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by James Payn**

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MIRK ABBEY,

By James Payn

**The Author of "Lost Sir Massengberd;" "the Clyffards Of Glyffe;" etc.,
etc.**

In Three Volumes. Vol. III.

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CHAPTER I. MADAME DE CASTELLAN.

UPON the fourth day after the reception of her Paris letter, my Lady had to leave Mirk for town on business connected with Walter's affairs—for, after all, she cannot permit his elder brother to bear the whole brunt of these unexpected expenses. Her visit was to the family lawyer, and she went alone save for the attendance of Mistress Forest. Under any circumstances, she would rather it were thus, she repeats, even if the preparations going on at Mirk did not take up so fully Sir Richard's time, and render his accompanying her out of the question. For this Coming of Age was a case wherein surely a man might busy himself even though the whole affair was to be held in his own honour; the very name of Lisgard being in a manner at stake, and obnoxious to censure, if everything should not be in a fitting scale and perfect of its kind; nay (though certainly more remotely), might not the Great Principle of Territorial Aristocracy have been almost said to be upon its trial upon the coming occasion? The business must have been pressing indeed, remarked the baronet a little pointedly, that took the mistress of Mirk from home at such an important epoch; and he thought in his heart that his mother might have put off this signature of a few parchments until after the fête-day. However, it was plain that my Lady considered the call to town imperative, since she started thither upon the very morning of the day on which her old friend Madame de Castellan had appointed to reach Belcomb; and although she hoped to be able to return on the ensuing afternoon, in company with Walter and his wife, whose marriage had been in the meantime publicly announced, it was not certain that her affairs could be transacted within such time as would permit her to do so. And so it unfortunately turned out. About an hour after luncheon, the carriage having been despatched from the Abbey to the Dalwynch station just so long as would admit of its return with its expected inmates, the sound of wheels was heard in the avenue, and both Sir Richard and Letty felt the colour come into their cheeks. Each imagined that it was the Return of the Prodigal (in this case rendered more embarrassing by the fact of his bringing his wife with him). Suppose their mother should have been prevented from accompanying Captain and Mrs Lisgard! How very awkward and disconcerting would this first interview be; and especially for the poor baronet, who had never seen Rose, at least to his own knowledge, as a married woman. His brother's bride, too! Sir Richard rather repented for that minute or two that he had made such a point of the young couple returning to Mirk so soon. He felt quite grateful to his sister when she placed her hand upon his arm, and whispered: "Had we not better go out to meet them, Richard?" At any other time, he would perhaps have resented her offer to share the duties of host; for was it not his place, and his alone, to bid guests welcome to Mirk Abbey? But upon this occasion he accepted it gladly; and it was lucky for him he did.

Instead of the gay barouche and glistening steeds from his own stables, he beheld, when he reached the hall steps, the Dalwynch fly—for the little town only boasted of one such conveyance—a yellow single-seated machine, which had once been proud to call itself a post-chaise, and been whirled through the air by panting wheelers and leaders; but it was now dragged along by animals so melancholy and slow, that but for their colour and shortness of tail, they might have been hearse-horses; while the driver had a lugubrious expression too, as befitted one who felt that he should never buckle on his single spur again, or crack his whip in triumph, as he came up the street of the county town at a hand-gallop. But the tenant of this vehicle was a far more old-world-looking object than itself or its belongings; a very ancient and silver-haired lady, looking almost double even as she sat, and only able, painfully, to alight from her carriage by aid of Mr Robert's arm and a crutched stick. Her complexion was an agreeable gingerbread; she had not above three teeth, which, however, were very white ones, left in either jaw; and her head shook from side to side with the palsy of extreme old age. But despite these disadvantages, she had by no means an unpleasant expression; and Sir Richard, with his fete-day running in his head, was somehow reminded of one of those beneficent old fairies, who, at considerable personal inconvenience, used to make a point of being present at the christening, marriage, and other important occasions in the life of the young prince with whose royal mother they had been such great friends in years gone by. He hurried down the steps to offer his arm to this strange visitor, and bid her respectful welcome.

"Madame de Castellan, for I think it can be no one else," said he; "it is most kind of you to treat us thus. We ought to have been at Belcomb ourselves by this time, instead of your being here, and indeed we should have been there yesterday, had my mother been at home; but important business has taken her to London, and I much regret to say that she has not even yet returned, although we are expecting her every minute."

Either the exertion of alighting, or the reception of this unexpected news, set the poor old lady shaking to that degree, that it seemed a wonder that she did not shake to pieces. She fell to kissing Letty, doubtless partly from affection, but also perhaps as an excuse for not immediately commencing the ascent of those dreadful stairs.

"You don't either of you remember me, I dare say," mumbled she in the French tongue.

Sir Richard smiled and bowed, as being the safest reply he could frame to a question of which he understood nothing.

"Ah, Heaven, he does!" cried the old lady with evident delight. "That is an excellent young man; and yet he

was but a very little boy. And Miss Letty? No, she does not remember—how should she? she was too young! And Walter—the pretty boy, so *spirituel*, with his black velvet frock and short sleeves tied with scarlet ribbon—where was he? What! grown up and married? Was it possible! How time had flown; alas, alas! And the good Dr Haldane and his wife, was he here as much as usual? clever, sarcastic little gentleman!”

Not even the allusions to their own childhood gave Richard and his sister so vast a notion of the time that had elapsed since Madame de Castellan's previous visit to the Abbey, as this last remark of hers; for the occurrence which had shut out the good doctor from the Abbey had happened so long ago that it was almost legendary; and they were so accustomed to his absence, that they could not picture to themselves the state of things to which this patriarchal old lady referred as a matter of course. As for Mrs Haldane, they had heard of the existence of such a person, and that was all. That good woman had not made much noise in the world when she was alive, and she had been among the Silent now for more than eleven years. How far back were the explanations to begin, thought Letty and her brother, that would make this female Rip Van Winkle *au fait* with the present order of things?

But the old Frenchwoman was fortunately not nearly so anxious to be answered as she was to talk, a feat which she accomplished with much more distinctness than could have been expected, notwithstanding that Sir Richard subsequently ascribed to her paucity of teeth the fact that he only understood about two words out of her every five.

It was very amusing to watch the poor young baronet listening with fruitless diligence to her rapid syllables, and then turning an imploring glance upon his sister and sworn interpreter for aid and rescue. He was obliged upon two occasions to frame some halting reply with his own lips; once when Madame openly complimented him upon his good looks and gallant bearing; and secondly, when she thanked him for the readiness with which he had placed the cottage at Belcomb at her disposal; but for the rest, the burden of conversation rested upon Letty.

“And how is Marie—how is the good Marie, who was to your dear mamma like a servant and a sister in one?” asked the old lady, when they had got her with some difficulty into the drawing-room.

“She is well, Madame; but in some trouble about a certain suitor, whom” (here she pouted a little) “Sir Richard here considers to be undesirable.”

Madame raised her rather shaggy eyebrows, and looked towards the young baronet as if for an explanation. He knew that they were speaking of Mistress Forest, and that was all.

“An admirable person,” said he earnestly; “most trustworthy in every way. We have all cause to be more than satisfied.”

“Ah, then he does not object after all!” exclaimed Madame triumphantly. “And Master Walter—what sort of a wife has he got? Beautiful? That is well; it would be a pity if it were otherwise. And clever? Excellent! And also good, I hope?”

“Well, Madame, she will be here in a minute, so that you may judge for yourself,” answered Letty smiling, but by no means displeased to hear the crunch of carriage-wheels upon the gravel of the terraced drive. These home questions concerning her new sister-in-law were getting rather difficult to answer, and especially in Richard's presence.

“Will your mother be with them?” inquired Madame, gathering from the faces of her companions, rather than from any sound which could have reached her tardy ears, that the arrival of those expected was imminent.

“As I said before, Madame, I cannot promise; but I sincerely trust, for your sake—as, indeed, for her own—that it may be so. I am sure mamma will deeply grieve to have missed you.”

The next moment, Captain and Mrs Lisgard were announced. Richard walked straight up to Rose, and taking her hand in his best Sir Roger de Coverley manner, bade her frank but stately welcome. Then, “How are you, Walter?” said he, giving his brother's fingers an earnest squeeze, and simulating cordiality all he could. “Here is a very old friend of our mother's, Madame de Castellan, who remembers you in a velvet frock with short sleeves and cherry-coloured ribbons.”

For the first time, Sir Richard blessed this old lady's presence, which was so greatly mitigating to him the difficulties of this dreaded interview; but Walter appeared to be but little embarrassed; less so, indeed, than Madame herself, who, overcome, doubtless, by the strong resemblance to his mother in the young man now presented to her, began to tremble again almost as much as she had done a while ago.

