed, or I might say flashed, into the clear dusk of her cheeks, and a brilliance into the darkness of her eyes. Then she placed the long oval of her smooth plump hands (which reminded me of Dariel's, but were half again as large) on the black walnut wood before her, and gazed at the Captain, till he scarce knew where he was. Then she turned her eyes on me, with contempt subduing anger.

"***Gazed at the Captain till he scarce knew where he was.***"

"If you think to defraud me by such pretences,"—as she spoke she rose, and her head towered over the dumb-foundered Strogue's, and Cator's also,—"it would have been better for you, if you had remained at the foot of my hospitable ladder. As to the chances of Sûr Imar's interference, you shall have the evidence of Prince Hafer. His signature also you shall have. I will produce him to you." With swift yet dignified steps, she left the long gloomy room, and we stared at one another.

"Better cut and run, if they have left the ladder there," Strogue whispered, for several men now occupied the doorway; "it is all up, if Hafer sees us. I made sure from what they told us that he was miles away. What's the good of four of us?"

"They can shoot us all the easier, if we run," I said; "let us have it out here, if it must be; this thundering walnut table makes a grand breastwork. After all, they may not want to fight us."

"We can settle at least half-a-dozen of them;" Cator's eyes shone with legal pugnacity, "four Englishmen can lick a score of Ossets."

"Not if they are like that man," said the fourth of us, Tommy Williams, pointing to the door, which [Pg 417] was not a door (as the old joke has it), neither could it be a jar, but looked more like a bed-curtain. The lintel was appointed for men of good stature, and I had passed beneath it without much bend; but the young man, who made his entry now, was above any moderate stature of mankind, as he promised in breadth to out-do them. In a flash of thought, Sûr Imar stood before me, as I first beheld him. "Has that woman killed him, and is this his spectre?" I asked myself, as I fell back, and stared.

Dark as the room was, another moment showed me the excited wandering of my wits. This was not Sûr Imar's face, but one of similar comeliness, without his resolution behind it. A gentle, pleasant, large, and kindly countenance as his was, but with very sad placidity, and no strong will to enforce its lines. The face of a man who can be trusted to do you no wrong, and never to stop any other man from doing it. Like that of the friends we value most, when our little world goes smoothly.

He came to the table, behind which we had posted ourselves for a desperate stand, and there he bowed very gracefully to us, and then looked round for his admirable mother, as if he were quite at a loss without her. Strogue, in his polite way, asked in English, "Who the devil are you, sir?" The young giant looked at him, and shook his head, like a stranger to our fine language. "No fear; he won't fight," the Captain cried to comfort us; and we all took our hands from the triggers in

our pockets.

His golden curls were waving still—for he had the finest crop that I ever did see—and he was looking at us calmly, and as we thought with a sweet and hospitable intent, when back came the lady almost with a rush, and tokens of fury on her too expressive face. She had not meant her son to come in without her; and we smiled among ourselves, as we thought how he would "catch it," by and by at any rate, if not in our presence. However, she controlled herself, and introduced him grandly.

"Gentlemen, this is my son Prince Hafer, who will add his signature to mine, to remove all your hesitation, if the terms you propose should be suitable. Also he will confirm my declaration that [Pg 418] my brother Sûr Imar will raise no claim to the valuable mines you propose to rent from me. The Prince is capable of speaking French; though not perhaps with my facility. Your concession, which I have perused, is in French, but the amount of your payment is not yet stated. It will be useless to say less than one thousand roubles, five hundred of which must be paid in advance. Herr Steinhart, I am not a lover of money; but I must insist upon my son's rights. Do you consent to the sum I mention?"

Strogue looked at me, and then at Cator. Intending no business, but only a sham for the purpose of seeing the lady, and hearing something about her brother, he was taken aback at this close issue, especially the demand for a large payment on the nail. Moreover, his mind was in sad confusion, and so was mine, I must confess, about the existence of two Prince Hafers, while we durst not even hint at any explanation. But Cator was quicker, and more ready with a quiddity.

"Your Highness," he said, "as the legal adviser of this wealthy company, I may say that we shall not object to the rent you reserve, nor to the prepayment, which to us is a trifle below consideration. Only I should take a note of guarantee from your Highness, and also from Prince Hafer, against interference on your brother's part. That will have to be embodied in this instrument, which moreover has not as yet the necessary stamp. You have already given us your full assurance. If the Prince in my presence will add his, according to your proposition, I will put them into legal form."

"Bravo, Cator!" cried that stupid Strogue in English. "Did you speak, sir?" asked the Princess. "Your Serene Highness, I am afflicted with a cough," the Captain replied, with his hand before his mouth.

"My son," said the lady, looking steadily at Hafer, "oblige me by sitting down in that chair. It is one of my afflictions, gentlemen, that he is not always in strong health. But he is the delight of all our tribe; so amiable, so just, so generous! Now," she continued, with her back towards us, so that we could not see the expression of her eyes, "assure these gentlemen, my dear son, of your certain knowledge that Prince Imar will never set foot upon Kazbek again." [Pg 419]

"I have no knowledge. I have never seen him. His doings are unknown to me. I cannot affirm at all where he is." As the Prince spoke, in French rather worse than my own, he began to tremble violently, and his eyes turned away from his mother's face.

We saw her place one hand below her solid breast. And then she said, coaxingly as we thought, "The poor dear, what an affliction it is! But, my son, you can give us your firm belief that he will never tread the mountain of Kazbek any more."

"He will never tread that mountain any more," the young man replied in a low sad voice; and then he broke into a torrent of tears.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. It is most grievous. From a child he has suffered from these heart-attacks. Oh, the unfortunate mother that I am!" As she spoke, she was leading him out of the room; and we drew aside respectfully.

Before we had time to discuss this scene, her ladyship returned with some tears in her eyes, which made her look strangely beautiful. "I thank you for your most kind sympathy," she said, "and will not detain you any longer. If you will put all into proper form (for even in trouble such things must be seen to), and return with the 500 roubles and the deed, if it may be this day-week, I will grant all your desires. Till then, farewell."

With silent salaams we took our leave, and were shown forth, not from the rock-front of the castle, but through a narrow passage, or gallery, cut in the crag, and provided with iron doors. And the Ossets who conducted us could not be tempted to open lips, or to make a sign.

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CHAPTER XLVII
WOLF'S MEAT

Thus far Cator, the attorney's clerk, had proved himself the most sagacious and quick-witted of our party; though Captain Strogue would have been amazed and indignant to hear me say so. And now, when we had rejoined the rest of our little expedition, and all were recruiting the inner man (or the middle man perhaps he is, body being first, stomach second, and mind—when found, third portion), that sprig of the law came up, with a bone between his teeth, and begged the Captain and myself, who were feeding from the outside tops of our hats, to go a little further

round the elbow of a crag. There he asked us what opinions we had formed; and when we had taken our seats, we said: "None at all; except that we are all bamboozled."

"No doubt about that. But how, and why?" He answered with a mysterious look, which we were inclined to smile at, not having known him long enough to be sure of his prophetic gifts. "A lot of things have occurred to me, which may be very absurd of course, and it is not likely that all are right; but I am pretty sure that some are. Shall I tell you, and hear what you think of them?" We lit our pipes, and nodded to him, and smiled at one another.

"To begin with, then, I suspect most strongly that her Majesty, the Devil's wife, for so she deserves at least to be, has got her brother under lock and key somewhere, snug enough, and at her mercy, if she owns such a quality. Did you see what she touched, when she went to gag, and at the same time to cram, that poor young fellow, whose will she has crushed out of him by years and years of bullying? Perhaps you could not see where you stood; and she did not think that I [Pg 421] could. But I saw the tips of her long fingers playing with a key which was in her belt—a mere household key of course—but enough to remind her unlucky son where his poor Uncle was, without much chance of ever coming forth, but in his coffin. And I caught a glance of his which proved that he understood her meaning, and might soon have the same thing for himself. And then you saw how he broke down; for he is a very tender-hearted youth."

"By Jove, it sounds uncommonly like it; I was so taken aback," said Strogue, "at seeing another Prince Hafer in the field, and so different from my Simon Pure, that I could not notice small things much; and perhaps it was the same with Cranleigh. There is some abominable villany at work, and we shall be too late to stop it. I would like to insure friend Imar's life for ten thousand at five thousand premium. Go on, my son, thou speakest well."

"Another thing, according to my lights. He is not in that queer old place at all, Gomorrah Castle, or whatever they call it, although there are plenty of black holes there, enough to starve a regiment man by man. No, he is away to the North at present, perhaps on the other side of the mountains. You saw the big window that faced the North, more like a door than a window it was. Well, every time her brother was in question, and especially when she was fingering that key, she gave a quick glance through that window, very likely without even knowing it. People who gesticulate much often follow it up in that way. When they speak of a distant thing, they glance in that direction, if they can see it, or anything anywhere near it; and there was a great double-peaked mountain covered with snow, like a white mitre, stuck against the sky in the North. And if her brother had been in the castle dungeons, she would have made us go down the front ladder again, instead of getting a wink of back premises."

"Upon my word, this boy is wide-awake, considering how little he has seen yet of the world. Cator, like Cato, thou reasonest well. Go ahead, my son, we hearken thee."

"You see, Captain," said the young man, feeling abashed in the presence of such renown, and [Pg 422] doubtful about some chaff in its palm; "you see, I should never care to offer you advice. It might be in place with Mr. Cranleigh here, because he is only a young beginner. But you know what's what, I should say, ever so much better than I do. But as you tell me to go on, I will. Her Serene Highness intends to make away with her twin-brother, on Monday next."

"Come now, come now! I can stand a great deal, Cator. And none of your butter-Scotch—no, you are a Shropshire man, you say. Whatever you are, it won't make that go down. Why, Old Moore, and Zadkiel would be nothing to you."

"Captain, I will tell you what I go by, and then you'll be able to judge for yourself, whether I talk bunkum, or good sense. I have been in these parts for a twelvemonth now, and I ought to know something of these blessed natives. There are no two lots of them quite alike, any more than two mountains or two valleys are. But there is not a pin to choose among them in the matter of laziness. Poor beggars, they can scarcely help that, I dare say, frozen as they are for half the year, and roasted for the other half. Well, about here the manner is to keep three holidays, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, just as if they did anything on the other four days. These Ossets about here have no religion of any sort worth speaking of. Some call themselves Christians, some Mahometans, many are simple idolaters; but all are full of superstition, as such people must be. All they do in the religious way, is to stick to their fasts and festivals, particularly the festivals. And their great festival of the year finishes up next Sunday."

"What the deuce has that got to do with it?" Strogue enquired impatiently, for the sun was beginning to slope along the valley, and we had ten miles to go to the next covered place.

"Everything, if you will hear me out. That festival goes on for three weeks; and during that time it is not lawful to follow up even the blood-feud. But on Monday, it will be the proper thing to stick and stab all who are waiting for it. And what makes me think that this little game is on, according to institution, is that we have not seen a living soul, except an old woman and a child or two, in [Pg 423] the miserable villages we have come by. Why? For the very simple reason that every noble savage who can swing a dagger is off for this great act of faith on Monday; to see the death of the head of the clan avenged."

"I won't believe a word of it," I exclaimed, meaning no rudeness of course to Cator, but scouting the possibility of such fiendish abominations, after all I had heard of the great man's lofty hopes and pure ideals.

"To me it seems likely enough," said Strogue. "I have been among fellows who would eat their

mothers, and serve up their own babies for a garnish. We have none of that sort to deal with here; and the men of these mountains, taking them all round, are an indolent rather than a cruel lot. Quarrelsome of course, and hot of blood, but most loyal to their chiefs, and very generous sometimes. It is the blood-feud that makes devils of them; but how can they help that? It is their test of honour, ever since they came out of the Ark with the raven. What we have got to do is to act exactly as if all our friend Cator suggests were the fact. Thursday to-day; there is little time to lose, even if we can catch it up at all. We shall want every son of an emerald of you; and you must fight like sons of the Emerald Isle. By Jove, what a ripping turn-up it will be! Right about face, quick march for Kazbek!"

It was all very well for him, and Cator, and the rest to take things lightly thus. They could not be expected to feel much concern for the Lesghian Chief, or a Lesghian lady even more adorable. And as for Strogue his main object was less to rescue Sûr Imar, than to wreak his own vengeance upon Hafer—that is to say the London Hafer, the one who had leaped the ivied wall, and shot at me, and robbed the Captain, by some blackleg's process, of £300.

But I (with my warm affection and deep pity for the father, and passionate love of the daughter) could see no adventurous joy or fierce delight in the issue impending. I wanted no revenge, no compensation for anything done against me. Hafer the genuine, and Hafer the counterfeit, might settle their claims to the title as they pleased; even that most malignant and awful woman—if she were as black as she was painted—the Princess Marva might live her life out, and give the best [Pg 424] account of it when her time came; if only she could be kept from harming her relatives so innocent. There must be in her motives something more than we could see. Revenge alone for the loss of a husband, with whom she had lived on the worst of terms, and who had wronged her on the tenderest point—that, and the time-worn grievance about the refusal of her marriage-portion were not enough to drive her to such a horrible and unnatural deed as—unless we wronged her most shamefully—she was now in cold blood designing. There must be some other strong motive too, some great temptation of self-interest, some of that stern, sour stuff which drives us out of the hive that should be sweet to us.

No man knows what he does or thinks (unless he can keep himself separate from the thoughts of all around him, which requires a wonderful nature) when his legs go along with the legs of other men, and he has to swing his arms accordingly. There was no sort of march among us; for we had never been even of the Volunteer Force (except myself, and that only made me critical, without any help in it), and if we had wanted to show the Caucasus any sense of drill, we could never have done it, even if we had known how. By order of the rocky way, or of rocks without any way among them, we could never march two abreast, or even three in file with decency. All we could do was to get along, and admire one another's clumsiness.

Then we came to a place with a sudden gap in front, and nothing but the sky beyond it. A cleft in the crown of a rugged ascent, with spires of black rocks right and left. And there on the saddle-ridge that we must pass, a gaunt and wondrous figure arose, whether of man or of beast, and wavered against the grey mist of the distance, and swayed. Two long arms, like a gallows out of gear, or a cross that has rotted with its weight, struck up; and having been severely tried already we were much at a loss what to make of it. There was good light still, and we were not to be frightened, as we must have been after sunset; but the Interpreter being always nervous turned round, and exclaimed: "She has sent the Devil, the Devil himself, to stop us." While he spoke the long figure fell down on its knees, and swung its lank arms, like a windmill.

"Hold hard! Don't fire!" Strogue shouted sternly, as some of our men had brought their guns to [Pg 425] bear. "Idiots, it is nothing but a poor lost man, a fellow without a bit of food inside him. George, let us go and see what he is up to."

I was ready to go anywhere and do anything in my present state of mind; and when we came up to him, our poor brother mortal fell upon his face, and put his hands upon our feet. He muttered some words which we could not understand, and then he opened his mouth, which was very large, and pointed down it intelligibly to the slowest comprehension.

"He may be the Devil, but he wants some grub," Strogue shouted back to our company, who were still looking towards us doubtfully, for people become superstitious, without intending it, in these wild places. Then Cator came up, with a barley-cake in one hand and his rifle in the other. The unfortunate starver took no heed of the weapon in his extremity, but stretched his shrivelled arm across the muzzle, and tore the cake from Cator. In a moment it was gone, almost without a munch; and then he stared at us, with sun-scorched eyes projecting from their peel like a boiled potato,—and groaned for more, crooking his fingers like prongs of a rake. We shrank from him so that he might not touch us. But for the blood he was covered with we should have taken him for a skeleton; and but for his groans and nakedness we should have passed him as a scarecrow.

"Don't be in such a hurry, old chap, or you'll do yourself more harm than good," Strogue suggested reasonably. But even if the other had understood, it would have made no difference. He spread his face out in such a manner that there was nothing left but mouth; as a young cuckoo in a sparrow's nest, when his stepmother cannot satisfy him, squattles his empty body down, and distends himself into one enormous gape. Then Tommy Williams came up laughing, with his hat full of broken victuals; and the Captain, who understood the subject, said: "Not too fast, or he'll fall to pieces. And pour down a little whiskey to soften it."

When the poor fellow came round a little—and flat enough he had been before—to our surprise [Pg 426] he proved himself an exceedingly brave and well-intentioned man. In fact, if he had been

otherwise we should never have found him there. A barbarian he appeared at first, but that was appearance only, and under the stress of misfortune, although he belonged to a race which is the most barbarous of the Caucasus. When through our nervous interpreter we began to understand him, we soon perceived that it was our good luck as well as his own, which had brought him to us. And much as at first we grudged the time expended in this humanity, we soon came to see that it had been well spent, even for our own purposes. After such a fast, and then such feasting (prolonged in even more than due redress), it would have been most unfair to expect many words from him prematurely. We clothed him a little, for he was stark naked,—and so hairy a person I never beheld,—and then we cut the tight cord knotted round his waist, from which even famine had not freed him; and then we made a litter—for he could not walk—and carried him to our night-quarters. Luckily there was no foe in search of us, or that miserable sufferer's groans and snores must have told our whereabout to every echo. He surprised us again by an eager call for supper, but none would we give him, until he had splashed for a quarter of an hour in the glacier stream. Then we fed him again, and clothed him fairly, and a decent and reputable man he looked, though going down the vale of years. And his tale was interpreted as follows.