“And this is Master Walter,” said she in broken tones. “I think I should have known that without any introduction.” Here she held him with both her hands at arms' length. “I suppose, now, you do not remember me at all?”

“Madame,” returned the young man in bad French, but briskly enough, and with a very pleasant smile, “I cannot say I do. Little folks in velvet frocks have very bad memories. But I have often heard my dear mother speak of you most affectionately; indeed, she wrote to me of your expected arrival at Belcomb with greater pleasure than I have known her to take in anything for years.”

“Except your marriage, Mister the Captain, eh?” returned the old lady archly. “Come, introduce me to your lovely bride. Ah, Heaven, what a young couple! Well, I like to see that—I who might be the great-grandmother of both of you.—How are you, Madame Walter? What do they call you? Rose! Ah, a charming name.”

But though the name was so charming, and the young lady was so lovely, Madame de Castellan did not take her to her arms and embrace her as she had taken Letty. Indeed, if it was possible for Rose to look disconcerted, she would have done so now, as she stood with cast-down eyes, exposed to the same steady scrutiny as her husband had just been subjected to; but there was by no means so much affection in the old lady's gaze on this occasion. When she had regarded her sufficiently, she dismissed her with a patronising tap upon the head, and once more addressed herself to Walter. “And what have you done with your mamma, sir?”

“I have done nothing, Madame,” answered he laughing. “She has never given me the chance of making away with her, if it is of that you suspect me; for she never came to see us in town at all. We were to meet at the station this morning, but she was not there. I am afraid, therefore—for she dislikes travelling at night—

that we shall not see her before this time to-morrow."

Master Walter was in very different cue from that in which we saw him last. The burden of his difficulties had been lifted from his shoulders, at all events for the present. He had been saved at least from ruin, and that, though he might be henceforth compelled to live the life of a poor man, was a matter of congratulation; just as one is thankful, in shipwreck upon the desolate seas, to land on even a barren rock. His spirits were always buoyant, and they were now asserting themselves after a period of severest pressure. In short, Master Walter was himself again—good-humoured, graceful, and as desirous as well fitted to please all with whom he came into contact. It was plain that he had made a complete conquest of this old Frenchwoman.

"And Marie, have you hidden *her* anywhere, you naughty boy?"

"Not I, Madame. If you saw her, you would understand that she is not easily hidden. You remember her plump, I daresay; but plump is now no word for her. Even love—and she is love-sick, poor thing, at five-and-forty, or so—does not render her less solid."

"Ah, wicked, to laugh at Love!" replied the old lady, holding up a reproving finger, of whose shape and whiteness she was evidently proud, and not altogether without reason; "and worse still, to laugh at Marie. I love that dear Mistress Forest; and mind you, tell mamma, if ever she parts with her, that she is to come straight to me. What would I not give for a waiting-maid like that—devoted, prudent, to whom I could confide my little love-affairs!—Why do you laugh, rude children? It is, I see, time that I should go.—Seriously," continued she, when the chorus of dissatisfaction had died away (for every one except, perhaps, Rose, was pleased with this sprightly old lady, and all felt her presence to be, under the circumstances, an immense relief), "I must be going home at once.—Thank you kindly, Sir Richard, but to stay to dinner is impossible. The night-air, at my time of life—more even than 'five-or-forty or so, Mister the Captain—is very unwholesome. You must all come and lunch with me shortly A *fête champêtre* upon the—what is it you call it?—Lisgard Folly. You will give this kiss to mamma for me, Miss Letty, and tell her I must see her to-morrow—no, the day after, for she will be tired. I will not have any of you young people on that day. I shall wish to talk to her alone about so many things. Will you please to ring for my—that droll conveyance which you call *mouche*—'fly?'—Adieu, Madame Walter; take care of your handsome husband, for I have fallen in love with him.—Adieu to you, naughty boy.—Now, Sir Richard, if you will give me your arm, by the time we get to the front door, and down these dreadful steps, the *mouche* will be at the door, though he walk slow, as though he had just escaped out of treacle."

As the pair made their way to the hall, at the pace of chief-mourners, Madame de Castellan, to Richard's surprise and joy, began, for the first time, to speak in broken English. "Your mother is very fond of you all," said she; "I hope you are fond of her."

"I hope so indeed, Madame: we should be very ungrateful if we were not."

"That is well, young man. Be good to her, for our mothers are obliged to leave us, you know, long before we go ourselves."

"God forbid, Madame, that we should lose her these many years," answered the baronet fervently.

"Yes, yes; but mind this," answered the old lady testily, as she climbed into the *mouche*, "that if Mistress Forest should want a place—here am I at Belcomb, very glad to receive her. Good-bye."

Sir Richard, thunder-struck, stared at the slowly-departing vehicle like one in a dream. "I never heard such a speech," soliloquised he—"never. Can that old harridan be really calculating upon my mother's death giving her a new lady's-maid? How selfish is extreme old age! I could not have believed it possible. How it would have distressed mamma, could she have heard her. And yet but for that speech, she seemed an affectionate and kindly old creature enough. I have often heard that Frenchwomen have no hearts, but only manners—and I suppose that so it is."

CHAPTER II. THE PARTIE QUARRÉ.

AS Walter had predicted, my Lady did not return to Mirk by the evening train, and scarcely under any circumstances could her absence have been more keenly felt. The four young folks at home were by no means so socially comfortable as a *partie quarré* is proverbially said to be. They felt themselves embarrassed even when all together; but when the couples were left alone, the gentlemen over the dessert, and the ladies in the drawing-room, their position was tenfold more awkward. If they had not been so nearly connected, the one might have taken refuge in conversation about the weather or politics, and the other in books or bonnet-shapes; but one of the many disadvantages of near relationship is, that you are cut off from all havens of that sort. The device is too transparent to be adopted or acquiesced in—each was conscious that the other was thinking of all sorts of unpleasant things, and wishing his companion at Jericho—or York at least. The temperature was so mild that there was not even a fire to poke.

"You remember this claret, Walter, I dare say."

"Yes; did not our father reckon it the next best in his cellar to that of the Comet year?" &c., &c.

But it struck them both that an absence of a few days from the Abbey was not likely to produce forgetfulness upon this particular point more than upon any other. Sir Richard did not venture to propose a cigar in the smoking-room; they sat on either side of the empty grate making a great pretence of enjoying their wine (which might have been ginger-beer, for any gratification it afforded them) and racking their brains for something to say. At last Walter blurted out with a great show of frankness: "Richard, you were quite right about that fellow Derrick; I wish I had taken your view of the man; he has let me in for a good deal

of money this Derby."

"I am sorry for that," returned the other, with genuine pleasure. "Yes, I knew he was a bad lot. I hope, however, he has now left Mirk for good and all."

"No; he'll come back after Mary Forest, I have no doubt; and I am afraid I was partly to blame in helping him in that quarter. But he knows what I think of him now."

"I am glad of it," said the baronet drily.

"Nice, conciliating, agreeable companion this is," soliloquised Walter: "I think I see myself making any second admission of having been wrong where he was right." His self-humiliation, however, had not been altogether without an object.

"Yes; I lost a considerable sum—that is, considerable for me—through this gentleman from Cariboo," continued the captain. "It is all in train for being settled—I am not going to ask you, Richard, for another shilling. I am sure you have been already extremely generous—very much so. But the money can't be paid for a few months; and there is one rascal—an infernal Jew fellow—who, instead of replying to my letter, offering him very handsome terms, I am sure, has had the impertinence, I see, to write to mamma."

"A Jew fellow write to *my* mother!" exclaimed Sir Richard, with an indignant emphasis upon the personal pronoun.

"I am afraid so. I am almost sure I recognise his horrid handwriting upon this envelope."

He took down one of several letters upon the mantel-piece that had arrived that morning for the mistress of the house, and were awaiting her return.

"You see he knows I'm under age, and he thinks to frighten one's people into immediate payment by threatening all sorts of things which he cannot really put into effect, but which will alarm mamma very much indeed. It's a common trick."

"Oh, indeed; I am not acquainted with the ways of such people myself. And what is it you propose to do, Walter?"

"Well, I don't think my mother should see that letter at all. He is not a sort of person—the beggar, you see, spells 'Abbey' without an *e*—for a lady to have anything to do with."

"Nor a gentleman either, as I should think," observed the baronet severely. "But I do not perceive how we can prevent this mischief. You cannot open the letter, nor destroy it, of course."

"No, of course not," assented Walter, though with the air of a person who had only been very recently convinced of the impossibility.

Sir Richard took the objectionable missive between his finger and thumb. *To the Honorable Lady Lisgard, Mirk Abby, Dalwynch.*

What a deal of trouble this fellow Walter was causing! Of course, one did not wish one's brother any harm, but what a nice thing it would be if one could get him some appointment in the Colonies. New Zealand was said to be very salubrious, and had an excellently conducted church establishment: the last mail, too, had brought home (for the eleventh time) the joyful news that the Maories were finally subjugated.