CHAPTER XLVIII
USI, THE SVÂN

[Pg 427]

"I am Usi, of Ushkul, in the country of the Svâns; Usi the Bear-slayer was my name, as long as I lived among them. The custom of the country is that as often as a female child is born, any youth of the village who looks forward to his need of marriage may come to the cradle and hang his own bullet around the neck of the infant, and from that time she is pledged to him, and he must marry her when she is old enough. When I was a stripling, the wife of our Priest produced him their fourteenth child, a daughter; and I was the first to go in at his door, and bespeak the young creature for myself. But as fortune ordained, the damsel proved deaf and dumb, though in other ways quite useful; and I very justly refused in the presence of all the village to marry her. And this I did, when she was ten years old, allowing her plenty of time for others, who might esteem it to their pleasure and advantage to possess a wife without a tongue. But the very next day, when I was watching the maize, a bullet came through my hat, and lodged in a tree behind me; and when I dug it out, behold it was my own with the fancy pattern on it, with which I had betrothed myself ten years before. To that I need not have paid much attention, but that the Priest had nine well-grown sons, and it would be the duty of all these nine in succession to lie in wait for me, and endeavour to shoot me through the head. The eldest had been too near the mark for me to believe without rashness that the other eight would fire in vain; so I took my good mother's advice, which she gave me with many tears, and left my native place for lifetime. Neither was it safe for me to dwell in any of the villages for miles and miles around, because we people of the Svâns had suffered from want of food for the last two years, and had been obliged to take all the loaves, and corn, and cattle of our neighbours within three days' journey; and so we were out of favour with them.

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"On this account I was compelled, having borne a strong hand in those forages, to keep myself away from spots where I would have settled gladly. At a distance I saw beautiful maidens, over the tops of the raspberries; but whenever I desired to draw near them, there was sure to be a father or a brother, whose cow or whose sheep had been beef or mutton to me. And those people bear such things in mind, not being generous as we are. And thus I went along the valleys, feeding on the fruit, wherever the bears had left a tail of it. Then going further towards the rising sun, which is the strength of all of us, I came upon a man who carried a kinjal on a gun-mouth.

"In those days, I could jump as high as I could put my hands up; and being surprised by his pointing at me, I did it to give him time to think. This made him think more of me than I deserved, and instead of shooting me, he asked in what land men could jump so. I could not understand at first, though he did it with all his fingers; because we had kept ourselves apart from other people, whenever we could live without our neighbours' goods. But I was always considered the foremost of the young men for understanding, and I contrived to make out what he meant, and to do a thing which is much harder—to make him know what I meant. He was a soldier of the great Imaum, desiring to shoot Russians; and as soon as we made out one another, he showed me the notches on his gun, and I counted forty-two, and he said every one was the good corpse of a Russian. This made me long to do the like, though the Russians had never shot at me, but my own friends had; and my soul arose to look along a gun at any stranger, even as it had been done to me.

"Others came up, and when they found how straight my barrel was, and what it was famous for doing among the bears, the Captain said, 'Thou shalt do it, my lad, with the bears that eat our people.' And so I was put into Shamyl's army, and for many years enjoyed myself. I have shot three Russian colonels, and small officers by the dozen; and I could have shot the Commander once; but his daughter was by his side, and I stopped my finger when it was on the crook, with my mind upon my mother.

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"Twelve years I fought under Shamyl, and did so much good that as often as a great man came on the Russian side, it was my place to put a stop to him. If you come across any of our old men now, and say to them, 'What about Usi the Bear' you will see their eyes sparkle, and hear them say, 'Not one among us could compare with him for sending a Cossack to the devil three-quarters of a

verst away.' Alas that I shall no more do it! The times are not as they used to be.

"Then there came a man who was the noblest of all the sons of men to look at that ever the red sun shone upon. Imar, the son of Dadian, Master of the Western Lesghians, stronger than an Auroch bull, and gentler than a suckling woman. His father Dadian had been mighty, and a lord of men; but Imar was as the Saint Christ that stands in gold among the images of clay. Though I was not of his tribe, I craved to be put into his troop, and whatever he did Usi was never far away. Until the war came to an end, and all who were not shot or starved went home to their own mountains. But I dared not go to Ushkul yet, and had forgotten how to live without a rifle in my hands. Then Imar, the son of Dadian, took me, and beholding in me an honest man, and the surest with a long gun of all whom he had proved in battle, he appointed me a little place on the northern slope of Kazbek, to keep the wild beasts from the crops, and the wolves who had thriven by means of the war from eating the helpless children. As long as he reigned I had a hut in the forest, and twenty-five kopeks a week, and all the timber I could cut, and a wife who behaved very softly to me, and bore me several children.

"Then the Russians spread their hands along the mountains and the valleys, when there was no longer any power of men in arms to stop them, and they put a tribute on every house, and they sent away all the leaders of the men who had fought against them, and among them the Lord [Pg 430] Imar, to a little island in the West which had never been friendly with them. My money was cut down to ten kopeks; but I had my cattle and sheep and goats, and all the things that I could grow or shoot, until that Princess Marva came, the widow of Rakhan Houseburner, and claimed the command of everything. I would not rebel against the sister of the man I had loved so much, and she said that she sent him all the money to keep him in his exile, and for a long time people believed her. Until a great man of authority was sent to us from Russia, to see to the forests and the revenue, and he told us that the lady had never sent a kopek to her brother, but that the Russians very justly allowed him most of his revenue, because he had friends of clever voices and power in high places. Then the Princess said that I defied her, although I had never said a word of lies, and she sent fierce men to turn me out; but I had a little powder left, and my eye was straight though my hands are old, and I made two of them fall as dead as bears, and the rest flew away, like the shadow of a cloud, when the wind is blowing.

"But a week after that my house was burned, while my wife and I were fast asleep; and I lost the gun that shoots so straight, though I think it must be in the ashes still. My little daughter, nine years old, died in the stream we put her in to relieve her of her death-pain, and the other damsel and both my boys were hurt by jumping into the fir-tree. The hair of my wife's head was scorched so that I had to put a sheep-skin on; and the doctor said that if I had been a smooth man, I never could have worn a shirt again. But people were good, and I had shot a bear, which was hanging on a tree unmelted; and when you have such fat to rub you, you can cure anything outside.

"Ossets, and Lesghians, and such races might think none the worse of Marva for treating them in that kind of way; but Svâns, such as I am, have never abandoned their bodies and their goods to the authority of any one since the time of the great Queen Tamara, none of us can tell how long ago; and although I might not be a true Svân now, yet the nature of the race abode in me. Then, while I was thinking, I heard a thing which stirred me like the trumpet of the great Imaum,—Sûr Imar himself was coming home to take his proper place again, and do good to his people. Great [Pg 431] joy was spread among the Lesghians; but the Ossets went against the thought, because he had too much strength of law, and had grievously wronged them of the many goods flowing in to their dwellings from robbery, for the short time he governed at Karthlos. It was said, moreover, that Queen Marva, as she loved to hear herself called, would now have no chance of holding fast her manifold encroachments, fruitful valleys which she had stolen, and flocks and herds, and timber-trees, and crag-sides where some strangers pay her for hunting stones which they can change for gold.

"Now I will tell you a little thing; and it is the wisdom of the wiser days. There are two sorts of bears which prowl and devour in the corn-land and the forest; the big brown bear called *Michael*, who destroys the crops and the fruit-trees, but is glad to run from an unarmed child, unless his body is wounded; and then there is another bear, not so large indeed, but black with a white frill to its bosom. This animal we call *Michaina*; and a wise man flies from it, unless he can slay it at one shot; because it will rush upon him in the dark, and tear out his intestines. And our fathers have left word for us through many generations, that the brown bear is the form in which bad men on earth have been condemned to come back to it and see the harm they did; when some of it has been stopped by death. But the black bears are the wicked women, still going on in wickedness, not so often met with as the evil men, but a hundredfold to be dreaded, being black to the depth of their hearts and souls. And this black bear Queen Marva is.

"I had no house in the forest now, and no place left me in the world better than any other; and it mattered little to my flesh what became of all great people. I had my wounded children, or as many as remained of them, to carry on my back sometimes, or sometimes to run and pull me on, according to the power of our courage. And my wife, when I grieved about her hair, which had brought men in office to admire her, said that without it her head felt lighter, and begged me not to accept another woman, with no hut of my own to bring her to, and no meat to put into her. Why she asked me such a thing—when I had never thought of it, and was going along in a [Pg 432] steadfast way, with a child on either shoulder-blade—only the Lord, who made most of the women for our good, can tell us.

"Sir, and honourable gentlemen (who have saved my life upon a hair), when I was a boy my

teaching was to believe in the Devil only, and to pray to certain images that knew the way to appease him. But now I have been among wiser people, who look up to the sky, and think that it was made for good as well as evil. And whether that be true or false, I have found the people who think thus a great deal better than the dark believers."

At this point the poor Svân broke down, and shed a flood of tears after a long sad gaze at the mountains as if he had no home now, and at the sky as if he had no hope there. We gave him a little more nourishment, for we saw that his tale was coming towards us now; and then he wiped his eyes, and set them sternly, and cast self-pity into the fire of his wrongs.

CHAPTER XLIX
THE EYE OF GOD

[Pg 433]

"Seven days agone I was seeking in the woods, together with my wife and little ones, with the worst of the winter past behind us, and kind roots shining above the snow (which had smothered all of them for months), and pith of growth as good as corn, to be found by those who are used to it; for the desire of our hearts was only to keep a spark of life in them, until we might get to places where mankind grows corn and grinds it. For I had heard of an ancient friend, the best man I ever knew to fight, when it came to axe or kinjal, though he never could shoot afar like me; and his name was Stepan, the Lesghian. For a number of years he had been away, following his master's fortunes; but lately he was come back, they said, bringing household goods to prepare for him.

"Then in the dark woods, as we crept along, weary and hungry and trying vainly to comfort one another, we beheld a company of well-fed people, riding in the timber-track below, which we had been afraid to occupy. By the white sheep-skins upon their heads, we knew that they were Ossets, men of Queen Marva's bodyguard, whom she had chosen from all the tribe; even as the great Imaum had riders of the Avar race continually faithful to him. At the head of them rode the young Prince Hisar, as wicked a young man as ever drew breath; and behind them came a score of footmen, rejoicing in cruelty, and haters of the Lord.

"'Go you on, my child,' I said to my wife Rhada; 'in the morning I will be with you by the great red pine;' so I left my family in the hands of God, and putting dust upon my head, like an old man [Pg 434] seeking alms, I fell in with the rear of that sprawly-jointed troop, and none of them knew that it was Usi. When a man calls for alms in the name of the Lord, his brethren are happy to escape expense by letting him walk with them, as if they heard him not. And so I went on with them till night, for I wanted to know what their wickedness was; and I sang them sweet verses which they could not understand, and they gave me some scraps to keep me quiet. Then from a boy who was pitiful to me, perceiving how much of the world I had seen, when the flesh-pots hung upon the crooks and bubbled, I learned what the meaning of this armed troop was. They were coming with a strong force by order of their Mistress, to make a hearty welcome to her brother and his daughter upon their return to the native land, from the place where the Russian steam-road ends at the Northern plain of the great mountains. All had been settled that Sûr Imar and his daughter should come from Vladikaukaz in a hired troika, and be received by their loving sister and aunt, at a place appointed; and there they must leave the great Dariel road, and be conducted by her to Karthlos, with great rejoicing and affection kindled. But why were all these men thus armed? Not as for travelling only? Why did they carry ropes and chains? Why was there not a Lesghian among them? and why was there no sign of the Princess, eager to embrace her kindred? Loving Sûr Imar as I did, I resolved to go on, and understand these things.

"On the following day, the Ossets drove me from among them with many blows; but I cared not, since I had renewed my strength with plentiful waste victuals, and a warm sound sleep. For I could watch them none the worse for being outside of their wicked troop, and by this time I well knew what they meant. So I followed them to the great Russian road, towards which the forest track whereon I found them led; and there they encamped on either side. There were steep rocks around them, full of black caves and crannies, and without much risk I crawled up into one of these, so that I could see all these warriors and the road beyond them, without any risk of their seeing me.

"Before I had been there very long, a three-horse carriage came up the road, followed by two carts piled with goods; and the young chief rode to meet them, and much salutation might be [Pg 435] seen, and the carriage and carts were unloaded and sent back again, so that only Sûr Imar—for I knew his gait and stature even at that distance—with a young lady, and two attendants, a man and a woman, stood in the road. Hisar no doubt had assured them that the Princess was close at hand with vehicles well prepared to conduct them home. But it seemed to me that the Prince and the lady were looking to this side and to that, and gazing at every corner, as if they expected some one who ought to have met them, but was not to be found. And suddenly I thought that they were looking out for Stepan, Imar's milk-brother and most faithful friend. And I wished with all my heart that he were there, or could even be advised of his lord's return.

"Sir, and honourable gentlemen, I will not deceive you by speaking as if I had seen the shameful things that happened, almost before one could think of them, to the great Chief and his daughter. For they were led very politely into a dark narrow valley that slopes from the road, and cannot be

discerned at all from it. And a torrent, that rushes along the lower end, goes by with such an uproar that an army with drums might scarcely be heard at the mouth of it. They were led there perhaps on pretence of a hospitable meal such as I would with joy pursue. But in sad truth it was to overthrow them by means of ropes, and loops, and trees, for Sûr Imar was known to be the strongest man in all the great army of Shamyl; and although he might now be unarmed and defenceless, it would be easier to master him by fraud than force. And although I saw not the doing of it, the old head sees more than young eyes sometimes; according to an ancient tag of ours, 'The grey bush looks round the corner.'

"They came not back into the wide strong road, for fear of Cossacks or other gapes; but went along the forest ways of rock and slough and waterfall; and through my old experience in the turn of war—for Shamyl was fox, wolf, and lion in one—it was easy enough for me to keep in their track, without giving them any smell of me. They had my old commander strapped on poles across two horses, which must have been great pain for him, and would have torn a loose man in [Pg 436] two; but I never heard him speak a groan, although they passed through hollow places, where the misery of a man sounds loud. The fair damsel had not her senses with her, being of softer substance; and cruel as they were, they bore her gently upon a litter of slender wood, not desiring to hurt her yet, and having perhaps later occasion for her. Some of them jested about her beauty, till the violent young man rode back, and sent their loose mouths sprawling on the rocks. He means to keep her for himself, I trow.

"When the sun was getting low, and but for my memory of honest warfare, and the love of an old soldier for a kindly leader, I must have dropped away through weariness, the feet of their horses struck on softer ground, and behold they were entering a fair green valley, on the northern breast of Kazbek, where the sun strikes not from on high, but twinkles along the rocky passages, when the slope of the earth invites him, in the morning and in the evening time, like a low flight of arrows, such as I have seen when the Svâns were mighty bowmen. Wherefore this valley is never parched up, as they are on the south of the mountains, but is covered with moss, like the breath of night, and soft with trickling moisture. And the learned men say that an ancient race, who had come through the gates of Caucasus, having conquered the whole world all around, set up their last pillars here, and desired to go no further. And the masonry of giants is there to prove it, such as no man can make when the world grows old.

"Here that troop of brigands—for such a name is almost too good for them—opened a narrow door in the cliff, which cannot be seen from every place, because dark rocks encompass it. What they did there I cannot tell, for I durst not set foot down the valley, and there was no getting near it in time from above, so as to look down over them. I could only discover that some went in, stepping as if with burdens, while others were left on guard outside. By and by, I heard a clanking like the swing of an iron door, and presently all, or as I thought all, the riders came back, and with laughter and singing, and the young chief Hisar at their head, made off by the track which leads home to their village.

"Then I did a very foolish thing, which has all but cost me my life, without being of any use to Sûr [Pg 437] Imar. If I had counted the men on horseback, which I might have contrived perhaps to do, though it would not have been very easy, I should have learned that they were not all gone, but that two were left on guard. Descrying no horses tethered in the valley, and knowing that the prisoners could not escape, I concluded rashly that all the Ossets were gone, at least for the present, and that I might safely spy all around, and perhaps even try to let Sûr Imar know that I would do my best to save him. So I hastened with some care, but still too boldly, along the foot of the cliff which rims the valley, so as to endeavour to approach the door. For the shadows were wiping out the shapes and colours of a man, or a bush, or a rock standing still; while the soft moss and herbage took away the fear of sound.

"Looking out winkingly in all directions, like a man of the chase who has espied the Tûr, at the end of the valley in the clouding of the dusk, I beheld a company of little rocks, jutting from the soft land, and standing in jags, like an old man's teeth, across the butt-end, where the dungeon began. In and out of these I crept, going very stealthily, as if I were dealing with a Cossack outpost; but the mischief of it was that I had no gun, only the dagger that everybody has; and this one was more like lead than steel, having come to me cheap in my distress from some city in the west called *Brummerum*. By breathing upon it many times, I was doubtful of its temper, but never thought how much it would betray me.

"Among those jags of rock I stood, watching the face of the cliff beyond, and the deep withdrawal of the iron door set in the granite masonry of some nation as old as Noah. And I said to myself that with a good ash-trunk, and Stepan, and myself, and a score of strong men to charge at it like a battering-ram, stout as it was it would perhaps give in. There were loop-holes also on either side, to give air and a little light sometimes, and I ventured a low breath of whistle in a soft and friendly tone, to ask whether anybody might look forth, though there was no width for a fox to squeeze through. But the whole of my wisdom only proved what a fool an old soldier is sometimes.

"For a loop was thrown over my head from behind, and then two strong men had hold of me. I [Pg 438] managed to twist with one arm free, and struck with my dagger at one of them. But instead of making any hole in him, it came back on my wrist like an osier, having met with his metal cartridge-belt; and then they pulled me off my feet, and I lay like a sheep with his legs tied. I thought they would have cut my throat outright, for my head fell back the right way of it, and one of them whipped out his knife to do it; but the other cried out about the holy season, and then put

his arm across. So they satisfied themselves with binding me with cords that cut into my flesh; and they carried me through the night, shaken up with pain; and I knew not where I was, till I came back to myself through necessity of lying to Queen Marva.

"But as my evil fortune fell, there happened to be among the Ossets, another old soldier of Shamyl, and one who had never served under Sûr Imar. This man knew me, and told the Queen who I was; and but for the holy time she would have crucified me then and there. 'Religion forbids us to slay the wretch,' said Marva, with a glance of blackness, 'but doth not forbid to make wolf's meat of him.'

"Three days ago I was fastened to a rock with the big rope round my body, and my wrists and ankles corded, so that if any wolves came by they should have no trouble with me. But the Lord commanded only one wolf to come, and he was overtaken with great wonder at the sight; and I had the courage to keep silence, and gaze at him, as if demanding what he meant by being there. Seeing me naked and so hairy, he could not understand such an animal; for I could no longer stand upright. Then, as I never flinched nor moved, he sheathed his teeth, and turned his eyes, and his tail began to quiver. I kept my eyes fixed on him steadily, and my face as firm as the crag behind; until with a little whine of doubt he drew in his nostrils, and dropped his tail, and trotted off to consult his friends, and perhaps he has taken his family to look for me this evening. A monstrous wolf he was in truth, and as hungry perhaps as I could be.

"For two days I had been numbed, and parched, and struck by the sun and the moon so much, [Pg 439] that instead of any brave time of thought, I had only leaped and raved and yelled, and dashed myself about in vain, tearing my skin in strips, and cutting gashes into my purple flesh, and making holes all over me.

"But the moment that wolf was out of sight, I was seized with a cold and shivering dread, so that I could see the naked hairs of all my body quivering. Death I knew that I must have; and death had seemed a reasonable thing, when I gave it to another man who was trying to do the same to me. But to see myself being crunched alive, to feel those yellow fangs pulling my strings out, and that long tongue lapping up my blood—let me die before he came again. Surely I must have strength enough left to burst the veins of my neck and die. Were there any rocks within my reach so rugged and sharp that I might fling one of my leading blood-pipes down, again and again, till it should burst? I flung out my legs, and strained my length, like a chained dog clawing for a bone out of reach, in search of some blade of flint keen enough to saw my gullet or windpipe through.

"But what did I descry wedged firmly in a little cleft among them? A long brown eye, which I could see into, curdled with coils of different colours, as regular as a bulb cross-cut, centred with vaporous waves, and hooped with rings of white, as the rind encloses some dark wood. Then a spring of hope like the sparkle of a star flashed into the clouding of my mind, for this is the stone[1] which we call the 'Eye of God.' It is stronger and keener of edge than any flint, luckier to man than mother's milk, and harder than steel of the Genoese.

"Instead of straining, twisting, and wriggling, to release my corded wrists, which were lashed to the rope at my waist so tight that I could not fetch teeth nigh them, I began to saw the cord below the clench of my thumbs upon the stone of God. The agony of it was terrible; but at last I rent my hands apart, and as soon as the blood returned to them, with teeth and flint I contrived to sever the rope that strung me to the rock, and to hobble to a brook to drink. The rest you [Pg 440] know; three days have I borne of agony, starvation, and the stars and sun. The Lord God—if there be One in heaven to look down upon His own wicked works—spit my blood into that woman's throat!"

FOOTNOTE:

[1] Probably the Agate.

CHAPTER L [Pg 441]
TWO OLD FRIENDS

The Svâns are a strange and peculiar race, declared indeed by the few outsiders who have ever seen them and come back, to be the most original of mankind. And Usi proved at least that much, by showing some rudiments of gratitude.

Although he had managed to tell his tale, with failure of words, and gasps for breath, and rolling of his eyes when the agony came back, poor Wolfsmeat was not fit for much, except to be laid in a soft and shady place, consoled with tobacco and cordials, and continually asked how he felt now. We soon understood what he wished to say, even without the interpreter, for he had picked up small pieces of divers tongues, by being so long among the mountain troops. More than once we feared that he would never bear up from the pains and privations he had undergone; but he said that he should be unworthy of the name of a Shamylid, or son of Shamyl, unless he could starve for a week, without showing immoderate signs of hunger. If the signs Usi had manifested, after only three days, were moderate, no wonder that the big wolf turned and fled from a countenance so expressive.

Strogue, and Cator, and myself, who might now be called the three leaders, sat late into that night, discussing the story of this patient sufferer. What chance had we of being in time, even if we could raise force enough to prevent the murder in cold blood appointed for next Monday? All the fighting men of this tribe of Ossets in the Upper Terek, and the Ardon valleys, would probably be mustered there to carry out the execution. Cator had often heard of the place so clearly described by the injured Svân, and he told us that these wild folk called it the "Valley of [Pg 442] Retribution." From Usi's account, it was plain that Marva was making a tribal revenge of it. Her brother would be tried and condemned by the tribe, in expiation of the death of their former chief, Prince Rakhan. Him she had hated and scorned perhaps; for she was not of the sweet kind of women, who look at their wrongs with dewy eyes; but according to the Osset creed her duty was—blood for blood, and soul for soul. Strong in her own dominion now, she might drop all that, if she saw fit, and cry, "Bygones be bygones." Every man of the tribe (being in his heart most loyally afraid of her) would have joined all his cousins in lamenting, that the days were not as they had been; that nobody had the courage now to keep up good old customs; and yet, however right one's own mind was, what could one do, but as the others did? And then to sigh, and cast a glance at Heaven (that forbears to fall upon us) and light another pipe with some remorse, but plenty of sentiment to make it draw.

This was not for us to do, in a state of things beyond all understanding of any man not in the thick of them; and a thousandfold worse for him, if he is there. Nothing is more pleasing than to hear a man tell the story of some touch-and-go adventure he has been through. If he is an Englishman, he is sure to be self-ashamed about it, and describe himself as much more frightened than his slow system gave him time to be. But whoever he is, you may depend upon it that he will put into the narrative a lot of things which never occurred—till afterwards. And I am afraid that I shall do this, when I try to tell how we went on, though I mean to tell everything word for word, which ought to be the same as fact for fact.

But lo, at the very outstart, indignation cripples one! We know that it is sure to go too far, and to put things into darker colours than clear truth has cast into them. In dread of this, a truthful man draws back, and takes too weak a brush.

All of us were put upon that sense of wrong which stirs us up to think less of our own poor lives, and more of that great power which the Lord has planted in us (though He has not always worked it out), to show that we are something more than the brute creation round us. The sense [Pg 443] of justice, and good will, and love to those of our own kind, and hate of all that wrong them. Even if Sûr Imar had not been the man he was, and Dariel's father, I would gladly have risked my life—if time were allowed me to know what I was about—rather than let such inhumanity triumph among human beings. Strogue and Cator were of the same mind, and the rest of the miners found that a little excitement would not be amiss. The worst of it was that they were inclined to underrate the enemy. To them it seemed sound argument that a dozen Englishmen could larrup, almost with their neckties, thirty or forty of such fellows as they were like to meet with. Even if there had been truth in that, and it would be most ungrateful on my part to disparage them, what would they do if they had to encounter perhaps a hundred men all well armed? Therefore we must increase our force, and that without loss of a minute. To call for Russian interference would be vain, for they had no brigade—even if they would have used it—that could be brought up in three days' time. We must act for ourselves; as the rule is laid down generally for poor Englishmen, because they are so few, yet always called upon to meet so many.

Strogue struck the proper note. Of savage people I knew nothing, save of Income-tax Commissioners, who charged us twice upon our land,—once for our crime in owning it, and once for the profit which they alone were able to make out of it. But the Captain said: "These men will fight. And they fight quite as bravely as we do, only with more passion in it. To beat them, we must have man for man, or something very near it. The only plan is to find your friend Stepan, and all the fellows he can bring. That poor beggar who is groaning in his sleep seems to know where to find him. He will not be able to walk for days; but he can tell us where to go."

We had searched in vain, as I may have said, for any sign of Stepan near Karthlos. That was one of the things which made us sure that treachery was at work; for if he had travelled with the heavy goods, straightway home, as his orders were, he ought to have been at Karthlos long ago, in spite of the terrible winter. But no one seemed to know where to find him, although a rumour [Pg 444] was spread abroad that his master was returning. There was, however, every prospect now of discovering him and those other retainers who had been with the Chief in his exile, for Usi could not have been so long the forester or huntsman of that district without knowing where to find all the principal members of his adopted tribe. What could be finer justice than that a fiendish plot of fratricide should be discomfited chiefly through the brutality of its conceiver? If that tortured victim could but recover the use of his swollen limbs, we might push along towards the Lesghian valleys in time to rouse the tribe on the Saturday night. But to carry poor Usi was a sad, slow drag, and to go without him would be useless, even if humanity allowed it.

"Bear's grease!" was his perpetual moan; "Oh, that men valued the precious bear's grease! If the good Lord would send me only half a pound of bear's grease, I would leap like the Ibex, and dance like the Tûr."

Then, as if to show that Heaven itself had taken a turn in our favour, a most unusual thing came to pass, although at the time I was very far from being at all surprised at it. But those who knew the country said that such a thing scarcely ever happened, and all of our little company might live to be ninety, and keep eyes like twenty, without ever seeing such a thing again. However, I can

answer for it, and was not at all disturbed by it.

We came, walking heavily yet tenderly, and like men who (if they were in England) would go to their chemist and ask him whether he had tried his "Celandine" on his own feet,—we came about the middle of that day—Friday it was and a critical time—to a corner where two torrents ran into one another's arms, with as much noise as two Frenchmen make. There were no trees, not a leaf to break the sun; everything was either hard or wet; and the light itself seemed to come in gurgles, as if it were almost giddy with the shining of the water, and the staring of the rocks. In the loose spread of it, below the rush of the two streams into one another,—both being buxom with snow on the melt, which affords them a thickness of suet,—there I saw a great sprawling thing—sprawling at least it appeared to be, and at the same time splashing. I happened to be foremost of the file, yet for the life of me, I could not make out what it was; till Cator spoke over my shoulder thus— [Pg 445]

"Motherly she-bear, carrying her cub! Economical father wants to kill it—they always do at this time of year—mother takes a different view. She will land in a second. Aim behind the shoulder. The kid is fine eating. If you feel like missing, let me do it for you."

"Get away!" I answered; "I came first—what have you got to do with it?" I put up my rifle, but when she landed with wonderful care not to hurt a hair of the baby in her clumsy mouth, and then looked at it so proudly—though it was but an ugly little lump—and began to lick the holy trickle from its newly opened eyes, such a touch of nature went into my heart, that I would rather have shot myself almost. "Fire, you stupid!" keen Cator cried. And fire I did, but not at her. For paterfamilias came down raging, with his coat thrown back on his body, and his little eyes rolling, and his hairy chin poked out in fury at his wife's self-assertion. My bullet behind his open shoulder told him that there might be two opinions about paternal duty, and he rolled like a log into the swirling torrent, and was washed up on our side a hundred yards below. Then Usi, the Svân, in a glory of excitement rose from his litter, and told us what to do; and we cut him out the fat that lies along the kidney part, and he scrabbled it into his stringy legs, and fell back again, and smiled at them. In less than half an hour he could walk, and we had all we could do to keep up with him.

That night we slept in Kazbek village, which is on the great Russian road; and we laid our plans for the morrow. Cator was to make rush for the mine, which he could reach before nightfall, and implore Jack Nickols to spare us every son of a gun who could handle a rifle; while Strogue, and Usi, and myself, and others, made every hour of daylight tell for our race in quest of Stepan. We feared that those vile Ossets had a short cut across the western mountain, from their village to the "Valley of Retribution," which would bring them in front of any speed of ours; and unhappily so it proved indeed. And they must have carried Usi by that track, when they caught him spying in their valley; although they gave him small chance of knowing what was time, or where was road. For the mighty mass of Kazbek lay betwixt the Osset villages, and the vale which had been for ages hallowed to their horrible revenge. [Pg 446]

At daybreak on Saturday we set forth, in the midst of a miserable drizzle, which would have made the way as hard to find as it was bad when found, except for the knowledge of the land which Usi showed. That son of Shamyl, as he loved to be called, was of infinite service to our cause. Very seldom did he care to speak, unless he was consulted; and the bronze cast of his rugged face beneath that hairy thicket showed no more life than the juniper scrub which we saw on the cheeks of the mountain. But the quick blue flash of his eyes, whenever we caught them unexpectedly, was like the point blank spark that comes, when the lightning is over one's own lawn. Let me not be in that man's black-books—was the first thought of even the boldest mind, as Strogue said more than once to me.

Presently this "Bear-slayer" showed us that he deserved the name of "Straight-pipe," which he had received from Shamyl. For while we were halting in a glen to feed, Gator's rifle stood against a rock. We grudged every moment, and were eating against time, when one of those great black eagles, which are the grandest of European birds, came soaring above us at a mighty height, searching the earth for lamb, or kid, or perhaps a nice babe fast asleep beneath a rock. With Cator's leave, Usi raised his gun, and he must have been as quick as light, for the crack of the rifle and the heavy flop of the dead bird on the track before us, were the first I knew of the matter, although I was standing within a few yards of him. "That's a grand shot; I couldn't have done that, although I am not a bad hand," said Strogue. But the Svân was not satisfied with his work. "I struck him too far behind," he said, "my own pipe would have done it better. I must get time to search for it among the ashes." But we could not spare him yet; for he alone could show us the men we wanted.

How it may be in the winter I know not, and perhaps no one would care to know much about it then, but to me, who was used to very reasonable weather (sometimes dull and sometimes fickle, but scarcely ever furious, and generally comprehensible), the style of this Caucasian sun, whether as he asked his way among a crowd of pinnacles, or whether as he mounted high, strong, and hot above them, or even when he meant to be compassionate and genial in looking back at his long day's work—all I can say is, that to a man of Surrey, who lives out of doors nearly all day long, and can tell you the time within half an hour, whether it be cloudy or whether it be clear, the climate was incongruous. At home, you could look up at the sky, and after making wise allowances for the way of the wind, and the manner of the clouds, and the inclination of the quicksilver, you could generally say something, which could be explained away when a little incorrect. But here the only wisdom was to shake your head, and say the developments are [Pg 447]

complicated, pressure variable and conflicting, local showers not improbable, thunder not impossible. As our Scientific Staff begins to waver, after predicting rain every day, in a drought of three months' duration.

That Saturday evening the sun went down (so far as we could get a straight look at him through such ins and outs), genial, bountiful, a great globe of good will, squandering gold upon a maiden world of snow, which it blushed to accept, and yet spread upon its breast.

"The weather at any rate is on our side," was my cheerful remark to Captain Strogue; "if we can only find those fellows, we shall be all right."

"Don't you be too sure," he said, "there may be a hurricane to-morrow."

Travelling eastward all that day, we had passed the foot of Karthlos long ago, under Usi's guidance; for to climb the steep would be waste of time, as there was no strength of men there now. Then we descended into another valley, and Usi blew upon a horn, and listened. We heard no reply, but he heard something, and led us, as the yellow light turned grey, into a hollow place with huts around it, and out rushed two enormous dogs, and behold they were *Kuban* and *Orla*!

CHAPTER LI
THE ROOT OF EVIL

[Pg 448]

The amazement of those dogs at sight of me was beyond anything I ever did behold. They had seen so much of the world by this time, including a good deal of England, that they had learned to doubt all the evidence which untravelled dogs wag tail to. They pulled up suddenly, and looked at one another, with the tawny curls of their ears in a tremble, and the hackles of their necks thrown back, and every hair to the tips of their tails quivering with incredulity. Then, like a fool, I pronounced their names, and the word that brings down the avalanche would have been a wiser utterance. They flung their great frames and golden crests in one shock of delight upon my breast, like a harvest-cart dashed against the rickyard post. Luckily I expected it, but even so was glad to be backed up by a rock, and there it was impossible for me to speak, all human emotion being swallowed up in dog.

However, they soon made amends for that, and the roar that rang from crag to crag brought every living being out. Foremost of these was our old friend Stepan, carrying a mighty gun, with Allai peeping through the loop of his elbow, and four or five more, who had been in our valley, staring at us over the packing-cases. I shouted to them with the old salute which they had taught me at St. Winifred's, and they made their salaams, and sang their welcome, while Stepan enfolded me in his capacious arms, and Allai hugged my knees and wept.

"Say nothing till we are inside," I whispered to Strogue, who could speak their language somehow. It was high time to be prudent now, as well as prompt and resolute, for it seemed as if [Pg 449] the enemy had in every way outmanœuvred us; and now, if our project should become known, the case would indeed be hopeless. "Not a word to any of these people, until Stepan thinks fit to tell them."

But I need not have been so particular, for they are as true as steel to one another, and above all to their Chieftain. Stepan told them, even before he heard my story out; because swift runners must be sent that very night to other Kheusur villages, for every fighting man within reach to join the muster at the foot of Karthlos. And that muster, to be of any use, must not be later than noon of the morrow, which would be Sunday.

Then I told Stepan our side of the story, with Strogue to make it clear to him; and Usi, without whom we could have done nothing, recounted all that he had seen, but scarcely spoke of his own woes.

At this I wondered for the moment, but knew the reason afterwards. Stepan listened with arms folded, and his great grey head as still as a rock, while his eyes were harder and less expressive—as it chanced to occur to me—than the agate which had saved Usi's life. And I noticed that the wall on which he fixed them was not half so sound and solid, nor the room itself so neat and cheerful as the old stone ruin occupied by Sûr Imar's men in England. "Is that all?" he inquired at last; and Strogue replied, "Yes; and to me it seems enough." The Lesghian dipped his unshorn chin upon the wooded cataract of his breast, and nodded courteously, meaning clearly—"Sir, you have been through us, but not to any purpose among us." And I, as a young slip—in comparison with him, though old enough now to stand up for my growth—marvelled about dry roots, and trunks that are all bark, and so on.

"Hearken to me, and I will use few words," said the loyal Lesghian slowly, with Strogue explaining for my benefit; "I am getting old, and I have my daughters, for the Lord has granted me no son, and the babes whom my daughters have brought forth while I was far away, to dwell upon. I am growing old, and my strength is only in the standing combat now. I cannot leap down from a rock and alight with both feet together, and my arms like willows of steel twined round the enemy. It has been ordained that a man, as his years increase upon him, should increase also [Pg 450] in bulk and weight, if permitted by fortune to feed well. All the men of our tribe feed well, because they are just and remain with their wives, who know how to cook the cattle of their

neighbours. None of those would we ever take, if we could trust them to leave us ours. For not only are we righteous, but we endeavour to make strangers so, when their wickedness is not good for us.

"For my part I have been in foreign places, and learned much of foreign language, sometimes increasing in wisdom thus. But as yet I have not found a country fit to be placed by the side of ours, not only for the fairness of the land, but the goodness of the inhabitants. But, as a man of truth, I will admit that it is not so with our neighbours. They on the other hand are breakers of the laws of righteousness, seeking only the ways of evil, eager to slay all who set them example not convenient. And now they are in dread of the return of our great Chief, because he brings justice and virtue with him. Their desire is to slay him, and to rob him of his goods, and to rule over us who belong to him.