"A perfect savage," observed Walter, with reference to Mr Moss Welcher Abrahams.

"And yet with some good points," argued the baronet, his thoughts still lingering in the antipodes.

"I'm hanged if I ever heard of them, then," replied his brother with irritation. "He's a black-leg and a usurer. I'd never have bet with such an infernal scoundrel, only that he offered me half a point more than the odds."

"Ah," returned Sir Richard, with all the expressiveness that is attributed to the "Ugh" of the North American Indian. "Suppose we join the ladies."

I do not pretend to narrate how Rose and Letty had passed their time since dinner. No grown-up male—with the exception, perhaps, of Mr Anthony Trollope, whom I have heard ladies say has actually described the thing—can picture the mysteries that take place in the drawingroom before the gentlemen come in. Do they tell stories, I wonder, like the folks in the dining-room? Now and then something incidentally crops up which induces me to think they do; but there is no absolute proof. When I was a very little boy, and there chanced to be a dinner-party at home, after having had my half-glass of wine—"up to the cut," I remember, was the niggardly phrase—it was my invariable custom to leave the dining-room when the ladies did; and well I recollect how my elder brother used playfully to flick my unprotected legs with his dinner-napkin, as I closed the petticoated procession. But memory often retains what is least worth keeping, and loses that which is truly valuable. If I had only known that it would be my future mission to write stories, I should doubtless have not so neglected my opportunities in the drawingroom. But at that time I looked forward to be a merchant engaged in the diamond business, and realising thousands of purses of sequins by traffic with the natives of Bagdad and Bassorah. Indeed, upon these very after-dinner occasions I used to be taken upon somebody's lap, and entertained with anecdotes of that charming profession, the members of which were exposed to no vulgar bankruptcies; but if they escaped from the mighty Roc (which was a bird) and from the loadstone island (which drew all the nails out of their argosies), were certain to live happy ever afterwards with some beautiful princess, who did not scorn to ally herself with trade. Alas! the tongue is withered now that spoke such magic, and the kind hand that fondled my childish curls is dissolved in dust; and it is like enough that all the rest of the gay company is dead except that little boy. No; I remember nothing of it, except that the older ladies, and especially the married ones, used to herd together, and interchange what I took to be secret and important communications; and that the young ones seemed to get after a while a little tired of one another (notwithstanding that they were particularly civil and affectionate), and turned expectant glances toward the door.

They could not, however, have been more pleased to see the gentlemen than Rose and Letty were upon that evening in Mirk drawing-room to welcome the two brothers. Much as women are praised for their superior tact, it is my humble opinion that they possess less of it than ourselves. Their gentleness, beauty, and general attractiveness enable them, it is true, to render certain rough places tolerably smooth—nay, some almost

impregnable passes very practicable; but considering their great advantages, they often signally fail in a piece of social engineering, the difficulties of which almost any man would have managed to evade. They prefer cutting a tunnel through granite to deviating a hairbreadth from the line they have marked out for themselves. How often has one sat on tenter-hooks, listening to a woman who raises a domestic breeze to storm, when anybody but herself (who has yet been married to the man a score of years) can perceive both drum and cone mast-high in her husband's face and manner; nay, when you, the spectator, have marked half-a-dozen openings—only she *will* charge with her head down in that foolish manner—by which she could have approached her consort's heart in the course of discussion, and got all she wanted, and yet let him keep his temper. When a *Man* happens to have some feminine gifts, tenderness, grace, beauty—like Walter Lisgard, for instance—what power of pleasing, what avoidance of all subjects of *displeasure*, he almost always exhibits, notwithstanding his masculine selfishness. It is very possible, indeed, that this young dragoon may not have captivated my readers; but that is because it is not possible to convey, by any description, the attributes which make such a man so popular. Men talk of the nameless charm that hangs about some fair one, her unspeakably winning manners, and the grace “beyond expression” that pervades her being; but the influence of such a charmer is almost entirely confined to the other sex.

She cannot compel adoration from her young-lady friends: not solely because she is their successful rival, but partly because she does not possess the art of winning them. She has not the tact to conceal her superiority, to conciliate their prejudices, to win their friendship. Now, Walter Lisgard, who was of course adored by women, was almost as popular with men. There were half-a-dozen or so of people—among whom were Ralph Derrick and Arthur Haldane—who had seen him under circumstances of extreme annoyance, and had been disenchanted of the smiling kindly boy. There was Sir Richard too—but there were reasons enough why Walter should not possess his brother's good-will, and having failed to win it, it was the nature of such a man to be embarrassed in his presence. Dislike, nay even want of appreciation, will often paralyse the most agreeable of our fellow-creatures, and make them duller than those who are at all times equally tedious. But if Walter had been in Rose's place, I think he would have managed to get on better than she did in that *tête-à-tête* with her peccant sister-in-law. No woman can conceal her annoyance from its object, if that be a person of her own sex; she can only be desperately civil.

At all events, husband and brother were received by these two young ladies as though they had been their lovers; and then the tea came up, itself a diversion, which they prolonged to an inordinate limit. Who is so fortunate that he has never been compelled to Tea against Time! The dinner-hour at the Abbey, however, in consonance with ancient county habits, was a somewhat early one—six o'clock—and there was a considerable amount of evening to be got through. Sir Richard, in these terrible straits, proposed a game at whist; and the four accordingly sat down at the velvet card-table—scarcely ever used at Mirk—the gentlemen to contend for shilling points, and the ladies for postage-stamps. Mr Charles Lamb has informed us that he is inclined to think that there *may* be such a thing as *sick whist*; and if that admirable humorist had witnessed this particular rubber, he would have had his suspicions confirmed. Poor Walter thought grimly of his last experience in that way with the *Landrails*, and could not help making an estimate of how many cycles of years it would take him, with average luck, to win back the money lost upon that occasion at the present stakes. Immersed in this calculation, he made a series of infamous blunders, for which Letty, who was, of course, his partner, reproved him with that unsparing severity which this delightful science induces even in an angelic partner: it is at the whist-table that the trodden worm will turn with the most energetic writhings. Sir Richard, on the other hand (who scarcely ever ventured upon any finesse except that of Ace, Queen), was put in the highest spirits, and became as offensively triumphant as his chivalric nature would permit. Rose, poor girl, sincerely bewailed her husband's vanishing shillings, of which she knew he had no superfluity, and would have trumped her partner's best card half-a-dozen times over, had she but dared. Altogether, it was the dreariest of domestic evenings.

The morning that followed was not much better; and never did mother receive a sincerer welcome from her offspring than did Lady Lisgard upon her return. The love-light danced in her eyes for a little at their genuine enthusiasm, but it soon died out, and they all observed how tired and worn she looked, how much more white and wan than when she had started from home. If Sir Richard had had the opportunity, I almost think he would have now acted upon his brother's suggestion, and spared his mother the sight of Mr Moss Abrahams' letter. But it was too late. Letty had herself taken possession of it; and when the first greetings were over, and all had had their say about the visitor of the day before, she put it into her mother's hand along with the other missives.

“I don't know who your correspondents may be, dear mamma, but I should recommend one of them to apply to that gentleman who promises in the *Times* newspaper to teach everybody a legible hand for four-and-sixpence; and when he has done that, he might learn a little spelling, such as *A, b, ab; e, y, by*—*Abbey*.”

“I daresay it will wait till I go up stairs,” said my Lady with a faint smile; and she did not even look at it. Nay, when she had reached her room, and was alone with her maid, although she turned the letter round and round with hurried, anxious fingers, she did not open it even then, but gave it to Mistress Forest, saying piteously: “I am not sure about the handwriting. Is it his, or no, Mary?”

“It is not his, madam.”

“Thank Heaven for that!” cried my Lady, breaking the vulgar, sprawling seal, and rapidly possessing herself of the contents. “More trouble,” sighed she. “And yet, why should I sigh: this is only another reason to add to the budget in yonder desk for what I am about to do.”

“That is well, dear madam, and bravely said,” answered the waiting-maid. “It is no use to court delay. Sooner or later, the blow must fall; if not to-day, then to-morrow. If he does not write, be sure, my Lady, that he will come himself; we must make up our minds for that. He cannot go to Coveton, and see my father—which is what I feel he intends to do—without discovering all; and since that must be, the sooner he does so the better. We are now prepared for the worst—for everything, in short, except suspense.”

“That is true,” returned my Lady wearily. “Heaven help us!”

“Amen,” exclaimed Mistress Forest encouragingly; “and I both hope and believe it will.”

CHAPTER III. A JOURNEY ON FOOT.