"Me, who am his brother by the mother's breast, and bound to give my life for his and all that I possess, they have deceived and cheated by many lying tricks, and beguiled me, as the mother fox tempts away the dog to discourses of soft affection, while her children prey upon the tender lambs.

"Behold, when I landed from the great smoke-ship, after many weeks of rolling on strange waters, there came a man to meet me with a letter in a stick, which he said was by order of the Prince himself, and I and all my company must obey it. What the tongue says the ear can swallow, and render to the mind for consideration. But that which the hand has shaped, in many forms of crookedness, cannot come into the mind through the passes of the eyes without long teaching, and toiling through a forest full of twists and turns, which can only be endured in childhood. Therefore I went to a learned man, and paid him ten kopeks, and he made it to me the same as if Sûr Imar's voice pronounced it. And thereby I was commanded to stay where I was, with all my companions, and all the goods, for the passes were already blocked with snow, until I [Pg 451] should receive another letter, as soon as the spring flung back the gates between the frozen mountains. The winter was very long, but at last another paper came to us, through Officers of the Government, as the letters are sent in England. And I paid another ten kopeks, so expensive is such learning, and was commanded to come on by way of Kutais and hire waggons, and get to this village, which is not my own; but not to go near Karthlos yet, because it was full of workmen. Money was also sent to me in a note for a hundred roubles, and I was ordered to shoot both these dogs, if I had kept them still alive.

"I was sure Sûr Imar had not said that, because his daughter loved them so; and that made me wonder and begin to doubt, and I said to myself, they shall see their master, and plead for their own lives with him. Also I was ordered to remain here, almost as if I were to be in prison, keeping away from my own village, and all my old friends, and obtaining food only from the people close at hand, until I should be sent for. And the reason was that if the Russians heard of all the goods we had, they would send an officer to take toll, or seize them altogether. This I thought might be true enough, until the people here declared that the Russians never do anything like that; and again this made me doubtful.

"We, who are of the true and never to be called in question faith of Christ, even as the English are, do not observe these heathen fasts, and feasts, and rites of superstition, but keep our own most holy seasons as ordained by the Lord himself. Yet so noble are our minds, that we blame not those of smaller knowledge, but rather abstain from meddling with them during the days which they keep holy, although they be not the right ones. For this reason I remained here yet, resolving to set forth on Monday, when their profane days will have returned, and to ask among them the meaning of these things, which I am ordered not to seek among our own tribe.

"But woe is me to have learned it thus, with haste and peril and helplessness! It must be the wicked Prince who has plotted this vile plan, having taken it straight from the fiery lips of the Evil One. It is not by any one to be believed that the sister of Sûr Imar, born at one birth with him, [Pg 452] should be as a cauldron of the pitch of hell, while he is in an alabaster box of manna for the food of the faithful in the wilderness. By many generations it has been said that a woman who has not been made of milk and honey must have been fashioned out of gall and venom; and true it may be, yet how should such things descend from the mother of Imar?

"Tell me, then, for now we speak, as I would that we had spoken long ago, in words that pass into the minds of one another, tell me what advantage can the Princess Marva look for, from doing that which none of the women of our tribe would wish to do, or even if she wished it under the influence of the Devil, would dare to keep in her mind as long as a baking-shovel in her hand."

As yet we had not dwelt much on this. The design being manifest, as we believed, the motive did not concern us much; and in all the hardships, perpetual effort, and weariness of travelling—such travel at least as we had to face—the body was always too hard at work for the mind to be very active, except in attending to it. Strogue looked at me, and I at him, and each left the other to answer.

"Friend Stepan knows all the ins and outs of these tribal politics and family arrangements," the Captain opened his mouth at last, "ever so much better of course than I do. No doubt her ladyship expects to suck some benefit out of this murder,—for I don't see what else you can call it, although there may be a mock trial; but even without that, I always understood that the duty of the blood feud would compel her, even if she loved him the best on earth, to hunt him to death with alacrity. You know that, although the law is not in your tribe, or at any rate you are free from it, by marriage she is an Osset, and with them it is most sacred."

"I have not forgotten that," our host replied, looking doubtful as became him when even near the verge of argument; "but even if that tribe kept up its wrath at the death of its chief so many years, the lady, as I have heard even in England, can do as she pleases among them now. It is not right, it is not just, it is not as the Lord intended. The woman should never rule the man; but she will do it gladly, if they lift her upon the stool, instead of keeping her to the oven. But when she gets tired of salutes, and praises, and humble words, which ought to be like ripe figs to her, what she begins to yearn after is money; and life will be short for those who have it, when she thinks it should be hers." [Pg 453]

"My good friend, my great friend Stepan," cried Strogue, with the stem of his pipe in the air, as if he never cared whether he sucked it again; "you have hit the mark better about those blessed females, than I should have ever dared to try to do. At the *London Rock* it is just the same—Landlady, or Barmaid, makes no difference, or the little girl that wipes the glasses. All eager to go for a celebrated man; but won't put a tear in the corner of their eyes, till they've peeped into his pockets on the hook inside the door. That is why none of them can catch me. A man who has been round the world three times finds the black women truest to their colour."

To me this was such hateful doctrine, so low, so coarse, so cannibal, that I jumped up with a strong desire to send the Captain down among the packing-cases. But he gave me a sly wink, meaning clearly—"The object of this is to fetch that fellow out."

And Stepan came out, with a dignity scarcely to be expected from him. Some of his words were beyond my knowledge; but upon the whole he spoke like this—

"I have not been round the world three times; and that man is the wisest traveller who goes through his own self the most. But in all the countries that I have seen, the women are better than the men, according to the gifts of nature. Of money they are not half so greedy, and they have more compassion. Usi, the Svân, will tell you what the father does to the female babies, when he has too many of them, in the country of men and women. Straight-pipe, what does the father do then in the noble country of the Svâns?"

"He places the little one on her back," the Bear-slayer told us, looking at the floor, as if he were watching the domestic process; "and he makes the fire burn brightly. Then when the little one opens her mouth for the nourishment of nature, he takes the spoon from his bowl of soup, and fills it with red-hot embers, and pours them into the infant's mouth, and lo that child calls for no more food!"

"Hast thou ever beholden a mother who would feed her infant thus?" Stepan asked the Captain, who looked as if his pipe had grown too hot for him; and the Captain knocked out his ash, and said, "Give me some cold whiskey." [Pg 454]

"Lo, the moon is shining on the white peaks now, and the light will soon flow along the valleys. It is time for me to go," said Stepan, "and Allai will come with me. I have told the head-man what to do; but the men here are as nothing. Gentlemen, you are weary. The Lord give you good rest to-night, for to-morrow we must travel fast. I will bring every faithful son of the tribe, and meet you by noon at Karthlos."

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CHAPTER LII
STILL IN THE DARK

At midnight we stood by the door of the hut, and watched the broad bulk of Stepan, and the slender slip of Allai, sliding away into white breath among the black jaws of the mountains.

I thought that I had never seen so fair a night, so lovely, soft, and kindly, offering guidance of bright stars among the pale blandishments of the moon, opening avenues of lofty hope, compassionate to mortals. With such glory full in view, and the grandeur of unknown realms beyond, how could any of those, who have so short a time to dwell below, spend it, or spare a moment of it, in the trivial worm-casts of rank and money, which cannot even slime the scythe of death?

If Farmer Ticknor had been with us—that Ticknor, I mean, who had proved himself so trenchant a Micaiah to the Official Zedekiah—perhaps we might not have entered into this rapturous view of the heavens. Or perhaps it was that we required a lesson. But whatever the explanation is, the fact came far in front of it. When we tried to get up in the morning, there was nothing to get up by except time, who sheds no light, but spends the better part of himself in quenching it. Laden as we were with sleep, whose freight we had not yet discharged, we said to one another that a special relief was granted us. It was manifest that human skill in the record of time had been overruled; the Powers that govern day and night could not be set at nought by watchmakers. We blew out the matches we had struck, and rolled on our backs for another snooze, submissive to the will of Heaven.

How far we might have prolonged our snores, we never grew wide enough awake to say. But the soft folds of darkness fell around us still, and we closed our eyes beneath them, as a child submits to the kisses of his mother. Then a mighty bellow, and a cackle, and a stamping, and a shovelful of cold slush thrown into our faces made all of us jump up, and stare about, and splutter, and [Pg 456]

every one swear, except, as I heartily hope, myself.

It was the old village Starchina, or Starost, or whatever his dignity may have been, in a state of mind so furious that it was true bliss to be no linguist. Strogue made out some of his compound curses, but was too wise to interpret them, or even to accept his own version; until that most venerable and profane of men saw little advantage in cursing himself. He flung down the shutter that served as a window, and poured about a sackful of snow down our necks.

This might be the manner of the country; but we resented it all the more for that, and spoke harshly of the place, and of all born near it, until Strogue sat up on his very hard board, and stared, with his eyes as close as burning glasses, at the old silver watch, "which a man could work a ship by," and exclaimed—"By Jove, he is done for now, George! We ought to have been at Karthlos by this time. However he is safe to go to Heaven, according to your account of him."

Even cowardice is sometimes less contemptible than flippancy. But I made no answer. My rage with myself was too deep to fly off into sparks against others. What could it matter to Strogue, or Starost, or even to Stepan himself, compared with me, with me, the snorer? If the noble man who had treated me as his equal—clumsy clodhopper as I was—and his daughter (the model of all love and grace) were butchered by savages to-morrow, upon whose head would their blood lie?

Upon mine—for my accursed laziness, self-indulgence, wicked gladness to believe the thing that I desired.

Then I went out, and looked for the sky which had been so blue, and the earth which had been so green, wherever it was not brown rockiness. Behold—there was nothing to behold—as Usi the Svân might have said of it—but grey thickness, fleecy softness, multitudinous whirl above, and [Pg 457] vast whiteness, promiscuous glare, and slur of dazzle around us and below. Not what the puzzled world is wont to call a *blizzard*, and fly shuddering—for that only comes with a bitter blast, and is a mass of pointed particles—but a genuine downright heavy snowfall (such as we get in March sometimes, when we are sowing the pea-drill), big flakes, thick flakes, like a shower of daisies, flinging their tufts in feathery piles, and smothering one another. "It can't go on very long like this," says a man who has lost in half-a-minute the pattern of his coat and trousers.

Certainly it could not in Surrey or in Kent; but here in the Caucasus it proved that it could go on, long enough at any rate to bury all the trackways, and turn jagged rocks into treacherous white rollers. If we began (in our credulous greed for rest) with failing to know the time of day, we went on with losing the way; and what was worse, if possible, we lost the better part of our strength, through sprains, and strains, and stumbles in the drift. Mishaps of the like sort had befallen the party recruited by Stepan, although they had not overslept themselves as we did; and instead of prompt muster to start together at noon from the foot of Karthlos, we found that it was almost four o'clock before every one was ready.

"To do any good, we must travel all night," said Stepan, as he swung his heavy pack upon his rifle. "To travel all night on a turnpike road is all very well," Strogue answered; "but who could do it here, my friend? And sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If the snow stops us, it will stop the other fellows."

I had indulged in this hope too; but the Lesghian's words were against it. "No man can say, till his eyes give proof. But the storm came from the east, and they seldom travel far in the summer-time. Like enough there was not a flake on the western side of the Russian road. Ha! Kobaduk, art thou coming too? Thy old limbs will tire, we shall have to leave thee, even though thou hast that colt."

We had not climbed the steep to the tower, because time was so short, and the old steward could not be of any service to us. Therefore it was a great surprise when he slipped among us from a [Pg 458] snowy corner, leading a rough unsaddled colt, with a strap buckled over his loins to which a sword was attached on one side, and a rusty old musket on the other. An English crowd would have gibed, I fear, at the menacing aspect of this feeble ancient, and even Strogue made no attempt to hide a grin; but the Lesghians glanced at him kindly, and made room for him among them, and he plodded on resolutely without a word, like a fatalist come to look fate in the face.

Even in a small lot such as we were, and consisting chiefly of hardy fellows, there must be—according to the varicose vein which runs through all humanity—three or four at least of softer pith, or eruptions that arise to the occasion, or some thing or other that goes amiss. And not having one leg too many among us, or I might say less than half the legs we wanted, our hard fortune was that the briskest shank among us—which was not my own, though I did my best, and in Surrey would have challenged any of them—was obliged to stick fast, when it got too far ahead, and disguise its own gratitude for a thrill of rest, by turning on its heel disdainfully. In a word, nearly all our most excellent men, brave and zealous, and brought up from childhood to a good stroke of speed after other people's cattle, had lost the best part of their training, by compulsion—under Russian tyranny—to attend to their own flocks and herds, instead of lifting their neighbour's.

Thus it was that we came at last to an elbow of the great Russian road, which is a noble work, but not by any means such as we should make, if we had the opportunity; and there we found a sample of what human nature is. Having surmounted, by wonderful endurance and perpetual rivalry with one another, obstacles that seemed insuperable, surely we should have gone on with double spirit, when we came upon a Christian highway. Instead of that, every blessed man sat down, and thanked Heaven—or in truer truth thanked himself—for having got along so famously.

It was dark, as dark as one could ever wish to see it, down in this gorge of magnificence, with the river roaring sleepy thunder, and the snow-clouds spent, and the stars looking faint. I thought—as an Englishman thinks by instinct—that men of our own race would not have stopped (at any [Pg 459] rate if there was money in it) and shut up in this sudden style.

However there was more excuse than help for it; and Stepan and myself, the two who cared most deeply about the issue, tried to cheer each other, so far as our mutual misunderstandings reached.

Then by a lucky chance the gallant miners (whom we should have missed perhaps, if we had gone on at once) came into our camp, with light hearts and merry songs, delighted at the prospect of a lively brush; for so they all regarded it. Jack Nickols himself had been unable to resist the fierce temptation, and gloomy would be the outlook for any foe who crossed his sky-line, though I cannot recollect just now his celebrated score at the "running deer."

It was terrible to me to find these fellows taking things so easily, not through any callous inhumanity or indifference, but simply because their own private interests were not immediately involved. For instance, the way in which Nickols, and Cator, and Strogue discussed the situation was enough to sponge out of my heart a great lump of that affection for the human race without which a man becomes miserable. Weary as they were, they found it needful to hold some little council, while they smoked their pipes after supper, having settled that all should take four hours of sleep if they could get it, and start again when the moon arose. I sat in a corner and listened to them, refraining from all interruption, though a great part of what they said was new to me; for if I had spoken, some heat might have followed my words, and done mischief to all of us.

Strogue. "I have always had the credit of seeing as far into a hayrick as any man that ever sucked a coral. But this fiend of a woman beats me hollow. I can't make out what her little game is."

Nickols. "Well, I can't see any difficulty about it. She wants her brother's property, and to be the lady of the other tribe too, which she would be as Dadian's daughter, if her brother Imar were done away with. She will have him tried for the death of her husband, or get him shot without trial. Then she has discharged her duty according to the rules of the blood-feud, and she steps into poor Imar's shoes. To me it is plainer than a pikestaff."

Cator. "All that looks straight enough, but it won't hold water. You forget the pretty girl. Imar has [Pg 460] a lovely daughter, and she would be the head of the tribe, not Marva, when his goose is cooked."

Nickols. "That's true enough. But a woman with such a strong mind wouldn't make much bones of that. Or rather she'd make bones of her in no time. I am very sorry for that pretty girl. She is booked for a share of her father's grave."

Strogue. "Naturally I look deeper into things than you young fellows can. The real difficulty has escaped you both. The woman is bad enough for anything. I know things of her that I won't tell, at any rate for the present.

"But as for making away with her niece, there are two good reasons against it. In the first place, the Russians would be almost certain to punish Madam heavily, though perhaps they would not interfere, if Imar alone were tried and condemned according to the usage of the country. And then again, even if they let it pass, the Lesghians, who are a very loyal race, would never accept Marva's rule, when she had slain their Chief and his daughter. You have got the wrong story altogether, according to my view of it. Her game is not quite so clumsy, though it is a very bold one."

Nickols. "Captain, you are one of those men who get the right tip always. Don't be shy,—that would scarcely become you. But tell us exactly what you think; although it may be hard to square it with the higher moralities."

Strogue. "You speak like a fool, as all boys do. But there is no time to board-school you; and you are getting too old for that rot even. Now listen to what I have to say, though beyond the present range of your intellect. I have not dwelt among this mixed lot of savages; I have simply passed through them in my usual course. You might live among them till your hair grew white, and know less than you did when it was green. Why? You are sharp enough in your way, and if you had started with a humble mind, and kept it open, you might win knowledge. But that is not fine enough for you. You start with your poor wits already ingrained and case-hardened with the grease and suet of self-conceit, and nothing ever sticks to you."

Nickols, and *Cator*, and *I*, in the corner, with unanimous surprise: "Captain Strogue is the [Pg 461] humblest of mankind, and therefore the most omniscient!"

Strogue. "It is true, my friends; a great home-truth, and you shall gather the fruits of it. I have penetrated this lady's scheme, and deeply regret that so fine a woman, one of the handsomest I have ever seen, should not behave with equal beauty. Having sent her brother to a better world, she will bring his daughter to the altar as the bride of her noble son—noble indeed to look at, but unable as yet to say Boh to a goose. He will be the master nominally of all Imar's fair dominions, which are as lovely as any in the world, when the snow allows a sight of them. The real master, of course, will be a certain lady-friend of ours; for you can see that from his cradle upwards she has cowed that uncommonly fine young fellow, so that he dare not call his soul his own. Upon my word I should not be surprised, when she has united these central tribes, if she threw off the yoke of Russia, and proclaimed herself Queen of the Caucasus, like a modern Tamara. All that is

clear enough, but the one thing I can't make out for the very life of me is, why the dickens did she send us that scamp, whose real name is Hisar, under the name of Hafer? She would not send the true Hafer of course, lest when he had been away for months, and seen the ways of the polished world, and how absolutely the children rule their parents, he might be seized with emulation, and resolve to be master of his own domains, if not of his own mother—though I am sorry for anybody who tries that. Now tell me, ye who flatter yourselves that you can see further into a milestone than Strogue who has beheld so many, what induced this artful schemer to send Hisar to England in the name of Hafer, when for all that we can see he might just as well have gone in his own name?"

Nickols. "I was never any hand at crooked dealing, though there is plenty of it in our own line of business, but none with tip-toppers like my uncle and me. We have a high character to sustain. Even supposing we would stoop——"

Cator. "Stow that, Jack, we know it all by heart. But I can tell the Captain one good reason why the lady's ambassador should be called *Hafer*. Sûr Imar was bound to receive his own nephew, when he might have refused to see a stranger. And to take him into their confidence, and let him know their plans, and so on. All of which has enabled them to make fools of his faithful retainers, and prisoners of himself and his daughter." [Pg 462]

Strogue. "With half an eye open, I saw every bit of that. But it does not touch the real difficulty. Dariel is to marry the true Hafer. Very well, let her, if she likes. He's a young man of grand appearance; and that reconciles the women to a lot of disadvantages. But if she was meant to belong to him, why let another fellow get the start with her? Though women of decent age know better, a girl is sure to be romantic. She piles wonders of imagination upon the first good-looking young fellow who suggests how lovely, how lofty, how divine she is.

"She keeps him at a blushing distance, and looks as if she had not the least idea where he is, and would turn her head away if he came up. Bless their hearts, I know them all; though I never let them see it. I could have had fifty Mrs. Strogues,—for they love a man who knows the world,—some of them too with cash and houses. But none of that for me, till I want nursing. Half-a-dozen Miss Strogues here and there, some white, some black, and some the colour of an orange, or a good Mocha berry that you can't get now—and they behave all the better to you when they know that you can do without them. Simple truth, gentlemen. I am not romantic."

This was too much for Jack Nickols, who was truly in love with his Rosa. Too much even for Cator, though he had no love as yet to hold him. Young Englishmen know right from wrong, though they do the wrong very often. But they cannot bear to hear it boasted of. But to me, with Dariel in my heart, purifying and ennobling it, bad as the time was for a row, I should have deserved no better time, if I had been afraid of it. So I marched up, and laid my hand upon him.

"Sir," I said, without a sign of anger,—for such stuff was not worth it,—"what you deserve, both of men and women, is to die in a workhouse, with Mrs. Gamp and Betsy Prig to close your eyes. Bad women there must be, as well as bad men; but tell me which has made the other? I know you better than to believe that you really think such wicked nonsense as you talk, for the sake of seeming clever. Bartholomew Strogue is a better man than that." [Pg 463]

"I should not be much surprised if he was," the Captain answered pleasantly; "and he can allow for babes and sucklings, who are the happiest people after all. But come, my friends, I hear the sounds of sleep, the grinding of the mill of slumber. How those gallant Lesghians snore! If the Caucasus is the true cradle of our race, sleep must have lost its silence before language was invented."

CHAPTER LIII [Pg 464]
A RUTHLESS SCHEME

While these men were arguing thus (failing with all their ingenuity, perhaps, to hit upon the true state of the case) a scene which they would have been glad to behold was taking place some twenty miles away, and not far from the banks of the Ardon. Here that river (on its way to join the Terek below Vladikaukaz) rushes through a rugged and desolate country on the further side of Kazbek, where the fall of the land is towards the north, and the long shadows lie in snowy stripes, even to the suns of midsummer. This was the melancholy spot where Rakhan owned that hunting-lodge, to which the poor Princess Oria had turned for refuge, when the snows of autumn blocked the track. Here it was that Imar (furious at her apparent guilt) found her most unhappily, at the very moment when the faithful steward—whose presence would have proved her innocence—was gone to the nearest hut in search of provisions and help to clear the road. And here it was that she breathed her last, slain by her own hand, according to the ordinance of her ancient race, to expiate the intolerable insult of the man she loved and worshipped.

But now the woman who had caused her death, or led up to it so cleverly by her own malevolence, felt no misgivings about that. Betwixt twins, even of the kindest nature and clinging from their birth to one another, a fungoid growth is apt to spring, as it does in a tree cleft down the centre, but not allowed to part in twain. Either member of the impaired union believes that the other belongs to it; and both are ready to close the grip against all who would divide them.

But as years go on, and diverse attractions draw them more and more apart, each begins to form and thicken cuticle against the other; at least if they are of equal strength. And then the stuff that vainly came to close the gap grows venomous. [Pg 465]

Jealousy, like a yellow toadstool, sprang up in young Marva's heart, when her brother dared to love another woman better than herself. She had fallen away from the twinship first by giving herself to Rakhan, without a word to her brother, and sacrificing to passion all the tender ties of kindred love. None the more could she endure that her brother should do likewise; and she would not believe, although she knew it, that her lover had murdered her father. Then when her husband made a grievance of Imar's just refusal to pay marriage-portion to that murderer—unless he would come and take the oath—she made a grievance of it too, more and more bitter as Rakhan began to make more and more spite of her poverty. And so it went on, with the crust of sullen temper thickening year by year, and the faith of married life turned sour by her husband's faithlessness, until her brother slew the wretch who had ruined him and outraged her.

Fair fight it was, and if ever one man has the right to stop another from his evil deeds below, and give him chance of mercy ere his black account grows blacker, the one might plead that right, and the other accept the relief with gratitude. But reason is less than a drop in the ocean of a tempestuous woman's heart. Marva's ill-will towards her brother deepened into bitter hatred, and nothing but his exile saved him from her brooding vengeance. And now she had found a chance of wreaking her wrath upon him to heart's content, and with the same blow satisfying her lifelong thirst for wealth and rule.

Therefore now her black device was on its last bound towards success; and we, who rejoice in lawful acts, and tricks that can be justified by solid legal argument, must bear in mind that her scheme was well in accordance with the local law.

To save all risk of being late for the ceremony of the morrow, she had quitted the stronghold where she allowed us the honour of that interview, and crossing the mountains west of Kazbek by the Ardon watercourse, had put up at this hunting-lodge, as the only suitable dwelling near the Valley of Retribution. About seventy armed men of the tribe, and a dozen village elders had been despatched to the Roman jail to keep guard, and prepare the trial; while she had only a few men with her, including the gentle Hafer, and the thoroughly savage Hisar. [Pg 466]

But the lady as yet had no suspicion of our rapid counterplot, which we never could have formed without the tidings and the help of Usi the Bear-slayer, whom she had corded to the rock for wolves. And if we could only have foreseen her sojourn at this hunting-lodge, what a dash we might have made with the mining force alone and held our haughty captive as a hostage for her prisoners! But as yet we knew not where she was; and as to what may here be told it is scarcely needful to observe that it came to my knowledge afterwards. And often on our road we doubted, in spite of all we heard of her, whether that any woman in her right mind, and acting with cool intention, would compass a crime almost beyond the conception of a man soever vile. Although it was not for the sake of the horror, but an indispensable part of her scheme, that her brother should be slain by his own, and only son!

"Hafer," she said to this noble-looking youth, who believed himself the only son of her injured husband Rakhan, "at last the time is come for you to vindicate your father. To-morrow his murderer will be condemned by the verdict of the elders of our tribe—the men who were faithful to your father, the great Prince Rakhan of the Ossets. Your father died, as you know too well, in the assertion of your mother's rights. Your uncle Imar, my own brother, was gifted by Heaven with no sense of justice. He was not content with robbing me, your dear mother, of my rightful share in my father Dadian's inheritance; but when your own brave father Rakhan vainly made suit after many years to obtain a small share of my rights, what did your uncle Imar do? You know, you have heard it a thousand times; he slew your father in cold blood, taking mean advantage of superior strength. He left me a widow, a helpless widow, with you my only child almost a babe. Instead of remaining, like a man, to face the consequence of his crime, and trying at least to make compensation, he fled to an island in the west called England, where all malefactors are sheltered and fed. There he lived in luxury for many years, receiving all the revenues which of right were mine. Now he has returned, without a word of sorrow to me, to rob me of the little I have tried to save. You know how hard I have striven against fortune, labouring to keep the scanty relics of my rights, and to take charge of small affairs that have chanced to lose their owner. Even you I have been compelled sometimes to deprive of enjoyments to which your birth entitled you. Is it not the truth, my child?" [Pg 467]

"Mother, it is indeed the truth. I have often been ashamed of my desire for more food. And yet it has been a pleasure to me to behold you never famishing."

"A barley-cake has been enough for me. There are some who can so deny themselves. But justice comes to those who wait, and bear their sorrows patiently. The murderer of your father has, even through his own bad designs, fallen into the hands of those to whom he owes so long a debt. We have him beyond all power of escape. To-morrow he will be justly tried by those who know what he has done. The elders of this noble race, the race of the white sheepskin, will have him placed before them. He will be forbidden to poison the air with any lying speeches. His sentence will be death, and you—according to the law of ages—you are the man to execute it."

The young man fixed his large and gentle eyes upon her face, in doubt whether she could mean in earnest to enforce such a cruel task. Even the worst of tyrants threatens a great deal more than he means to do; and when it is a female tyrant, deeds can scarcely equal words, however strong

the whole may be. This youth had received enough of both,—the blast of words, the lash of deeds,—and a heart that was both just and tender had confused the brain by pouring vain emotions into it.

The lady met his eyes with more than the every-day contempt in hers. It was not in her nature to make allowance for the result of her own work. Studiously from his infant days she had crushed all free-will out of him; and yet she scorned him for having none. As fine a specimen of manly growth as could be found in all the world was towering over her dark head, tall and stately though she was. She hated him for doing that, and she scorned him for doing it in stature only. [Pg 468]

"Am I to speak again?" she asked, with a gaze from which his mild glance recoiled. "I have set your duty before you, Hafer; if you are coward enough to refuse it, another will discharge it for you; and according to the ancient laws you will be imprisoned and starved to death. What will become of Lura then? She will love you, if you are a man. If not, she will turn to Hisar, who is longing to prove himself more worthy, and all her beauty will be his."

"What has Hisar to do with this? He is always seeking to supplant me. You speak as if I were a coward, because it is not my desire to shed blood of man or beast; those who have done no harm to me, why should I do harm to them? Neither do I take heed of words, being brought up with reproaches daily, which it becomes me not to answer. But of Hisar I have no fear. It is the feminine voice that scares me, because it has always held dominion, and is too rapid to contend with. You have never allowed me to obtain any skill in weapons, such as a full-grown man should have; neither have I desired to fight, which is worthy of wolves, and dogs, and hogs. But if Hisar thinks to take my place in the things which he is coveting, Hisar is of ignoble breed, let him come and make trial of me; and let Lura come and see it, if her gentle nature does not shrink."

Hafer tossed his golden curls, and tried to look fierce; but nature had not gifted him with that expression, neither had practice supplied the lack. And then he smiled at his own attempt, having much of his father Imar's vein. No woman, worthy to be called a woman, could have looked at him without admiration, and pity for all that he had suffered to take the bold spirit out of him. But the woman who had crushed his life was enraged at this slight outbreak.

"Something more than vaunt is needful to establish claim to courage. Hisar is brave; the maidens admire him, the fighting men are afraid of him. If thou art too liver-hearted to avenge thy father's wrongs, a braver youth will take thy place, and do thy duty for thee. It will not be worth while to starve thee, Hafer, and to listen to thy craven shrieks. On thy forehead we will brand *Coward*, and expel thee from a tribe of men. Hisar shall be the Lord of Ossets, with Lura for their Lady." [Pg 469]

"For the Lordship I care not. Thou hast done thy best from my birth to make me what thou art not—a woman. Hisar is more to thee than I am, though he is but a stranger. But he shall never be Lord of Lura; for I know that she hates him, and he would grind her into dust. For her sake, I will do this thing; loathsome as it is to me, since it must be done by somebody. But remember one thing, if I am forced to this—never more will I call thee mother."

"Poor fool! Does he think he will have the chance?" she muttered, as he strode away repenting already in his soft young heart of words that might have been too harsh. "Child of the detested Oria, better for thee to have died than led my own dear little one to his death. Thou hast escaped the precipice, but the Russian mines shall be thy doom. Hisar, where art thou, my son? Heardest thou what that spoon-pap said? This hut shall have a golden door, and walls of lapislazuli. Within it Oria slew herself; and within it her first-born has sealed himself for Siberia."

Hisar came forth from the inner room, so fateful to Sûr Imar, and for once his surly face looked bright. Since his return he had thought scorn of his native land and all therein; but he durst not show his mother that.

"Madam, it is nobly designed," he said, "and all in strict accord with law. Pedrel first, he shall have his wages, for which he has dared to follow me hither, and to plague me about marriage with his sister. Then to see that pious Imar fall by the hand of his sanctimonious son; to explain to that sweet saint what he has done; and then to deliver him to the Russians to be tried for parricide! It is high time to be quit of him. He begins to show cheek, as the men of England say. I could have stabbed him yesterday, if it were not for spoiling your noble scheme. Oh, mother, the eagles of Rakhabat alone can have brought thee such counsel from the clouds above! I am clever, and full of great devices, but never could I have invented this."

"My child, it is but one of many that have entered into my swift mind. When I was a girl among the nuns, to pass the winter nights, we used to relate delightful stories, far more ingenious than this. The difficulty is not to think them, but to do them, to make a great success of them. This we have not accomplished yet; but I see not how it can slip from our hands. So far, things have worked well for us. Even the weather has taken our part. That spy of a Svân is wolf's meat ere now, and there is not a Lesghian this side of Karthlos. No fear of that meddlesome Briton, I trow, or of Stroke, the drunken traveller, who threatened to come after thee." [Pg 470]

"Would that I could catch them in our valleys, mother! George the farmer would have small chance then of swinging his gun, and singing psalms with the angelic Dariel! How I scorn and hate soft women! And they love me not. All love and liking hath gone to the meek and milky Lesghian 'Hafer;' as thou hast chosen to call him. Therefore, to the Russian hell with him! But of one thing I would warn thee, much admired and beloved mother. When we have torn the red cross down, and cast it beneath the white sheepskin, and filled our belts with the gold of Imar, not long will I tarry in these dens of rock fit only for the hermit and the huntsman. Of Selina I am

already weary, and soon as my heart is weary both of Dariel and Lura—since the ancient law allows us twain, which is less than the wisdom of the Moslem—I shall leave thee to command this savage race, and take their tributes for me. Yearly will I come to see thee, and my two devoted wives, when the harvest-time is on, and cities are too hot to dwell in. But London and Paris, Paris and London, will be the delight of Hisar."

The Princess had heard this more than once, and it did not distress her. She had none to love or plot for now, except this savage Hisar, her own, but unacknowledged son. Forsooth when Rakhan proved himself both brutal and faithless to her, and quitted her before the birth of the genuine Osset Hafer, and wandered with a light-of-love, the outraged wife took her revenge, according to the manner of the country, by encouraging a Khabardan chief, a bold and haughty Mussulman. Hisar, born of this transmontane sally, about two years after the true Hafer's birth, but before his [Pg 471] death at Karthlos, was of necessity kept from sight during every return of Rakhan. That strong-willed savage, like many others, allowed unlimited action to himself, but passion only in the passive form to those who might have saved his soul, if there had been any heart behind it.

"Thou art not fit to govern men," the Princess Marva looked at Hisar with a smile of mild contempt, which would have been anything but mild to any other woman's son; "but there is time enough to learn all that. Fierce enough thou art; and that is the understreak of all government. All the needful frauds will flow into thy noble spirit, when thy truest friends and warmest loves have shown thee what the onyx is."

CHAPTER LIV [Pg 472]
THE VALLEY OF RETRIBUTION

Usi, the Svân, came up to me, in the first gleam of the morning, when the valleys were spiral snakes of white and the peaks were horns bedight with rose, as in a Roman sacrifice. We had struggled and scrambled, by Stepan's guidance, under the weak help of the moon, until jaded legs and burdened arms were like branches that droop with their own weight. Strogue most of all, after resting so long at the fountain of the *London Rock*, felt need of refreshment beyond the supply, and found tumbles less cheerful than tumblers. However, whenever we could stop to feed he was as brisk as the youngest of the party.

Then Usi, as I said, came round a crag with the light step of a mountaineer, and touched me on the elbow. I followed him into a piece of thicket, and there found our interpreter, a man of many accomplishments, and perceptive of their value. The Bear-slayer carried a long dull gun of ancient make and heavy substance, with the barrel stained by smoke and fire, and the carving of the stock turned black. Waving it proudly he began to speak; and what he said was rendered thus, though interpretation was growing needless as between his hits and mine.

"I am a man of piety not common among soldiers, and never yet heard of among the Svâns. For this cause hath the Lord preserved me from wolves, and daggers, and Marva. And not only me hath He preserved, but also this long pipe of Shamyl, this instrument of justice, renowned for laying low the sinners who have persecuted Usi. From the blazing of fire and the hands of thieves the Almighty hath restored it for a holy purpose. I will not boast; that now remains for the young [Pg 473] man or the coward. But I have seen in a dream of the night the proud eyes and the swelling breast laid low.

"I have a scheme of my own devising, by which perchance the Lord of Christians, the greatest officer of Shamyl, and his dear child may keep their breath. Know you not that the murderers will guard their dungeon-gate in force, and as soon as we assault the valley, they will rush in and slay the prisoners? Of what avail will it be then, for us to pour our strength in after them? Rather let the captain, and his brave men, lie dark at the mouth of the valley, until the chief who hath justice in his eyes is brought forth for the death pronounced. Meanwhile, if there be any man young, and strong, and fearless, to whom the lives of the prisoners are as precious as his own life, let him descend and lie hidden in the valley between the murderers and the prison-gate, with an implement such as I have seen, but know not how to handle, for it was not discovered in our war-time, a fire-arm which contains the death of four men in close combat. Also let two men of straight pipes—I myself will be one of them—lie in the wrinkle of the cliff, which is behind the prison-gate looking over it, and up the valley. I know how to get to that hole unseen, for every crag is known to me. Also we two at the crafty minute can lower from the rocks the man who is to hide in the valley; if a man can be found bold enough. I have spoken to this young son of the West, because he is strong and nimble, a lover of Sûr Imar also, and a worshipper of womankind. But if his courage abide not with him to go down into the place of death, there is a young Lesghian of better courage ready to encounter it. But he is not well skilled in fire-arms. With wisdom have I spoken, as befits a son of Shamyl."