SOME men, when crossed or "put out," take, like Sir Richard Lisgard, to whistling melodies—surely a very mild and harmless form of irritation. Others rap out a thunder-clap of an oath or two, which leaves their firmament as serene as ever. Nothing, again, can calm the wrath of some folks but pedestrian exercise; ghost-wise, they take to "walking," and gradually their angry passions exude. This last was the case with Mr Ralph Derrick, Mariner and Gold-digger.

When deeply annoyed, and some exceptional barrier existed to his throwing the weightiest substance that happened to be at hand at the head of his enemy, or burying some lethal weapon in his vitals, Ralph took to walking like the Wandering Jew. With the first stage or two, his thoughts were busy with the insult, real or imaginary, which had been put upon him; his teeth were set, his fingers clenched, his brows were corrugated; then he began to swing his loaded stick, not viciously, but after the manner of an Irishman at a fair; and eventually that calisthenic exercise, combined with the healthy influence of fresh air, restored him to that normal state of devil-may-care, which persons of charity go so far as to term, in folks of the like description, good-humour. Of course, one cannot help pitying this poor fellow, for he is one of those persons who always look much better on paper than in real life, just the reverse of which is the case with the Walter Lisgards; but as a matter of fact, he is not only a "rough customer," but a very dangerous and reckless man. Because we have seen him behave towards that graceless captain of dragoons in a very generous and high-flown manner, it is not to be supposed that he was always capable of magnanimous actions. That young gentleman had been his pet, and it had suited his mood to spoil him. A man may not only be agreeable to an individual or two, but an excellent father, or a pattern husband, and yet be a most offensive fellow-creature to you and to me. But it was certainly hard upon Ralph that the only man for whom he entertained a genuine affection, should have turned out such an ungrateful scamp. The treatment he had lately received at that young man's hands, the knavery of Mr Jack Withers, and the more than suspected collusion of his late comrade, Mr Blanquette, united to put him out of humour with the world. His previous opinions, as imported from Cariboo, before he met with Walter, that everybody was more or less of a scoundrel, had met with the amplest confirmation. He was more determined to take his own way than ever, and let them look to it that crossed him. Bitter, indeed, had been his thoughts as he had been borne along with that rabble rout on foot from Epsom Downs. Deceived by those whom he had trusted, insulted by him whom he had loved, and robbed of three-fourths of that wealth, to which he now ascribed a greater importance than ever, as the *summum bonum*, and indeed the *only* good thing that was worth gaining, he had but stopped in London a sufficient time to pack up his scanty wardrobe, then started off again on foot once more, as we have seen. Disgusted with the Turf, as with all else he had recently had to do with, he was now more than ever bent upon leading a new life—not, indeed, in a penitential sense (although some are so audacious as to aver that it *is* a kind of mortification), but, in other words, to marry. Mistress Forest was as fond of him, he thought, and with some justice, as any woman was ever likely to be; and he was resolved not to be balked of her by the machinations of Sir Richard Lisgard, or the cajolments of his mother. After the payment of all his bets, he would yet have left a sum that to one in Mary's position would seem considerable; for he could sell *Many Laws*, after his recent performance, for a great deal of money, to the half of which he rather suspected Mr Blanquette would never venture to lay claim. Yes; he would go down to the place where she had told him her father still dwelt, and would dazzle him with such offers as could scarcely fail to induce him to add the weight of his authority to his own proposals; and there being no particular hurry about the matter, and, as I have said, walking being consonant to his feelings when in wrath, Ralph Derrick had taken the road to Coveton on foot.

It was a long distance, and would have involved several days of such travel, under any circumstances, and he did not hurry himself at all. At many a wayside inn, where he stopped to drink, and found the landlord given that way, and to be good company, he stayed for the day and night, and even longer. And often he left the high-road, and took those short-cuts across country which, like "raw haste," are generally "half-sisters to delay." This was especially the case when he began to draw near the sea. Those who have passed much of their time upon that element (voluntarily), the roar of ocean attracts as the trumpet-blast the *quondam* charger, and mile after mile did Derrick stride along the cliff-top wherever it was practicable, and by the shore, notwithstanding that his indulgence in that fancy doubled his journey. When we are out of humour with our fellow-creatures, the external aspects of nature, even though we be no Poets, have often a special attraction for us; the winds of Spring—since as much has been said of those of Winter—are certainly not so unkind as man's ingratitude, and we bid them blow with a sort of soothing scorn; nor does the blue spring sky bite half so nigh as benefits forgot. It pleased Ralph Derrick to let it do its worst, and, rain or shine, he never sought shelter save when he needed drink or rest; and during this last part of his travel, he obtained them as often at some humble farmhouse as at an inn. The simple folks, who stared at his great beard, and wondered why he did not shew them what goods he had in his knapsack, like any other pedler, pleased him hugely; and when some newly-soaped and carefully-brushed bashful child would steal into his humble dining-chamber—which was the guidwife's, invariable plan of getting her dues settled, since we cannot charge for things, you know (and especially brandy), without a licence—he would take the little creature upon his knee, and give him or her his newest shilling, in addition to what was always a liberal settlement of the account. Perhaps he was practising that *rôle* of Paterfamilias which he hoped to be soon called upon to play. At all events, Ralph was by this time in high spirits; and when he was told that Coveton lay not above a dozen miles ahead of him even by the coast-line, he threw his cudgel into the air, and shouted a wild fragment of a diggers' song, to the consternation of his rustic informant.

His way lay now over a great waste of moorland, elastic to the tread, and over which the wind swept almost as unresisted as on the ocean from whence it came. Here and there, it whistled through a hare thorn, but what few trees there were had hidden themselves in sunken hollows, and stood therein huddled together, with only their shivering tops above the surface. Nothing was to be seen inland save "a level waste of rounded gray," broken now and again by a church spire or a scattered hamlet; but the seaward view was very fine. From that moorland height, you looked upon two fair islands spread like a raised map, beneath, with every hut and quarry distinctly plain, and the small white light-house standing out on its little hill like a child's toy upon its pedestal. How picturesque and sequestered they looked: how like two miniature but independent worlds, to either of which a man who had had enough and to spare of the turmoil of life might retire with some fitting mate, and peacefully end his days. Surely, thought Ralph, he had somewhere seen those two same islands before! As he stood at gaze, his thoughts went wandering over archipelagoes of garden-ground in tropic seas; over rocky islets sawn from iron-bound coasts by the jagged waves; and over mounds of sand, which the ocean had thrust back into the jaws of rivers, and suffered man to call them Land, and dwell there. But these were none of those. As he went on more slowly, searching through the long gallery of his mind for the picture which he knew was there, and half bewildered by the shifting scenes, he was startled by a noise like distant thunder. The sky was almost without a cloud, and the sea, although running high, and dashing with pettish screech against the cliffs, was not so rough but that the fishing-smacks, of which there was quite a fleet in motion, carried all sail; moreover, the thunderous sound was not upon the seaward side, but inland. A few score rapid strides in that direction made its source apparent. An enormous hole, like half-a-dozen gravel-pits in one, but deep as a mine, was gaping there; and at the bottom, whether it had tunnelled through years of patient unremitting toil, lay the churning sea. It was a gruesome sight to mark the solid earth—just where a peaceful cornfield met the moorland—thus invaded by its insidious foe, whose horrid pæan seemed to have something of malicious greed as well as exultation in it, as though it lusted to eat the heart of the round world itself away, after the same manner. "The Devil's Cauldron!" exclaimed Ralph excitedly, and then looked round him with a half-shudder, as though he had repeated the statement out of deference to a Great Local Authority, rather than initiated it of his own free-will. Yes, such was the name by which the place was known; he felt certain of that fact; but unless in sober seriousness H. S. M. himself had whispered the information, how did he ever come to be aware of it? He had certainly never been there before, in all his life; it was impossible, having once seen it, to have forgotten so abnormal as well as tremendous a scene. True, there are pits and holes in many cliffs a few yards from their edge which reach like shafts in a tunnel down to the sea; but the distance of this place from the shore might be measured by furlongs, and the pit was so large that it almost resembled a land-locked bay. A Cauldron it might well be called, where the black waters were seething and boiling even now, while in storm-time there would be such wild work as no mere witches could raise, but only the Fiend himself, their master.