The danger thus foreseen by the veteran sharpshooter had long been in my thoughts. Our attack upon the rear of the enemy, far away from the dungeon gate, would avail the prisoners not a jot, and only cause their instant death, if the savage horde rushed at them first, as their leader would probably command. Some one must be there to face them, at the first signal of the fight: for the straight course of the glen (which resembled in shape a drawn-out horseshoe) was nearly a [Pg 474] quarter of a mile in length, and our appearance at the further end would leave plenty of time to

stab those inside. But one man hidden in the glen itself, and two upon the cliffs above, might check the rush for a minute or two, until our main force dashed up behind. Yet to have six rifles on the cliff, and six revolvers in the valley—how much more effectual would that be, as well as so much safer!

"Is there no room for more than one to lie concealed near the prison-gate, and for more than two upon the crag above?"

When the interpreter put my question, Usi shook his head, and turned his back upon me, as if he cared to hold no further converse with a craven. "I would go myself," he muttered, "if I had ever been taught to shoot with pipes that are no longer than the honeycomb."

"Hearken unto my words," I spoke in the style of his own oration, "O slayer of bears, the English heart hath as much endurance and contempt of peril, as ever was bred in the Lesghian or the untamed Svân. From this adventure I will not turn back, by reason of terror or the love of life. Do thou consider these things apart, while I hold counsel with the Captain of brave men."

Forty-two of us there were in all, without counting old Kobaduk or the fluent interpreter,—the one disabled by length of years, the other by prolixity of tongue. Time had failed us to muster more than twenty-two Caucasians, and eighteen British miners, with Strogue and myself to make up the force; but a match as we thought for twice that number of Ossets, or any other savage tribe. And we had the advantage of knowing much more about their proceedings than they could know of ours; for Usi (who had left us the day before to search his burned hut for the celebrated gun) had made the best of his time in other ways, skirting the highlands round the valley at a prudent distance, and learning from a goatherd's boy what the proceedings of the morrow were to be. All these things I put plainly before Strogue as the commander of the expedition, and he fell in at once with the Bear-slayer's plan; while Jack Nickols (as the best rifle-shot among us and a first-rate climber) volunteered to be Usi's partner in the dangerous enterprise among the cliffs. [Pg 475] So we three, Nickols, Usi, and myself, made every preparation we could think of, and set off with a quick step right early, in advance of the main body.

In some of his tempers, Strogue was a very provoking and irritating fellow, and he knew it, I think; or he must have known it, whenever he looked at Bat Strogue in the glass. But now I thought more of him than I had ever thought before, because he behaved so kindly to me. For it must be remembered that I had not always put up with his brag, and his cynicism, and contempt, or pretended contempt of women, and many other little ways that rasp the quiet Briton.

"Let Jack Nickols go; don't you go, George," he said to me, I daresay a dozen times; "what matter if he gets a prod through the lungs? Take a lot of gabble out of him, if he ever came round again; if he didn't, one coxcomb the less. He does think Treble X of himself; while you are always so ready to learn,—it's a pleasure to hold a conversation with you. And when a man comes to know you, George, he finds you not half such a fool as he thought! That is my experience at any rate, although I have seen too much of men to pretend to know much about them. But nobody need look twice at you, to understand you thoroughly. I am wanted here of course; but let that cock-headed young Nickols go; nobody would ever miss him."

"Captain," I replied with emphasis, for I knew that he loved the title,—all the more perhaps as being of home-growth,—"should I be worthy of your friendship if I allowed a young fellow quite a stranger to the case to undertake my duty?"

"Well, well! God bless you! I shall never see you alive again. But I'll make a rare example of the fellow that runs you through, dear George. I wish I had bought a six-shooter in London; however, the Lord be with you. Be sure you kill four of them before you drop. That sham Hafer belongs to me, mind, after all the tricks he has played me."

This was not encouraging; but there seemed to be no way out of it. Neither was there any genuine pluck in my volunteering; for as a mere question of selfishness, Dariel's life was worth to me a hundredfold as much as mine. Another thing was, that I had never felt sure whether nature [Pg 476] had afforded me a decent share of that British pith, and presence of mind, and calmness, of which the father reads in the despatch, and says, "Thank God we are not going down the hill yet!" while the mother's eyes run over, and the brother wonders whether he could do the like, if the pinch came to his own short ribs.

Some people declare that dreams will tell us, when we can remember them, what our genuine nature is. If so, I have been told both ways; in some visions, running like a niddering, in others standing firm as a pyramid. And now I found myself quite at a loss, although my mind felt firm enough, whether the body would toe the mark, stand steadfast, and act to orders.

Happily there was not much time for dealing with speculative terrors, for we had to keep on at a rapid pace, to do any good with our ambuscade. The sudden snowfall of the Sunday morning had not been so heavy on this northern side, but the track was very rough and crooked, as well as steep and slippery. So that Nickols and myself were ashamed to find the supple vigour of youth no match for the wiry endurance and practised precision of that ancient mountaineer. Then, at the crown of a terrible defile, he looked back, and ordered us to lie close, while he crept down a narrow channel flanked with trickling combs of snow.

We were glad to have a breathing time, and Nickols proposed a quiet smoke; but I would not hear of it, for the vaporous curls might be seen from below.

"Wonderful old buffer," Jack whispered with his hand to his mouth; "I believe he could out-walk us both. I shall take to bear's grease when I grow old. But I would like to shoot a match with him for his best bearskin, if the Amazon has not burned them all. By George, I shouldn't like to be that lady though, with the long pipe bearing upon me. Have you seen how his eyes flash and his lips twitch at the very name of that woman? I do believe he has arranged all this for his private satisfaction. But there goes the signal; we are to creep on carefully. Mind you don't send a stone down hill."

Taking our caps off, and stooping low so as not to jut out against the sky-line, we descended the [Pg 477] shallow seam of rock, until we stood in a stony and briary hollow, as long and as wide as a sawpit. At the further end, brown Usi lay flat on his breast, and peered securely through a wattle of budding bush into the depth of the glen below. We joined him, and found ourselves in full command of the whole of the savage solemnity.

A heavy stone chair was planted near the middle of the valley, with a black tent just behind it. On either side about a dozen dirty but distinguished greybeards were squatting upon blocks of granite, wearing the sheepskin head-dress, and the smock with fluted cross-belt, and holding long white rods, as if in trial or in council. There was no one in the high chair as yet, but a young attendant stood on guard, smoothing now and then the pile of leopard-skin thrown over it. Further up the valley I could see a lot of Osset warriors, lounging in their usual way, some even squatting down and smoking, and scarcely any two dressed alike. Reckless fellows, and rough as wolves—it was difficult to count them; but at a guess I set them down as from eighty to a hundred, gallant men, no doubt, but looking better trained to rob than fight.

"Take it all in; shape it all to know every inch of it in your mind," Jack Nickols whispered kindly; "now is your time, George Cranleigh. It may save your life, when it comes to the rush. Did you ever see anything more lovely?"

"Very fine for the fellows who are safe up here," I answered less politely, and knowing (without advice of his) how much I had to think of.

But even in that nervous state, one could not behold without thinking about it, the strange way in which the hand of nature had cut and shaped and almost furnished a theatre of the mountains here. The sides of the glen were of yellow rock, or rather perhaps of a dun colour, nowhere less than a hundred feet in sheer height, or beetling over; while the level spread of the bottom was, like a frame drawn by a tapestry-worker, soft and rich and tissued smoothly, only of the brightest green, shot here and there with play of gold, like a carpet woven of lycopod. Usi said that the people told him snow would never lie down here, neither would any coarse weed grow, but only [Pg 478] moss and the dews of heaven, for magnanimous heroes who slept below. And he said that the grey rocks, standing forth at the broad end we looked down upon, were tombstones, which had sprung like mushrooms where the Captains of those heroes lay.

"Imar and the lovely maiden," he said; as he struck his heel on rock, and Nickols told me what he meant, "are a hundred feet beneath us now. If you could drive an iron down, it would pierce the roof above their heads. But lo, one man has been slain already, condemned in the holy weeks and kept till now. A traitor, and an extortioner, by the black stake driven through him. The corpse is out of sight from the judgment yard, though I can see it plainly. By the dress he was of the Western races, such as you yourselves are; but a small man, weak, and of no account; perhaps an English slave purchased for his own use by Hisar.

"Now see, my son, where that horn of rock stands forth. When the wise men put their heads together, by this rope we will let thee down, if trembling cripple not thy strong limbs. The fighting men will not behold thee, because of the folding of the crag; the heads of men that are white with wisdom will be bowed into that of the wealthiest, while they whisper to one another *death*. And the woman will abide unseen within the tent. Therefore do thou quickly thus. As soon as thy feet are on the moss, cut the rope, stop not to untie it, fall on thy breast, and crawl into that hole—my finger shows it now—where slab of stone leans unto stone, and the body of a large heart may lie hidden. I saw it in the twilight before they caught me; but like a fool I went not in. Within twenty yards, thou wilt see the iron bars where Sûr Imar will be shackled to receive the death. Keep thy head below the brim, even as the salesman scrimps his bushel, and thine eyes as deep as his, when he seemeth to heed nothing. Thine own strong head and heart will guide thee, when it comes to stabbing. At the sight or the sound of thy downstroking we will shoot; and the Captain's force will rush up the valley. Bear in mind that thou hast chosen this; and death comes only once to man; and by the God on high, thou shalt be avenged on the wicked men that slay [Pg 479] thee."

This ought to have been warm comfort to me, according to all great writers, and the general practice of mankind. But it failed to kindle one fibre of my system, and I dropped my eyes that the heartless slayer of many bears, and men thrice as many, might not behold the affliction in them which he would be sure to take amiss. It was not terror (I would wish to think), so much as pity for my father and dear mother, and Grace, and Harold, and the farm, and the horses, and the dogs I loved, and most of all for Dariel; also a good deal for myself, who went hand in hand with her in every thought of mine. But the less I thought and felt, the better; for the time was now to act.

We crept unseen to the spur of rock which Usi had called a "Horn;" and there they made the rope fast around my chest, and I passed a handkerchief round the breech of my revolver, and slung my kinjal and *toorak* securely, for I had taken kindly to that native weapon, made of the long horn of

a mountain-goat, laden with lead, and bound with leather. Then at the proper moment when the judges or the jury—whichever they were—had gathered in a ring to consummate their farce, from the lip of the cliff I was let down softly, and lowered so skilfully in the buttress corner of a crag, that I reached the bottom with both feet ready, and only a little skin gone from my thumbs. There I cut the rope, and fell flat among the moss, which grew to the very plinth of cliff, and wormed my way, with the slab for a screen, until I dived into the hole at its base. Here I rubbed my knees, which had received a bruise or two, and began with great caution to survey the scene. For the little pit into which I had crawled was scarcely more than a yard in depth, but protected at the top by a smaller slab of stone, which rested with a wide slope against the upright rock, as the spur of a wooden fence is reared above the ground, and splayed against the post, to steady it.

At the lip of my refuge a grey plant grew with woolly leaves, something like mullein, and although it had not got much growth yet, it afforded me precious shelter, when I raised my head to peep around; for it partly closed the three-cornered gap, between the upright and the sloping stone. It [Pg 480] is not in my power to make a list of all that I saw, being in so quick a terror; but the things that I was able to twist my neck to were enough to make me sorry for the colour of my hair.

In the butt-end of the cliff, which I had just dropped down, I beheld a wide door of dark metal, and the gleam of it was more of bronze than iron. What the metal truly was, no man would stop to ask himself, but rather stand in wonder, and be overcome by the solid mass and magnitude, and the strength of ancient times. All the sons of Caucasus might have come together, and done their very best for a century—if nature allowed them such length of strength—but even with the Genoese smiths to help them, they could never have built such a door as that. A door I call it, though I may be wrong; others would take it for a gate perhaps. But being all in one plane and flat, and having no frame in sight, to me it was a door, and a marvellous door, beyond our power to make or even to break open. On either side of it were two long loop-holes, like the lancet-windows in our church at home, but carved in the solid rock, too narrow for even a child to squeeze his little shoulders through. And I knew that in the chambers (quarried thus by Roman steel eighteen centuries ago), waiting for their doom, were the chief whom I admired, and the lady whom I loved.

There was nothing more to be made of that; not even a sign that Sûr Imar knew what the savages outside were doing. But as I thought of him, labouring for years, girding up the slack folds of a life, from which all the gladness of the world was gone, simply for the benefit of these wretches, —genuine indignation filled me, and I longed to shoot a tribe of them. This it was, and no true courage, which enabled me to regard the whole, with a calm heart and a solid head, like the oak, which is our emblem.

CHAPTER LV [Pg 481]
AT THE BAR

How long those ragged elders carried on with their pretence of trial, is beyond my power to say. I only know that my joints began to stiffen with cramp, and to ache with crush, and my brain to hum like a factory wheel. Even the relief of descrying Usi or Jack Nickols, on the bristly brow of cliff a hundred feet over the dungeon-gate, was more than they dared to afford me now; though I tried to persuade myself once or twice that I espied the glint of metal there. Neither was there sound or sign of life within the rocky jail, so far as watchful eyes and ears could learn; while the cackle of the greybeards some fifty yards behind me resembled a drone of bagpipes enlivened by a cherry-clapper.

At last I beheld a stately woman advance from the cover of the private tent and take her seat in the chair of law, to receive the verdict of her puppets. Then some hypocritical farce ensued, as if she were shocked, and pleaded with them, and mourned to find them so inexorable. My heart burned within me, and my fingers tingled to pull trigger at some of them, such a fierce and dirty lot were they; but I said to myself, "Let Hisar come, the fellow that broke the lovebird's leg." Then as if the scene that could not be avoided was unfit for such gentle eyes, the Princess, with a bow of resignation, retired into the sable tent.

I lay close, and drew my head in, while four or five of the fighting men followed the hoary villain who had acted as chief-justice to the door of heavy metal sunk in the dark embrasure of the cliff. The old man drew forth a key as long as a toasting-fork and much bigger, and with brawny arms [Pg 482] thrusting in both directions, and a screech as if from wounded rock, the valves of the door slid back into their bed, as the damper of a furnace slides. But one broad bar of metal spanned the opening horizontally, about five feet above the iron threshold. The Osset warriors stooped their white head-dresses under this heavy bar, and disappeared in the gloom inside. That they would not slay their prisoners there I knew, from Usi, and from Stepan's tales.

Presently they appeared again with a figure in the verge of sunlight, towering over their woolly gleam.

I saw Sûr Imar's noble face, as calm as when he smiled on me, and blessed me with his daughter. His hands were roped behind his back, his silvery curls uncovered, and his broad white chest laid naked; except that the red cross hung upon it, in which he wore some of his dead wife's hair. Two of the men stretched spears behind him, as if he would shrink from the steps of death; but he

walked as if he were coming to welcome some expected visitor, bowed his head without a word, and laid his breast against the bar. There they cast a broad shackle round him and made it fast behind his back; while a pompous dotard stood forth the door, and read (or made believe read) the verdict of his brother idiots. As he finished, my pistol muzzle lay true upon the foremost of them; the man who first put hand to kinjal would never have put it to his mouth again.

Then to my surprise, they all withdrew, cackling in their crock-saw throats, while that old fiend showed his gums like a rat-trap, grinning through his rheumy scrub. And the sound of tongues up the valley ceased; and the blowing of horns, and the shrilling of fifes; and the only thing that I could hear was the slow beat of a sheepskin drum, to call the savages to the death, and the rapid thumps of my own heart.

Listening for the fatal step, I fixed my eyes once more upon the bound and helpless victim. Perhaps to reduce his well-known strength, or to lower his high courage, the affectionate sister had kept in his body just life enough to last till he should be killed. His ribs stood forth, and his cheeks were meagre, and the eyes looked worn and sunken; but there was not a sign of fear or flinching, no twitch or quiver in the smooth white forehead, and not so much as a palpitation in [Pg 483] the broad breast laid against the bar. Like a fool I raised my hand a little and tried to attract his notice, but he kept his calm gaze towards his foes; until a low heart-broken wail from an inner cell of the caverned rock told of a sorrow beyond his own. Then for a moment he turned his head, and spoke some words of comfort perhaps, or of love and long farewell, to the one who could not come to him, or perhaps not even hear him; and I hoped in the Lord of mercy that she could not see her father. At the thought of that possibility even, hot as I was, my blood ran cold. Could any woman exist who would set such a sight before a woman?

Suddenly a glow of deep amazement shone in Imar's haggard eyes. With a wrench of his mighty frame he shook the steel bar like a ribbon, the shackles on his chest gave way a little, and his grand face issued from the gloom of granite into the testimony of the sun. Then the strong aspect and vivid lines—as firm as the cliff to confront their doom—relaxed and softened, and grew bright, as if memory forgot its age, and went back upon its years, to have a play with tender visions.

"Oria, come at last!" he cried, with a smile to tempt her nearer; "my Oria sent to call me home! The God, who has done this for me, will take care of my daughter!"

Before him stood—betwixt him and me, although I had heard no footsteps—a tall young figure in a long white robe, timid as a woman, and as graceful; but with supple strength quivering for the will to man it. On the left hip hung a heavy sword; but the right hand had fallen away from the hilt, and the shoulders lay back with the sudden arrest. "My son, my son, it is just," cried Imar; "slay me, as I slew thy mother."

Then the shackled man turned his head away, that his eyes should make no plea for him, and nature's dread could be seen in nothing but the quiver of his long arched throat.

But the young man stood as if carved in stone, with both arms stretched to his father, unable to take another step, unable to do anything but wonder.

But betwixt their gaze a dark form leaped, quivering with fury, and wild for blood, too ravenous for slaughter to have formed a proper plan of it. And this was a very lucky thing for me. [Pg 484]

For while he danced between them thus, with his hateful face on fire, in the voluptuous choice of murder, there was time for me to leap out of my hole, and get my cramped limbs flexible; not a moment, however, for any kind of thought, and whatever I did was of instinct. What it was I know not, nor does anybody else; it can only be told in a whirl as it befell.

Hisar, I think, made a jump at Hafer, before he saw me, and smacked his face (as if he had been a child), and tried to snatch his sword, but was thrust back, and then drew his own, and flew with it at the shackled Imar's heart. But another was there—thank the Lord in heaven—I caught the flame of Hisar's eyes on mine, as his blade went straight for Imar's breast, and dashed it into splinters with my *toorak*. Then he hurled the stump at me, drew his kinjal, and sprang, as if he were made of wings, at my breast. I stepped aside quicker than I ever moved at cricket, and as he passed me he ran against so hearty a whack upon his wicked temples, that no more sin was concocted there.

Down he went, like a thistle at the ploughshare, and threw up his long legs, and lay dead, with a tuft of bloody moss between his teeth. I took the stump of his sword, which had struck me in the breast, and cut Sûr Imar free, and hurried him inside (for he was lost as in a vision), and stood with my revolver in the doorway, ready for the onset of the fighting men. These being taken with astonishment hung back, as if they had none to lead them; until the great lady appeared from the tent, to receive the tidings of her brother's death.

Marva came forth in her majestic manner (having turned away her face, perhaps with sisterly compunction), sweeping her black robe along the ground, and framing her handsome features to the proper expression of regret. Now the desire of her life was won. Paramount of the Eastern Ossets, and the Western Lesghians; quit of the brother who had thwarted her, and his son whom she had stolen for revenge and guile; nothing remained but to make her own son the heir,—for he was born in wedlock, though not of it,—marry him to the Lesghian heiress, and herself enjoy all [Pg 485] the power and the wealth, while he took his pleasure in the western world. She despised all the ignorance and superstition round her too loftily to act down to it; and perhaps looked down upon

herself a little, as she took her seat in the chair of stone. None the less she did it with a royal air, more impressive to us from a woman than from man.

To recover my breath, and be ready, I drew back in the shadow of the prison entrance, where Hafer was standing by his prostrate father; and much as I longed to see all that happened, for the moment I was out of it. Not that I should have been much wiser even in the midst of them, knowing nothing of the Osset tongue, which sounds like a chorus of bull-frogs, bagpipes, pigs under a harrow, a cock in the roup, and a hooter at the junction, even when the men are calm and keep the women silent. However, those who understood them tell me that they reported thus.

"Oh, lofty lady, mother of thy tribe, widow of the great Prince Rakhan, the sentence hath been given according to thy will, and carried out even as the Heaven hath decreed."

"Wise men, speak not of any will of mine; whatever hath been done is good and righteous, to establish justice, and avenge the wrong. The barb of the arrow of the Lord flies straight; never can it fail by any crookedness of men. Yet the great Prince who has fallen was the nearest of all flesh to me. I will be content with your testimony. I cannot gaze upon him."

"But—but we know not how to say it, so as to mingle truth with pleasure. Oh, lofty lady, it is not our enemy, Imar of the Kheusurs, who is dead. Rather is it sorrowful indeed for us to speak. Would that the Lord had made us liars, when He hath cast the truth into the breast of evil!"

"Wise men, what is it? Or am I to call you fools, if ye could not even execute your own decree aright?"

"It is no deed of ours. It is a spirit from the tombs, the tombs that were made before the world itself. Let the high lady come and see."

She was girding up her long robe while they spoke, and the jewels on her shapely feet flashed forth. With a gesture of disdain she waved the old men back, but a score of wild warriors followed [Pg 486] her, as she strode towards the dungeon, to see her brother's corpse. Instead of that, she stood before the body of her son, and a loud shriek proved that she was still a woman. From the gloom of my shelter, I saw her proud eyes aghast, and her arms thrown up, and her tall form quivering. Then she controlled herself, and looked around.

"To weep by-and-by,—to avenge him first," she shouted (as they told me afterwards), and such is the power of another's passion that I felt like a murderer, and went forth with an impulse of shame to surrender myself. For I had never slain a man till now.

"Idiot, get back!" cried a voice from the cliff, the voice no doubt of Jack Nickols.

"Slay him,—shoot all of you, shoot, shoot, slay him!" the lady called out, and herself seized a gun; "shoot him, though it be through my own body!"

This order was beyond my understanding; but I saw at least a score of muzzles looking at me, and I had not even the wit to move.

"Which will first reach me, the sound or the bullets?" That I should thus ponder shows clearly enough that fear had overcome all sense of terror.

"Now then; cut it short," I said, according to Jack Nickols,—though I cannot remember a word of it,—and the fellows were surprised, and drew their clumsy fingers back, and went down on their knees with superstition. But the Princess Marva drew near to me, and the butt of a gun was against her hip. She saw that I stood unarmed and nerveless, and she could not help playing with the joy of her revenge. To be shot by a woman! I had no power left. I could only stare, and wait for it.

"But I know him, I recognise my dear friend," she exclaimed in French, while she fingered the trigger, with the muzzle not two yards from my breast; "it is the gentleman desirous of my emeralds. Ah, thou shalt have them! How many? Ten?"

To prolong my agony, she began to count, with glittering eyes and a courteous smile, tapping my time on the trigger; and would you believe that I could not stir, and could only keep my gaze fixed [Pg 487] on her? Then as she cried *Seven*, a white spot leaped—as it seemed to me—from the palpitant surge of her bosom. Her dark robe opened, and her musket dropped, as the roar of a gun rang overhead, and the Princess sank, with her lips still smiling, as dead as a stone, into low-born arms.

"Usi, the Svân, hath his revenge!" a shrill cry from the crags proclaimed; "Wolf's meat hath choked the Queen of Wolves."

Fear fell on all of us, as if the sky had opened; and the warriors grounded their guns upon the moss, and crowded round one who had an image on his breast. Then with one accord they began a mournful howl, of a quality to come from the bowels of the earth, or send all her inhabitants into them. My presence of mind was restored by this; and with scarcely a wound I leaped back into my shelter, recovered my weapons, and determined to die hard.

CHAPTER LVI
HARD IS THE FIGHT

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What right had I to be out of breath, after standing stock-still no one knows how long, like a cardboard dummy to be shot at? But there seemed to be a hollow where my heart in its duty should have been staunch and steadfast; and my brain (having never been wrought up like this) must have lost its true balance and standard. Otherwise could it have shocked me to know that a career of cruelty and wickedness was brought to an ignominious close?

"Marva is dead," I kept on saying; "the greatest woman of the age is dead! Not the best, not the purest, not even a true woman. But how grand was her attitude, and how she disdained me! And now a wretched Svân has shot her!"

Let any one despise me as he likes, with reason on his tongue and humanity in his eyes. For the world at large it might be better to have such a woman stretched beneath the turf; but a man with his heart in the right place—which the muzzle of her musket knew too well—could not help feeling for her grandeur.

However, it was not for me to lay down the law, or even to stand up for it against this crew of savages. To keep out of their way was my one desire, and at first there seemed to be some chance of it, with their leader a corpse, and superstition frowning at them from the dungeon-gate. Hoping thus, I stood back in a niche of granite, while a bullet or two sang along the vault, and I strove to recover the spirit of a man, by thinking of my country and the luck we have in turning the corner of situations, where others would lie down and breathe their last.

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The bar to which Sûr Imar had been bound was still in place; but he was not in sight, neither could I see his son, the gentle youth sent to assassinate him. Then I heard the sound of heavy blows, and concluded that the younger man was striving to release his sister, while the father lay half-conscious still from brutal cruelty and want of food. There was none but myself to guard the entrance—for Usi and Nickols had not appeared—until our friends at the valley's mouth should have time to come to the rescue.

Glad was I to think, as I did at first, that the savage warriors, scared and puzzled, and without a leader, would now hang back; as they had done when the Lesghian chief brought their Prince Rakhan to account. And so it would have been, by their own confession, but for the ferocity of one young man, Karkok the brother of Lura, and the chief friend of that Hisar whom I had struck down. Karkok cannot have been stirred up by love, or loyalty, or any other noble motive,—for who could have regretted Hisar?—but by ambition of the meanest sort, and a dash at the mastery of the tribe, for he was now the last relative of Rakhan.

This upstart fellow brought the fighting men together; and they laid aside the bodies of Queen Marva and her son, in fear of their being trampled on; and then (with a screech that must have set all the teeth of the flintiest echo aching) at the prison-gate they rushed, and the valves being back there was only my poor body between them and the helpless inmates.

When I saw those fellows advancing upon me, capering, and flinging hairy arms about, and tossing white sheepskins, and flourishing long muskets, beyond any denial I was frightened, and would have given every penny I was worth to be in my own little saddle-room once more. My hand shook so badly that the blue revolver revolved without any mechanism; and the prudence which has been implanted in us all suggested that the bravest man must value his own bacon. When a friend assures me that I was gloriously brave, it would be a rude thing to contradict him; but what a different tale my conscience tells!

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In a word, just presence of mind enough was left me to show that I must fight it out. To make a bolt of it was useless, for whither could I go? Anywhere across the cave would bring a bullet into me; and as for slinking along the dark wall, where would that take me, even if I could contrive it? Into the very arms of Dariel,—a truly sweet refuge, but not for a coward. All I could do was to say to myself that the lines were hard, but the Lord had made them so, and I must trust in Him to deliver me.

Whether it were faith, or sense of justice, or the love of woman, or something far lower than any of these, the brute element inborn in the sons of men,—no sooner did I see hateful eyes agoggle with lust for blood glaring at me, and great mouths agrin for a grab at me, than the like spirit kindled in myself.

"Blood you shall have, but it shall be your own first," I shouted in English, and leaped at them from the mouth of the cave, like the demon of Kazbek. They took me for that great power, and fell back, while a ball slit the tip of my ear off, and before they could rally there were two as dead as stones with bullets in their heads, and two more fell upon them with their skulls cracked by the swing of my *toorak*. "Want any more?" I asked, having two charges left, and many of them showed the better part of valour. But a kinjal was thrown at me down a lane of cowards, and stuck in my breast, and that rallied the crowd. Three or four made at me from behind, and I know not how it was, but down I went from a terrible whack on the back of my head, at the very same moment that I shot their new chief.

A very lucky shot, and one that governed all the issue. But of that I knew nothing until weeks had passed, my latest sense being of a white flash across me, and a plunge into a bottomless abyss of some one, who might be anybody. "There let him lay," as a great poet says—and never would he

have stood up again, if his skull had been of Norman growth.

But a mighty champion just in time had rushed into the thick of it, and scattered a storm of sword-flash, as the lightning fires a forest. Two ruffians, poised for the final stab at my defenceless body, swung backward with their arms chopped off, and the blade that should have drained Sûr Imar's blood revelled in the gore of his enemies. For the fury of the mild and gentle "Hafer" (now that he had learned his wrongs and guessed his father's) swooped on those sheep- [Pg 491] clad fiends, as a whirlwind leaps upon a drying-ground of tallow candles. Would that I had only kept sufficient sense to see, for they tell me that it was magnificent. Heads that are full of hate should have some of it let out, and several of the worst were stopped for ever from receiving any more misanthropy. All who knew anything about it said that Rakhabat himself, the worst man-hater of all the demons of Kazbek, was seen to come down with the wings of a black eagle, and enter the vesture of the white "Lamb-angel." That was the Osset name for this poor Prince; and now having broken bounds, he proved the irony of his claim to it. For soon the chief-justice of the court went down, and so did the foreman of the jury, and a pair of clerks who sought nothing but their living, and others who had come to see things out without any view to their own exit. Among them raged "Hafer," like Hector of Troy, with twenty years, and more than that, of goodness to let out; and no man could shoot straight at him, because he was in the right, while all their guns were crooked.

Nevertheless the force of numbers must have been too great for him,—for the conscience of Ossets still requires to be formed,—but for the rapid and resistless charge of Stepan and Strogue, and the Lesghians, and the miners, down the long valley, and over the moss reeking already with more blood than it could staunch. At the same moment Usi, the Svân, and Jack Nickols, who had been hampered by some tangle of the rope, shouting to their comrades, fell in upon the flank; and the noble tribe of Ossets, or at any rate that branch of it, split up and fell asunder like an unroped fagot. There can be no certainty of justice in this world; but even the races connected with them by the tenderest ties of co-robbery found it in their hearts, when the facts could not be altered, to pronounce the only verdict—"Served them right."

CHAPTER LVII [Pg 492]
BUT NOT IN VAIN

In recounting my little adventures—as I am begged sometimes to do—upon coming to this particular part my general practice is to stop, as if I had no more to say. Whereas it is only that I want to know in which of the persons concerned my friends appear to take most interest. And to my pride, more perhaps than to my credit, their first question always is, not "What became of you, George?" but "What became of Dariel?" And that is more than I could tell for many a long day afterwards.

When the door of her cell was beaten in, she came forth as in a dream or trance, without any wonder, or fear, or question, possessed by one purpose alone,—to share the fate of her dear father. In the gloom of the tunnelled rock she glanced at the tall form of her brother, but the light even there was enough to show that this was not the one she wanted. And he, having reason from very early days to give a wide berth to the feminine form, drew aside gladly for a strange young lady to go her way without compressing him.

For this young fellow, Prince Origen, the son of Imar and Oria, the child who escaped by his fall into the drift (when Marva's genuine Hafer perished), being substituted for him, and brought up with plenty of chastisement, and strict privations, and a candid absence of affection, had never been encouraged to think, or act, or even to feel for his poor young self.

What then could be expected of him, when in a moment at one blow the whole of his world was cut from beneath him, his own identity plucked away, and not even a quiet corner left for considering who he was, or how he came to be? In such a case is it surprising that his head went [Pg 493] round so rapidly that he might fairly be said to have lost it? Instead of attending to his new-found father, he had simply stood staring at the prostrate form, till moans of despair from that inner cell were brought to his ear by the chilly draughts of rock. Thereupon he rushed in, and while I kept the entrance, he used his great strength to such purpose that his unknown sister glided past him and hurried to their unconscious father. And truly it was a great mercy for me, as well as a glory to this grand young fellow, that, instead of waiting longer where he was not wanted, he ran out at once to obtain fresh air, and get some light shed upon so many marvels. Rapid action and muscular exertion, for which he found ample cause at once, probably saved him from congestion of the brain, and certainly saved me from perforation of the heart.

For why should I make light of my defeats, any more than extol my victories, which latter it would be hard to do by reason of their nonentity? Those Ossets had performed an exploit declared to be impracticable by all the bravest sons of Wykeham during my generation. That is to say, they had cracked my skull, which was not a piece of biscuit china, but of solid and heavy metal, sounder I trow than its contents. And those who have studied the subject tell me that the thicker the pot is, which nature has provided for our poor brains to boil in, the more ticklish the job is to make good the splinters. What tinker can patch an enamelled saucepan? And a queer saucepan must our brainpan be, if, after all the smut shed round it and the slow smoke under it, any steam of self-

conceit still has a puff to lift the cover. Let any man who thinks himself a wonder get a bit of his skull (too small perhaps for a chick to pick up for the good of his gizzard) crumbled in upon the brain he is so proud of; and if he has the luck to meet with a friend who can get it out again, when he comes to know his own name once more, will he count it worth remembering?

But as for myself—because perhaps I had never thought wonders of it—trouble beyond belief was needful ever to make it sound again. When I came to know the facts—as I did at last—it may appear a singular result, but as true as I sat up in bed, the salt tears ran into my soup so fast that [Pg 494] they had to give me another basin. Not through any weakness, as an ill-natured man might fancy, but just because I was so happy to come home to a world where loving folk were living, and people better than myself, who wished to keep me with them.

Perhaps I ought not to talk about it, and yet it seems shabby and ungrateful not to say how much they had done for me. Here was my sister Grace, together with her husband Jackson Stoneman, rushing from the honeycomb of their blue moon among the soft Italian lakes into the "horrid Caucasus;" and bringing with them by telegraph to Surrey that wonderfully clever Dr. Hopmann, to whose skill I owe it that my reason was restored as good as ever it was before, and perhaps even better, for when it came back it had slept in the dew of humility.

But the doctor's humility was not increased, neither deserved it so to be. Because the most eminent physician at Tiflis, a Frenchman of vast renown, being called in at once by my host Sûr Imar, had pronounced all surgical operation futile, and declared that the owner of that battered brain might linger on for weeks, until inflammation kindled, but could never be better than an imbecile, even if he failed to satisfy science by ending as a raving madman.

"Shorge, my poy," were the first words passed by my ears into any superior part, "now you let your tongue come—very slowly. Put a good soup at the back of him, then put him in his house quietly, and go to shleep again."

"But you haven't finished cooking the partridges yet; and I want to have the one that is over."

This cupidity might scarcely seem to prove the possession of high intellect, yet Hopmann declares that the noblest utterance has never afforded him so fine a moral. "Zat Frenchman! Vot he know, to talk so quick? No fear for a prain with a memory like zat. Shorge, they kill bairds all the year round here. Go to shleep while I cook you four bartriches."

For another week he took good care to keep me in a state of body which wanted no motion of the mind inside it, nor even any quick heart-action, except at the sight of a knife and fork. But I feel ashamed to say how long the disabled body was the lord of all, and the nobler elements of our [Pg 495] existence were not allowed even to speak to it.

"I have dishpelled his shister and his sweetheart off," I heard Dr. Hopmann say to some one whom I could not see, after he had attended to my straps one day. "Vot they want? I tell you no. I let you help, because you not care. His leetle prain stand nothing yet."

"But I do care, because it was all through me," the reply was in a sweet low voice, as I caught a glimpse of a fair young lady, dressed in black and retiring towards the door; "you may have got rid of his sister, doctor, but there is one you will never get rid of, so you may just as well give it up. How much longer? And I am sure it would do him good. Why only yesterday I knew——"

"Ach, you be off! I am ze master here. We are not in England, where ze vimmen rule the roast."

The lady departed hastily, as if she had found that over-true, while the German bolted the heavy door, and came back with a grin on his solid ruddy face.

"Am I never to see any one again," I muttered, for gratitude does not flourish and abound with a man who has spent two months on his back, "nobody but a confounded German, who bolts everybody out?"