Did the mad waves, finding themselves thus imprisoned, ever leap up? Yes: now he remembered all. Thirty years ago, last autumn, he had seen those islands once before from shipboard, and had had them in view for a whole day. The wind, which was dead against the vessel, had kept her off and on that dangerous coast, and eventually risen to storm, and sunk her with all on board save him alone. The last time he had seen that little light-house, it had flashed in vain its fiery warning through sheets of blinding foam. The captain had told him, hours before, what sort of shore awaited them, if ever the *North Star* should be driven upon those pitiless cliffs, on which Derrick himself was now standing; and, in particular, he had mentioned the Devil's Cauldron, which was spouting foam yonder, he said, like Leviathan, a quarter of a mile inland over the standing corn. Ralph lay down at full length upon the thymy moor, and peered over the brink of the abyss with earnest gaze, as though he could fathom its dark depths, and mark what lay beneath them. Then rising, with a sigh, he wandered on, no longer with springy tread, until presently the cliff-top became dotted with white verandaed houses, looking down upon a little bay, that ran up into the land between steep banks, well clothed with trees and shrubs; whereby he knew that he had come to his journey's end, and that this must needs be Coveton.

CHAPTER IV. COVETON

COVETON—well known to ancient coupled who took their first honeymoons half a century ago—is one of those old-fashioned sea-side places that resolutely refuse to be "improved," and the denizens of which affect to speak of Brighton as Brighthelmstone, and to treat it as a rival upon equal terms. It has two very pretty inns, but there is so little competition between them, that there is a shrewd suspicion that they are under the same management; a few more houses have been built, it is true, within the last half century, but they are all constructed upon that same principle of fancy architecture, adopted at Coveton from the first, and which perhaps I may term the Lowther Arcadian. At least I am sure that the models of all its dwelling-houses are to be found in that respectable metropolitan emporium: weather indicators, built for the accommodation of an unencumbered couple; churches for the dressing-table, in the front elevation of which you hang your watch before retiring to rest; villa residences, down whose chimneys you drop halfpence (or half-crowns, if you are so minded), for the encouragement of missionary enterprise; and gritty erections for all sorts of ingenious purposes, but which to the Uninstructed suggest only the means of lighting a cigarmatch. You have no idea, unless you have been to Coveton, how odd is the effect of a real village to the construction of which these Lowther Arcadian principles have been applied; where the doctors, father and son, live in a Weather Indicator (only, of course, about five hundred times as big), and the former keeps indoors when it is wet, and the son goes out in all weathers; where a genuine clergyman lives in a magnified money-box, and you look up involuntarily at the upper windows, in the expectation of seeing *Help the*

Heathen running in a neat scroll between the first and second floors; and where the gritty church has a real clock in the very place where the hole was left in the model. The whole place looks, in short, as though some clever child had built it out of a box of fancy bricks, after the pattern of what he had seen on nursery mantel-pieces, or suspended from Christmas-trees.

Not only is the place old-fashioned in itself, and resolute to resist innovation, but the modern conveniences, which some enthusiasts have endeavoured to import thither, have suffered by the unnatural coalition. A branch-railway, for instance, has been attached to this Sleepy Hollow from a great trunk-line; but the only result is that the railway has become demoralised, and ceased to perform its functions. It goes no faster than the four-horse coach, which still continues to run between Coveton and the nearest provincial town; it is very uncertain in its times of arrival and departure, and prone to delay, for with old-fashioned gallantry, its trains never fail to stop to pick up a lady, if she does but wave her parasol, no matter whether there is a station on the spot or not. As to the supply of luxuries, or even necessities, the railway has been a total failure, and there is just the same difficulty in obtaining a sufficiency of food in Coveton as in the good old times—immortalised in a wood-cut at the top of the bills of the *Royal Marine Hotel*—when his Royal Highness the Duke of Kent arrived there in a carriage-and-four with outriders, and left a famine in the flattered hamlet behind him, after a residence of forty-eight hours. The most artful London bargainer who should take lodgings in Coveton, and attempt to do her own housekeeping, would infallibly fail to procure sustenance for herself and family. Nobody but a native can be certain, for instance, of securing a joint of meat. You have literally to “get up early,” if your ambition extends to anything of that kind. By 9 o'clock A.M. the butcher's shop—the facsimile of those which are sold in the Lowther Arcade for children to play at “going to market” with—has disposed of its single sheep, which lies dismembered and ticketed with the names of its several purchasers, thus: *Miss Robinson's leg; Mrs Captain Cooper's shoulder; the Rev. Jones' kidneys;* and so on. No sheep will be killed again till Saturday next. Beef is only to be looked for once a fortnight. Veal is an accident not to be counted upon at all. Game—you might just as well ask for Bird's-nest soup; and all the fish that is ever caught at Coveton goes as direct as the poor shambling dawdling railway can take it to the great metropolis.

If you stay at either of the hotels, you will not indeed be starved, because one half of the above-mentioned sheep is always divided between those two establishments; but you will not find any more variety. They are principally patronised by newly-married couples, who are too intoxicated with happiness to be very particular about their comfort. There are secluded arbours dotted about the pretty gardens expressly for the accommodation of this class of the community; and when a new arrival does not walk about the place with its arm round its waist (I am speaking of course of that mysterious duality which makes one out of two people), it walks about, hand in hand, like grown-up children. Nobody minds, in this little village, where honey-mooning is the normal state of visitors, and discreet behaviour the exception. Coveton itself, though on a small scale, is lovely, and naturally attracts these unsophisticated couples as to another Eden; there are a hundred winding walks—with rather abrupt turnings, however, which I have heard objected to as bringing folks face to face unexpectedly upon other folks who are already in that position—and seats provided at the local expense, commanding most exquisite views of the sea at all times, and of the moon when there happens to be one; and I do not doubt that as pleasant hours have been spent at Coveton as at any other place of its age and size within the four seas. I do not, however, recommend any middle-aged person, who has lost his taste for the mere vanities of life, and is particular about having cucumber with his salmon, to put up at either the *Royal Marine Hotel* at Coveton, or the other. They are both perfectly clean, it is true, but cleanliness is not everything, or else we should all go to prison, or endeavour to obtain situations from the Trinity House as supernumeraries in Lighthouses. It is not pleasant to have one's bed and board in *one* (the mattresses of the R. H. M. indeed, I think, are of cast iron); and when one does bring a bit of fish with one from town, one does not like it to be boiled in saltpetre, through a misunderstanding connected with cooling one's champagne with the best substitute for ice.

However, Mr Ralph Derrick, who patronised this particular establishment, found, for his part, nothing to complain of, except that its half-pints of brandy were exceptionally small; he therefore ordered a second after his dinner, and inquired of the waiter who brought it where Jacob Forest lived, and which was the nearest way of getting to his cottage.

“Jacob Forest, sir; yes, sir. You don't mean *William Forest*, perhaps, sir?” answered the waiter, gently whisking his napkin like a horse's tail, and with an air of patronage in his tone, as though he would say: “I am very well aware you have made a mistake, so I do not hesitate to own it.”

“No, I don't mean William Forest, nor yet Nebuchadnezer Forest, nor Beelzebub Forest, if those names happen to run in the family,” rejoined Derrick impatiently. “I mean simply Jacob Forest.”

“Beg pardon, sir, I'm sure, sir. But such an exceedingly old person, and so seldom inquired after; whereas, you see, William, he's a boat or two to let; and if you are anything in the shell or fossil line, he's quite an authority.—Mr Jacob's cottage, sir? Well, sir, the fact is, he has not lived in what you call a cottage for a long time. He has had a snug little house of his own, ever since my Lady Lisgard—But you know all about that story, I dare say, sir?”

“Yes, yes,” answered Derrick drily; for the very name of Lisgard had grown distasteful to him, and particularly in connection with his intended wife. “I know that Jacob's daughter has a very kind mistress—very; in fact, that she will never part with such a treasure of a waiting-maid, if she can help it. But let us get on to the house, if you please, for I want to call there to-night, and it is even now growing rather dark.”

“Yes, sir; it is, sir. I am sorry that the dinner was so unavoidably delayed. The last train and the last coach having come in, we did not expect any more gentry this afternoon, or would have made preparation. But the fact is, sir, there is no hurry with respect to Mr Forest. You will find him abed now, and you will find him no more than that two hours hence, for poor old Jacob is bed-*ridden*. Very cheerful though, I hear, and would like a chat and a glass of grog with any gentleman like yourself, no matter what time it was; and if you will permit me to advise, you will wait till the moon is up; for the path across the Cove is not easy to find after dusk; and then there's the churchyard, which, somehow, one always dislikes—at least I know *I* do—to pass through latish, unless one can see one's way pretty well; and after that, there's a bit of a spinney before you

get to the old man's house; so although you can see it at top of the hill yonder from this window—there it is, the white house with a thatched roof—you may judge that it is a good long step.”

“I see,” said Derrick nodding. “Then I shall light my pipe, and stroll down to the sea-shore until the moon rises, if you're sure that the old man will see me at so late an hour.”

“I am quite sure, sir; it will please him above all things, for he complains he gets no sleep of nights, to speak of. You will go down to the Cove, of course; that's what all our gentry does when there is a moon; and I shall sit up for you till you come back—although our hour for closing *is* eleven, sir, sharp.”