"Zat is shoost vot I vant to hear. Shorge, zat proves how you come round. If you say, 'Dank you, Tochtor Hopmann, you have saved my life, I shall never forget it, how can I ever hope to recompensh you?' then I know that your prain is very weak, not fit for healthy Englishman's at all. But when you call him a 'confounded Sherman,' he know, he see, that the nation have come up, which is the most obstinate of nature not to die. All the same, you lie down again. The world go on very well without you, Shorge."

It came into my head that this was not quite right, and that as an honest man I ought to try to stop it; but torpor overpowered my sense of justice, as it has a right to do, when the case is not our own. "I only want to know who that lady was," I mumbled.

"Zat gal was nothing of your concerns," Hopmann replied, as he sat down by the table, and began to rub some cake tobacco he had sliced; "little English Fräulein of the name of Pezzeril. Zat bad [Pg 496] fe-loe you knock worse than they knock you bring her from England with a heap of lies, and make sham to marry her; then he throw her off, and drive long black stick through her brother, because he haf desire of too moosh money. Englishmans often make mishtakes zat way."

"But I want to know about some one else, somebody different altogether, somebody who never thinks of money——"

"Ach zen, what fool can it be? Sometimes leetle gal not think of money; but boys do, vimmen do, men obliged to follow zem."

"Nonsense, doctor! The men set the example. But you know well enough what I want to know. I want to know where I am, and all about it."

The German came over and looked at me, and turned up one of my eyelids, and then did the same to the other, while he blew his smoke over his shoulder; and then he said "No fear. Shorge, you are a brick, and your prain go the way to belong to him. One leetle drop I give you shoost to clear both ears, and zen I tell you everyzing."

O double-dyed villain! With my usual faith, I accepted and made the most of his kind offering; and when I awoke again where was he? Perhaps in a boat at the mouth of the Rion, listening for the mill-wheels of a paddle-steamer to grind the slow grit of distance. For a telegram had reached Karthlos that the vegetable Earl, the good Melladew, lay at the last twist of our mortal coil internal, through travail on a bicycle with a County Council lecturer who had taken crab-apples to be synonymous with crabs.

When this abandonment was first brought home to me, my behaviour was not what it should have been. We are all too apt to suppose ourselves neglected, and doubly so when the system has been lowered, and the action of the heart restricted. To my shame I confess that a miserable pessimism—such as manhood should scorn on its own behalf, even without higher thoughts to lead it—invaded and began to vanquish me.

"What is the good of anything? All nature is cruelty; all life a curse. Every one for himself, and for none of us a God. Bitterness, and contempt of mankind, and a reckless fight for one's own hand,— [Pg 497] those are the only solid things black destiny has left us. There is no choice before us. As for sense of duty, or the stuff we call honour, or patriotism, or the absurdity called love——"

"My dear young friend, my directions are precise and I cannot depart from them. You may talk as much as you like about flowers, or food, or sport, or the hills and valleys, or anything in fact that you know anything about. And while you do that, you may refresh yourself and grow stronger and stronger with these good things here." Sûr Imar, who had risen from behind a curtain, pointed to a table which was laden with fine import of exceedingly attractive fragrance. "On the other hand, if you insist upon wandering into difficult and unpleasant subjects, which no man has ever yet made head or tail of, my orders are to anticipate the inevitable injury to the poor head and enfeebled system by prompt administration of these two doses." My host laid his hands upon a large flat bottle nearly full, but with room below the cork to shake up a profoundity of horrors at the bottom, and a box of pills as big as bullets. But before he could approach me, my heart and stomach, and every other organ that can influence opinion underwent a fundamental change.

"I did not mean it. You must make allowance. Only think of what has been done to me. Sûr Imar, you are not a small minded man. You can see how a fellow gets driven to sing out. Emptiness must bear a great deal of the blame. I entreat you to look at the matter largely. I am ready to vow that the world is good, and everything contained in it, except—except that bottle, and that box."

"Hasty conversions are not worth much. But from you, George, we accept anything. I hope to confirm you in the better faith, with these little proofs that the world produces one or two things not entirely bad; and after that, somebody—well, never mind, unless you are inclined to be amiable."

The chief was now in full Lesghian dress, a very magnificent affair to look at, stately, and graceful, and impressive; but he proved himself worthy of apparel even grander, by putting away all disrelishing sights, and waiting upon me like a hospital nurse, until I could compass not a dainty morsel more, and then he said, "Shut your eyes, and perhaps you will have a little dream." [Pg 498]

Was it a little dream? If so, I pray you tell me of a great one. Expecting nothing I lay back upon the quiet pillows, quite content, as young men are—for age destroys that comfort—to fancy that the world is good, and governed by a gentle Lord who waves a hand when we drop our eyes, that we may try to look up again. When the pride of strength is crushed, and violence of the will lies low, and a man is able to take himself at his proper insignificance, sometimes a little flow of calm glides in upon his nature, so that all is soft and bright, and his undulations multiply the silver and gold of heaven.

For behold, as I was gazing with a sweet and tranquil wonder, caring not to enquire even where I was, or who I was, but taking as it came to me the good-will of the time, and welcome of the friendly air—behold there came (as it were a vision, not to be enquired into, but accepted with the smiles of sleep) the form and face that had never left me,—though never could I see them clearly,—the presence without which my own presentment was all absence.

It was not for me to be certain yet, played with as I had been by visions that cry advantage of the brain, when even a pennyweight thereof is gone; neither was I clear enough to indulge in bright aerial doubt, as adolescent genius may. All I knew was "here I am;" and nature needed no more proof, when I had given myself a substantial pinch. "Is there any one here or there at all?" I seemed to say, but could not be sure of uttering or thinking anything.

Then, as sure as I am sitting here this day, the last thing that ever I could have believed was done concerning me and to me. Dariel came, and I knew nothing, except that here was Dariel. I feared to look direct, or even glance as if I meant it, being now little more than a lump of patches, with gingery tufts among them; and fool enough in my heart to think that love would be ashamed of me. I cannot say another word to teach any one who does not know, or do good to one who does. At such a time is there any man, or even any woman, who notices the tint of cheeks, the curve of

lips, and eyebrows, the guidance of the breath, or even the quick and tremulous enquiries, and lingering watches of the eye? My love was looking at me thus, with a sad and piteous misgiving, whether there might be any hope that I was large of heart as she was,—for now she felt it trembling,—and yet with some cold arm of pride and maiden fear thrown round it, to hold it back from being offered till it had been asked for. And I was looking at my love, with nothing but abasement, that anything I had ever done could make her feel afraid of me; and yet with some victorious hope that it was because she loved me. [Pg 499]

"Yes, I do, I do," she said, as if she saw the very thing I wanted to be sure of. "With all my heart I do. But how shall I make you believe it? After all that I have done, how can you ever believe it?"

This made me look about and wonder; for all I wanted was her voice,—to listen to its soft sweet tones, and feel that it was full of kindness, and know that it was meant for me; and then to see the smile perhaps that came so often with her words, and never failed to follow them if ever they forgot themselves.

"You are not to me as you were; you think me of no value now, because I have not been as true, and obstinate of truth against all signs and symptoms and testimony, as an English lady would have been. If you have in your mind decided so to estimate me, there is nothing more for me to say. Only that you must not think, because you will not let me show it, that I am base enough not to feel the wonderful things you have done for us. For me it is nothing, for I am not worth it; but for my father, and my brother, and for stopping cruel wickedness,—and now they have nearly killed you, so that you do not even know me."

She had tried to make her meaning clear, by keeping herself a good way off, and looking at the mountains more than me, and speaking as if her words came one by one from some type-writer; until the thought of my mishap and long disablement brought her near. Then I saw how she was trembling, and withdrawing her hands to hide it, and striving to make her eyelids proof against the shower inside them. With that the power of my love arose, and I said, "Dariel, look at me."

"It is impossible any more, after all that I have done."

Even while she spoke she did the impossible thing to such effect that I partook of the miracle. It seemed to me, as I met that soft deep gaze of boundless love and hope, as if Heaven had now so gifted and endowed me with the richest wealth, that humble as my powers were, henceforth I could do anything. [Pg 500]

"I am afraid, I am afraid," she whispered, as she saw my joy. "Love of my heart, it is not right that you should care for me any more. It is right for me to love you, and to be your slave for ever. But for you to hate me, to hate the Dariel you loved once, because she so requited you. Here you have been worse than dead, worse than dead for weeks and weeks, after saving all our lives! Through whom? Through me, that could not trust you, but measured you by my paltry self. But now I know all from that sly traitor who sent the letter to her wicked brother. Alas, how wicked I am, too, when he is dead, and she—oh, George, I ought to hate her, but I cannot, because of her misfortunes! Tell me, George, do you feel like that? Do you feel that you ought to hate me, because I have destroyed your poor, poor mind?"

"Well, perhaps I shall, when you have done it. But not till then, my Dariel. And I think that Dariel owes me something for her compliment to my intellect."

"Hush! My orders are to keep you perfectly quiet and stupid. I like that very much, because it appears so soft and easy. But I must not take advantage,—hush! You want to talk; it is not right."

She laid one sweet soft finger on my lips, and when I closed them, obedience had its due reward; such as is well known to those who have been true and faithful, through every doubt and trouble, to the one they love better than themselves.

"I am the master now," she said, "and I shall make the love to you, and you will have to put up with it; because you are so helpless, and because I have robbed you of all chance of doing it to me, when you could. But one thing I shall insist upon,—you must not want to know anything about yourself, or even me, or anything that you can think of, until your poor mind restores itself."

Then I said a thing worthy of Tom Erricker, "I will leave myself in Dariel's hands, if she will take me into her arms sometimes." [Pg 501]

* * * * * * * * *

Being so treated I should have shamed England among races who think well of her, if I had allowed a mere knock on the head to dwell too much upon my mind. Strogue came to look at me, and spoke with his usual lofty confidence.

"My son, you have done well and wisely. I fell among a tribe on the borders of Thibet, who make a point of taking out a piece about the size of half a crown from the skull of every strong male infant. The folly of the earth goes out, and the wisdom of the air comes in, according to their traditions. But I was not allowed to verify their views, and I found more vigour than wisdom there, for they kicked me over their border. But you may hope the best. Who knows? You may begin to say something good at last, and we shall know how you got it."

This was all very well for him, who had not received a single scratch, and was living now in

clover. Let good friends try things for themselves, and comfort us with their own distress. "Optimism" is a lovely gift, and comes direct from Heaven, chiefly when the sun shines on ourselves. But Strogue never listened to argument. "You are the luckiest fellow," he proceeded, "that I have ever come across. Here you have had your sister crying over you for days and days, putting her husband on the shelf, although he is made of money; and then the best doctor in the world, the only one that ever did any good; and now you have the loveliest girl ever seen waiting upon you hand and foot; and more than all without a bit of pain, without even knowing it, you are made a wise man for the rest of your life, at the age of six-and-twenty. Stop out here, my boy, stop out here. Your father will have heaps of money now, from your brother's grand discovery. Sûr Imar has made up his mind to keep 'Farmer George' for the coffee-growing; you can shoot all sorts of mountain game, and people the Terek and the Kur with salmon, and winter at Tiflis or Patigorsk."

As yet I was not in a clear condition to care where I was, or even to enquire at all about it, so long as the one my whole heart looked for came for it to dwell with every day. But gradually (I know [Pg 502] not how, and probably none can tell me) a power, almost as strong as love of the finest and sweetest of our kind, began to grow in my heavy nature. Everything is now explained, even when a man knocks his brother on the head, as a piece of hereditary tendency. To enter that plea appears to me to cast an ungraceful reproach upon those who have gone before us and done their best according to their lights which we disparage, and without receiving any credit for the wonderful goodness we derive from them. Let me blame no one but myself for that unreasonable pining and hankering for my native land.

"Look at the glory of the sky, look at the mountains and the woods," several people said to me, who never looked twice at them when they could smell their dinner; "look at the grand peaks robed with snow! Can you see anything like that in England?"

"No. But I can feel the things I see there," I used to answer meekly; "there may be little grandeur in them, but I love the things I know."

Moreover it came into my jarred and worried mind, that the gentle satisfaction—the only solid form ever taken by human happiness—is seldom or perhaps never to be found, when nature is too great around us. We see perpetual change of form and colour, and a fleeting majesty, and possibly our puny selves are incited to hopeless rivalry. Or even if there be nought in that, the sense of danger and wild elements and powers altogether beyond our control is at enmity with placid thought and the quiet course of duties; so that it is a sweeter thing, at any rate for an Englishman, to watch the plough on a gentle slope, or the cows in a meadow with their hind legs spread ready for the milking-pail, or the harvest-waggon coming to the rick, than to gaze at all the rugged grandeur of the Alps or Caucasus.

"My dear friend," Sûr Imar said, when I tried to make him see it so, "you were not born here, but I was; and that makes all the difference. I see no more of majesty, or menace, or sublime oppression, when I look at a peak growing up against the sky, than you find in a tall poplar-tree. And behold how calm is your Captain Strogue, a man of the world, who takes nothing amiss."

"Because he has no strict sense of right. He will do what he thinks honourable, which every man [Pg 503] judges by his own side-lights. Forgive me, Sûr Imar, for speaking so. You have your own standard, and you keep to it; and it is as much higher than mine, as Kazbek is than a Surrey hill."

"There you are wrong," he answered gently; "the proof is always in the practice. And I am proving myself as selfish, and as thoroughly ungrateful, as if I had always been prosperous. George, you know too well what I mean. Through you alone, and your wonderful"—it would not become me to repeat all he said—"I now have not only my life and my rights, but also a very grand son of my own, whose nature is that of the sweet one I destroyed; and soon he will help me in the work I hope to do. Yet I am so mean and small, that I grudge you the one love of your life, if you insist upon taking her away."

For a moment, as I looked at him, and perceived the sparkle of tears in his eyes, although his voice was clear and firm, it came home to my heart that here was a contest of generosity, wherein it would be ignoble of me not to show some valiance. But a sense of yearning, and perpetual loneliness, and an empty life, coupled with a doubt of my duty to the Power which has ordained true love, proved too much for my nobility.

"If you really think, Sûr Imar," I began with a dismal voice, "if you can reconcile it with your duty as a father to keep your dear child all to yourself—for she has vowed, I may tell you that, fifty times she has pledged herself never to have any one but me—and of course I know that I am poor." This was very mean of me, and I never meant to say it; but love is mean, as well as grand.

"Then let us settle it this way," he answered, with a proud paternal smile: "I have been so long in England that I will follow English usages. Let us leave it to the lady. I will send for Dariel, and she shall choose between us."

"I pray you not. It would be such a pain and trial to her."

As I spoke, he looked at me with a warmth of true affection.

"George, you love her even more than her own father does," he said; "you deserve a decision in [Pg 504] your favour. But I doubt whether you will get it. If you do, I resign without conditions. But poverty there need be none, unless you insist upon it. Mr. Stoneman, your brother-in-law,

entreats me to accept £10,000 for the valley of St. Winifred. Three railway companies there are, according to his account of it, railing and raving at one another for the possession of that part of Surrey. They all declare that such a line can never pay for making, but they would spend their last shilling upon it, rather than see either of the others there. Mr. Stoneman is in what you call the bench, the chair, the throne of the wealthiest of the three; and if he can make purchase of that track, the rivals will have no chance to pass. I have felt much scruple about accepting so much for land that cost me so little; the justice of the matter is not clear to me as a stranger to the English equity."

"Oh, Sûr Imar," I exclaimed with great surprise, "the largest and noblest of all the Angels, if he got the whip-hand of a Railway Company, would be compelled by self-respect to take it out of them, to their last penny."

"So I have been told on every side," the Lesghian chief replied with calm decision; "but I waited for you to confirm it, George. I perceive that they are the civilised form of the bandit. Well, that sum which seems considerable to us, though in England you think nothing of it, will pass at once to my Dariel, as the strict justice of the case demands. Of that she knows nothing, and if she knew it, her decision would be just the same. But here she comes, as I arranged."

The chief window of the sitting-room to which I was now promoted faced westward over the table-rock on which the great house stood; and further to the west, beyond deep chasms and dark precipices, arose a mighty Tau, the rival of Kazbek in this eastern range, and mantled with perpetual snow. This being flushed with ruddy thrills from the glances of the evening sun shed a rich tint through the room, as if the rugged mountains vied with heaven to bring their sweet Princess a tribute of bright roses. Then as she passed the black walnut panels, which looked as old as the ark itself, I took it for a good omen that she wore a dress which I had praised; not such [Pg 505] a thing as we see here, but graceful, elegant, flowing softly, docile, ductile, and yet expressive, simple though full of harmonious contrasts, zealous—if there were any hope of that—to enhance the beauty it contained, as a great poet's thoughts are clothed sometimes in language that transcends themselves.

She glanced at me as I rose, for now I could stand once more without giddiness, and by that passing glance she told me that she knew the time was come, when her long choice must be made. Then she went on to her father's side, and took both his hands and looked at him, as if there was nobody else to look at.

Over her bowed head he gave me a smile, which I interpreted—"Behold the vanity of human wishes! Be satisfied with Nature's laws. A dear child loves her father best. Young men may long to rob him; but the Lord forbids it. I grieve for you. But how could it be otherwise?"

There was nothing more for me to say. I made the best bow of which a true-born British back is capable; and with all the dignity left in me by the beating of my foolish heart, I walked away from both of them towards a little door which opened on a quiet gallery, where I might sit down and think it over with myself alone.

But before I could turn the handle, trembling arms were round my neck, and a quivering breast arose to mine, and a face that shone with rolling tears looked up for me to comfort it, and sweet lips whispered close to mine—"My love, could you believe it?"

Then I felt myself all right again. The strength that had been shattered by big Osset clubs, and long prostration, lonely wanderings of bloodless brain, feeble doubts of woman's truth, and the crush of furious doctors, all flowed back, and filled my heart and life with the joy of this great love.

I led his beautiful daughter back to Sûr Imar, and I said—"You see."

"Yes, I see," he answered softly. "And there is no more to be said."

"'Yes, I see,' he answered softly."

[Pg 506]

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