“Thank you, my man,” said Derrick, “do so;” and lighting his pipe, he strolled down thoughtfully towards the shore.

It was dark enough in the wooded Cove, although the trees were as yet but scantily clothed in their spring garments; but ever and anon, at a turn of the winding path, he came to some open spot artistically left there, where the darkling Sea lay stretched before him, waiting for her tiring-maid the Moon to clasp her jewels on. Even thus unadorned, she shewed divinely fair as her bosom rose and fell unstirred by passion, for the winds had lulled since sundown, and her gentle breath came up to him in even beats. How different must she have looked from hence, thought he, upon that night of storm which he had expected to be his last. The gale was taking them inshore, when the vessel sprung her leak; and doubtless many a fellow-passenger of his had reached this coast, perchance this very Cove, although not with life. O treacherous sea! you that can smile and smile, and break into ten thousand smiles, and make such dainty music on the pebbly shore, who can believe how cruel your wrath can be, that has not seen you tear man's floating home to fragments, and overwhelm him with his dear ones in your gaping depths? Ralph shuddered, and passed his hand across his brow, as though to erase some terrible thought within it. The silent sky, crossed by those swift and secret messengers the clouds, has doubtless a lesson for man's heart, which it would be well if he would more often study; but even Mr Ruskin, the great Self-elected Authority upon the subject, must acknowledge that there are physical difficulties at the outset of this particular system of spiritual education. Setting aside the fact, that it is only eagles which can gaze upon the sun with undazzled eyes, the human vertebra is not fitted for any prolonged investigation of the firmament; and if one lies on one's back—I don't know whether I am singular in this apprehension, but I am always afraid of some heavenly body slipping out of space, and dropping upon one while in that exposed position. But everybody can look upon the sea (from the vantage-ground at least of the solid earth), and that is the next best page of nature to the sky. There is something in its monotonous expanse which strikes most of us, especially when we watch it alone and at night, with mysterious, and perhaps religious awe. At all events, it reminds us, if there be any materials for reflection within us, of the brevity of our span of life, and of the littleness of its aims; a visible Eternity seeming to lie before us, in the presence of which we are humbled. Under ordinary circumstances, it was not likely that Derrick should experience these feelings, for sea-faring folks, in spite of what has been written of those who do their business in great waters, are least of all men subject to such influences: but not only, as we have heard him tell Lady Lisgard, did the sea at all times shew to him like one great grave, ever since it had engulfed his Lucy, but upon this occasion he was regarding it at the very spot, or near it, where the catastrophe had occurred. Thus, though the moon had risen by this time, and bathed the deep, as all things else on which it shone, in unutterable calm, Ralph's mental vision beheld waves mountains high, and one fair fragile form, now lifted on their foaming tops, now buried in their raging depths, but always dead and drowned.

“Sorry to disturb you, sir, but will you favour me with half a pipeful of baccy?” inquired a cheerful voice at his elbow. “Seeing you was alone, and without your young woman—which is rare in these parts,” continued the stranger, evidently one of the fishing community of the place, for notwithstanding the fineness of the night, he was attired in water-proof overalls—“I made bold, fellow-smokers being always ready to help one another in that way, if in no other.—Thank you, sir. That will save me going to the inn to-night, a visit my missis don't approve of.”

“Is *that* the inn?” inquired Derrick, pointing to a little low-roofed cottage just at the entrance to the Cove, and only raised a few feet above high-water mark.

“No, sir; that's my own little place, William Forest, at your service. If you happen to be in want of a boat, or one as can shew you where to find the fossils and such like, I can do that as well as any man in Coveton, let him be who he will.”

“Then you are old Jacob Forest's nephew, I suppose, for he had no son, and only one daughter, had he?”

“Just so, sir; my cousin Mary. A precious lucky woman she is. It was through her I came to have the cottage, for my uncle made it over to me when he moved to the grand house on the hill yonder, as my Lady Lisgard gave to him. God bless her Ladyship, and good Sir Robert too, though he's gone to heaven by this time, and don't want none of our wishes.”

“Yes, yes,” answered Derrick with irritation; “you Coveton folks can talk of nothing but these Lisgards. Now, just dismiss them from your mind while you answer a question I am going to ask you. You are old enough to remember that terrible storm which took place here in the September of '32, are you not?”

“Yes, sir, yes. And none of us that saw it is ever likely to forget it. That was the very time when old Sir Robert”—

“Damn Sir Robert!” interrupted Ralph with energy. “If you would only be so kind as to forget that respectable baronet, and all belonging to him, while you answer me a simple question, I shall be greatly obliged to you. Forgive me, mate—but my temper is not so good as my tobacco. Pray, take another pipeful. Now, after that same storm in which the *North Star*—that was the name of the ship, was it not?—was lost yonder, were there many bodies washed ashore about here?”

“Dead uns, you mean, sir, of course?” answered the man hesitatingly. “Well, yes, there was. I should think, taking them all together, for they came in, some of them, weeks afterwards, I should think there was a dozen or more; many of them lashed to spars, poor things. But it was no use.”

“And where were these unfortunate creatures put to?” inquired Derrick after a pause.

“They were all buried in the churchyard yonder, sir. Sir Robert Lisgard—but there, I forgot: you may read

some of their names—those at least as was identified—upon the tombstones. It was a sad sight them burials. Strangers, and very poor folks mostly, coming from miles and miles away to see their dead, who had but left home a few days before for a New World, indeed, as they call it, but little thinking as it was for *that*. You should hear Uncle Jacob talk of it.”

“Ah, sad, indeed,” echoed Derrick, rising from his seat. “I am glad to have met *you*, mate; good-night, and thank you.”

“Thank you, sir; I never tasted better baccy.”

Derrick waited until his companion had descended to the very bottom of the Cove; waited until he saw the cottage door open and shut—a mere streak of light and shadow—and then followed on his steps; but having reached the foot of the ravine, he took the winding path that led up its opposite side towards the church and Jacob Forest's high-built dwelling.

CHAPTER V. THE MEMORIAL WINDOW.

NOTWITHSTANDING that Coveton Church is “gritty,” like all the rest of the architecture in that locality, and presents the appearance of an ecclesiastical edifice swathed in sand-paper, it is by no means unpicturesque; while the spot on which it stands can compare for beauty with any God's-acre in England. It is more than a hundred feet above the level of the village, and commands a glorious view, which would be a complete panorama, but for the steep wooded hill, which protects it from the bitter north, and assists the genial climate to make a flower-garden of the churchyard three parts of the year round. Even thus early in the summer, had Ralph's visit been paid in the daytime instead of the night, he would have seen it bright with bud and blossom, for almost every grave was itself a little parterre, tended by pious hands. Poor wasted human forms, but not seldom dearer to others than the handsomest and healthiest, often come to Coveton to prolong for a little their painful lives, until they flit away like shadows; indeed, if you read the grave-stones, you will find three out of four are records of departed Youth. The newly Married pass their honeymoons at the pleasant little village, and those who have been sentenced to death by the Doctors come also thither, and a strange and touching contrast they afford.

The low large moon, was flooding the sacred place with its soft radiance, so that the inscriptions were as plain to be seen as in broad noonday. From knoll to knoll, each roofing sacred dust, Ralph wandered, not unmoved; for he too had lost a dear one by untimely death, and even now was looking for the place where haply she might lie. He would have felt it in some sort a comfort to know that her bones rested beneath the rounded turf, rather than in yonder shifting deep, although, beyond the wooded village with its scattered lights, it lay as motionless at present as a silver pall. No less than thrice, he came upon the tombs of those with whom he had been a fellow-passenger on board that doomed ship so many years ago. Time had done its work with these, and they were not easily deciphered; but he carefully spelled them out—*John Robins, mate of the North Star, which foundered at sea on the night of September 14, 1832*. Poor Robins! Ralph remembered him very well. They had been fellow-townsmen together at Bleamouth, a circumstance which had troubled him at first, sailing as he did under a feigned name; but they had met but once before, and the mate had, as it turned out, no remembrance of him. But Ralph well remembered what uneasiness the possibility of recognition had given him at the time, for it might have been supposed that he had committed some disgraceful crime, which would cause him, and what was worse, his wife and the Meades, to be looked upon askance throughout the voyage.

But what did it matter now? What had anything mattered to that great ship's company, so full of plans and projects for beginning life afresh under other skies! Death had made sudden and swift provision for them all.—*Sarah Button, aged 69, and Henry, her son. The bodies of his four children, and of Helen, his wife, who perished in the same storm, never came to shore.*—Ralph remembered the gaunt, strong old woman, who did not hesitate, within a year of man's allotted span, to cross the ocean; she and her son were as like as difference of age and sex could permit of likeness; but the children, like the wife, were delicate and sickly. It seemed somehow fitting enough that these two, though dead, should have come to land; while the others, poor things, should have succumbed to the stormy deep. The third inscription was even a more remarkable one. Upon a huge recumbent slab, which evidently roofed the remains of more than one person, were engraved these words: *Beneath this stone are laid the bones of those who were washed on shore from the wreck of the North Star, but whose remains, from lapse of time, or other causes, have not been identified. Requiescant in pace.*”

A nameless grave, indeed, with not even the number or the sex of its Unfortunate inmates specified! The slab bore the date of but a week or two subsequent to the catastrophe, yet spoke “of lapse of time.” How impossible, therefore, to discover *now* whose bones had mouldered beneath it into dust. His Lucy might be there, or she might not. It was one of the few tombs that exhibited no trace of care; but a tuft of violets, the sweet breath of which betrayed them, chanced to be growing at the edge of it, and Derrick plucked them and placed them in his bosom. He seemed to feel certain now that she had come ashore *somewhere*; and why not here? How solemn and still it was! The very air, though odorous and fresh, seemed full of the presence of the dead; and Ralph's thoughts were with them, so that he quite forgot the purpose with which he had visited the little village, light after light in which was being quenched beneath him, for it was growing late.

Was it likely that there would be any record of the perished crew in the church itself? They had almost all been in humble circumstances, being emigrants, and therefore it was not probable that any such costly memorial should have been erected; but still it was just possible. The oaken door, studded with iron nails, was

locked, and also a small postern that led into a diminutive vestry, an offshot of the main building. The windows, too, were fastened on the inside, or gave no promise of opening, either in hinge or handle; but he climbed up to the sill of one of them, for they were of no great height, and looked in. The church was small, but very neat and pretty, with carved oaken sittings, a handsome double pulpit, and a huge brass lectern, of the use of which the present spectator knew nothing. Ralph had not seen so much of the inside of a church for many a year, and he was fortunate in the specimen thus accidentally submitted to his notice. The wealthy visitors of the place had done their duty, and gratified their tastes at the same time, by many a pious offering. A small but splendid organ, with gilded and star-bespangled pipes, adorned the gallery on his left; and immediately in front of him glowed a memorial window. There were other smaller ones, erected, doubtless, in tribute to some of those dear ones who had been laid so prematurely in the graveyard without; but this was a very large and elaborate specimen of modern art. The designer, in his admiration of the antique, had carefully reproduced every blemish peculiar to an age wherein anatomy was never studied save by doctors, and perspective was utterly unknown. The persons represented were the four evangelists, all in the most gorgeous dyes, and as large as life; but with their magnitude ceased almost all similarity to the human form divine. Their spines were dislocated, their bones were distorted; and where a limb was bent, it exhibited a sharp angle, like a broken branch. In the background rose the mountains of Judæa, of the same size and shape as Christmas plum-puddings, with the sun setting luridly in the midst of them, like snapdragon. Ralph, however, was quite of the opinion of the great authorities upon church decoration, and thought this very fine; he was also perfectly right in coming to the conclusion that such a work of all must have cost somebody a good bit of money. The moonlight streamed in behind him full upon it, and lit up all its splendid hues. Besides the scrolls, with texts upon them, proceeding out of the mouths of these individuals like ribbons from between the lips of a conjuror at a fair, there was a gilded inscription underneath the whole, in highly florid and decorated print. In the case of the texts, when you had managed to master the first letter, the deciphering of the rest was, to a person acquainted with the Scriptures, tolerably easy; though poor Ralph was by no means "edified," and could make nothing of them at all; but as for the inscription at the base, it looked to him at the first glance as meaningless as the hieroglyphics on a tea-chest.

"Why cannot these good people write what they have to say in plain English?" thought Derrick irreverently; "folks as come to church must need to bring a copy-book of alphabets with them. Never in all my life, and I've been among strangely-speaking creatures in my time, did I come upon such queer-looking writing; and yet, one would think, being all in such resplendent lines, it ought to be something worth reading too.—Bless my soul and body, what's this?"

This last ejaculation was uttered with excessive vehemence, and the excitement of the speaker was such that he could scarce keep his balance on the narrow sill upon which he half knelt, half clung. His hot breath had dimmed the glass, and as he wiped the moisture from it with his handkerchief, his fingers trembled so with agitation that they tapped audibly upon the pane. He glued his face to the window for upwards of a minute, and when he took it away again, it was white as the marble font that gleamed within. Had Ralph Derrick seen a ghost, that he slipped down from that window-sill with such excessive precipitation, and stood beneath it with his hat off, wiping his cold brow? "Am I awake or dreaming?" murmured he, striking himself a sounding blow upon the chest. "Was the brandy at yonder inn so strong that it has drugged me? or has this moonlight, as some hold it does, been stealing away my wits? or has the subject of my thoughts suggested names of which I had believed no record survived?" Once more Ralph took his station at the window, and this time did not leave it till he had not only made himself master, although with pain and difficulty, of that part of the inscription which had so arrested his attention, but had even transferred it, as well as his position permitted, to his pocket-book, word for word:

Some sacred words were added, but they told him nothing more concerning those three persons, namely, his lost wife's father and mother, and *himself*. Ralph Gavestone, alias Derrick, had been gazing upon his own memorial window, set up to commemorate his death more than thirty years ago!

Who had done it? Who could have had the will to do it? And who the means? And how was it that he and the Meades were associated together upon yonder painted glass, and yet not she who was the only bond between them? Why was not the death of that sweet saint made mention of in a place so fitting for its record, and where his own unworthy name had found admittance; and his real name too—not the one which had stood upon the passenger-list of the *North Star*? Into his perplexed and wandering mind there came some half-forgotten tale, heard from he knew not whom, of some Scotch laird who, gifted with the second-sight, perceives a funeral pass by—the coffin borne by relatives of his, and followed by troops of mourning friends—and marvels that among the woeful crowd he does not recognise himself. Surely, thinks he, he should be there, to shew respect to the common friend departed, whom he must have known so well, although he misses no remembered face. Then on a sudden it strikes him that he himself must be *in* the coffin—that it is his own interment of which he is the witness—and his heart fails within him because he feels that he has had his warning, and stands indeed within the shadow of black death. Why Ralph should think of such a tale in such a place may perhaps have been easily accounted for, but once remembered, he applied it with lightning speed to the subject in his mind, only in an inverse sense. The reason why his Lucy's name was not upon that mystic monument, where those of her parents and her husband were glowing in purple and gold, must be that she herself was *alive*. Nay, who upon earth could have wished thus piously to perpetuate their memory except Lucy herself? How she could have had the power to do so, in so splendid and enduring a manner, would have been of itself sufficiently miraculous, but that that circumstance was swallowed up, like Pharaoh's serpents, by the still greater miracle—the fact that she was among the Living!

For a moment, a sort of ecstasy seemed to possess this world-wearied Wanderer, and all the moonlit scene to assume an aspect altogether strange, such as earth and sea, however beautiful, can only shew to the pure and hopeful; then a sharp thought pierced his brain. She might have been alive when she caused that window to be set up, and yet not now. He knew that those gorgeous dyes kept their bright colours for many a year undimmed: supposing that he allowed five years (in which, by the by, Ralph was very near the truth) as a reasonable time to have elapsed between the shipwreck and the time that this memorial was erected—and in less time, how was it possible she could have saved the money for such a purpose—that would still leave more than a quarter of a century between its erection and the present time. A quarter of a century! a generation of

human life! Time enough to die, to marry—but no, his Lucy would never have done that. This window, shewing so tender a regard after such a lapse of years, was evidence in some sort to the contrary; and since he himself had never forgotten *her*; and only now, after a lonely lifetime, was meditating another marriage, he felt no apprehension upon that score. No; if his Lucy was alive, she was still his, and free to welcome him as of old to her loving arms. The only question with which he had now any real concern was, whether she still lived? Henceforward, it would be his sole business in the world to find this matter out. And first, she must certainly have been washed ashore alive; and somewhere in these parts. Who, then, so fit to give him information upon that point as old Jacob Forest, who had lived at Coveton all his life, and at that time, in the very cottage on the beach where his nephew now resided? So Ralph Derrick (for, like everybody else, we may still continue to call him so) took the path that he had originally intended to take after all, notwithstanding his marvellous discovery, and made straight for Jacob's dwelling on the hill; no longer with the intention of winning a bride, but of recovering a long-lost wife.

CHAPTER VI. JACOB'S GUARD-SHIP.

W HATEVER evils may happen unto me, may Heaven spare my reason," was the heartfelt prayer of a wise and reverent man. He might have added—for he was one of those who thought it no harm to ask of Him who watches the sparrow's fall, for particular blessings—"And however I be racked with pain by day, by night may I still enjoy my sleep." Next to madness, and like enough with some folks to end in that, is the want of rest during that period which should be the season of slumber, and which, if it be not so, is a dread and dreary time indeed. There is many an honest soul in the autumn of life who will protest in the morning, in the course of a very tolerable breakfast, that she has not had a wink of sleep all night, because she has heard a few consecutive hours recorded by the church clock; but to lie awake indeed from eve to mom is not, thank God, a very common experience, and still less often are any of us compelled to endure it night after night for years. To live an existence the converse of the rest of their fellow-creatures is the lot of more than one trade—editors of daily newspapers, for instance, and burglars; but to *work* by night is a very different affair from the lying awake unemployed, but thinking, thinking, while nothing breaks the silence of the muffled world save the howl of the watchdog and the weird monotony of the wind. Yet there are some of us doomed to this sad fate, who scarcely know what it is to spend an easeful night, and who snatch their scanty dole of sleep by day.

Poor Jacob Forest was one of these. A long life of reckless exposure to the elements, not, perhaps, unassisted by hard drinking, had brought him to this sad pass. Thanks to his daughter, he wanted for nothing that money could give him; but the once hale and venturesome mariner was now bedridden and racked at most times, but especially by night, with rheumatic twinges. Mary herself never failed to visit him every summer; and three days out of four some ancient comrade would painfully climb the hill that led to his cosy little house, and hob and nob with him by his bedside. But he was still sadly in want of company during the night-watches; true, a nurse was paid to minister to his comforts during that season, but she generally "dropped off" into a doze, sooner or later; and even if she was awake, her gossip was of the tea-and-muffin sort, rather than that description of talk which goes best with hot grog, and was more suitable to a seasoned vessel, though laid up in extra-ordinary, like old Jacob. Therefore it was, as the waiter at the *Royal Marine* had observed, that visitors calling at ultrafashionably late hours at the Guard-ship, as it was the proprietor's fancy to term his place of residence, were especially welcome.

The home of this old veteran had been built, at his own request, of wood, notwithstanding the remonstrances of his medical attendant, who ascribed part of his patient's ailments to the fact, that his cottage on the shore had been constructed of that material. But Mr Forest had insisted upon having his way: next to one's own boat, he had argued, there was nothing like a wooden house to make one feel at home in; nor could he be moved from that position by the caustic rejoinder, that in that case he might just as well get into his coffin at once. Nay, the Guard-ship had been made still less air-tight than it otherwise would have been by the ingenious introduction of a hinge running along one side of the old man's bedroom on the ground-floor, the very wall of which, in summer-time, could thereby be lowered flap-wise, exposing the whole arrangement of his bower after the manner of the better class of doll's houses. With the eccentricity of taste so often exhibited in the possessors of unexpected wealth, Mr Forest had "gone in," as the phrase runs, in his prosperous old age, for curious poultry; and up his slanting shutter (exactly as horses are introduced into a railway train) used to be driven from the yard for his immediate inspection, as he lay in bed, every sort of feathered fowl after their kind, as into a poultry ark. The earliness of the season, combined with the lateness of the hour, denied this exhibition (afforded to all visitors whenever practicable) to Ralph Derrick, but the ancient mariner gave him the heartiest of welcomes, as had been predicted. He had heard of Mr Derrick more than once from Mary, and was exceedingly pleased to do him honour; at which hint the nurse at once set forth the "materials" for a drinking-bout on a little table which stood at the invalid's elbow, and betook herself to an adjoining cabin, where she instantly went to bed with her clothes on. Next to the danger from draughts, to which the captain of the Guard-ship had already succumbed, he lay in nightly peril of perishing by fire, since he smoked in bed almost unceasingly; and in case of a spark igniting where it should not, the whole two-decker would not have taken a quarter of an hour to become a heap of ashes; but this apprehension, as the old woman was glad to think, was groundless upon this occasion, when her master had a gentleman to keep him company, and she left them with an easy conscience to their pipes and grog.

"So I hear you are rather sweet upon my good Mary," observed the old sailor slyly, as soon as they were left alone. "She writes to me more than most girls do to their fathers, you see, Mr Derrick, knowing I'm all alone

here, and so pleased to hear any news."

"Very right and very proper," returned Ralph quietly, "and a very good girl, as you say, she is—although she is not a very young one."

"Young enough for some folks, at all events—eh, eh, sir?" chuckled the old man. "Come, come—I know all about you, and what you're come here about; I'm wide awake enough, I can tell you, although I'm abed. You've run down to Coveton, sir, to 'ask papa.' There, haven't I hit it?"

"Well, the fact is, Mr Forest, the love seems rather more on my side than hers. I don't deny that I had a great liking for your daughter, but when a man knows that his love is not returned"—

"Eh, eh," interrupted the old Salt, pursing his lips and giving his tasselled night-cap a pull upon one side, which gave him an expression of much aimless intelligence; "but I don't understand this. You must have done something, sir, to forfeit the good opinion of my Mary; for certainly, at one time—But there, perhaps I'm saying too much. If it ain't agreed between you and my Mary, then, may I ask, sir—not but that I'm uncommon glad to see you, or any other gentleman, from nightfall to any one of the small-hours, I'm sure—but may I ask what the dickens brings you here?"

"Well, sir," replied Ralph, forcing a smile, "I happened to find myself in these parts, and did not like to pass by without looking in upon the father of Mary Forest, even though all should be off between us; and, besides, I was told you are the likeliest man to be able to give me some information about the wreck of the *North Star*, which happened about thirty years ago, and the particulars of which, for a reason, I want to know."

"Fill your pipe, then, and mix yourself another glass," cried the old man, delighted to be called upon for his favourite yarn, "for it's a story as you can't tell in a five minutes, nor in ten neither. The ship you speak of, sir, was an emigrant vessel of more than a thousand tons, as sailed on September 10, 1832"—

"I know all about the ship," interrupted Derrick impatiently, "for I had a passage in her myself. I want to hear about the bodies that came on shore."

"*You were a passenger by the North Star?*" ejaculated the old man with amazement. "Why, it was said that every soul on board her perished in the storm in which she went to pieces. *Derrick, Derrick!* Well, now you mention it, I do remember the name, for I used to have that passenger-list by heart. I cut it out of one of the papers at the time, and having been so much concerned in the matter myself, though little knowing that I should owe this house to that same wreck—built out of its very timbers, as I might say—and almost all I have in this world. But you know how all that came about, and what Sir Robert did for me and mine, I dare say, mate?"

"Yes, yes—I have heard something of that. But can you tell me nothing of what came ashore? You have said not a soul was saved; I suppose, then, it was the surviving relatives who put up the gravestones to the memory of the drowned, which I saw as I came through the churchyard?"

"That was just it. There were five men and three women—poor souls—laid under the big stone next the yew-tree; nobody knew who they were. Sir Robert paid for that too, if I remember right—let's see"—

"I hear of nothing but 'Sir Robert' and 'Sir Robert' in this village of yours," interrupted Ralph impatiently. "Nobody has a story to tell in Coveton but manages to bring that man's name in by head and shoulders. Why the deuce do they do it?"

"Because he's been the making of the place—that's why, and because there's a little gratitude left in our village still, I am glad to say, sir, although it may have died out in the world," replied the old sailor firmly. "Why, he not only built the roof that is now sheltering us, but the village school, and the little pier at the Cove foot that has sheltered many a fishing-smack since the time when my Lady"—

"Well, he didn't put up that great bit of painted glass in the church, I suppose," broke in Derrick testily, "to the memory of Frank Meade and others, did he? for *that's* what I want to get at, and nothing else."

"Did he not? Then who did it, I should like to know?" answered Mr Forest sarcastically. "Who but himself and my Lady; and if it had been the old times as I've heard tell of instead of now, there would have been priests paid to pray for their poor souls until this day; ay, that there would. He was never tired of shewing his thankfulness for the joy that came to himself, and his pity for the woe that befell others upon that awful night. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, they say, and the storm that carried the *North Star* to the bottom with all on board save one—or two, I should now say, since I have no reason to doubt your word, Mr Derrick"—

"Ay, tell me about the storm," said Ralph in an altered voice, and with a face grown very white and still. "I will not interrupt you again, I will not indeed. One poor creature came ashore alive, you said?"

"What! do you mean to say my Mary never told you? She must be a good un to keep a secret even from her sweetheart; not that it's any secret here, however they may treat it at Mirk; and if I didn't tell you myself, you would hear it from the first man you met in Coveton, and asked how Sir Robert Lisgard got his bride."

"Just so," said Derrick in a hoarse whisper; "therefore please to tell me."

"Then help yourself to grog, mate, for you look cold. Some landlubbers will have it that this room is cold, because of the hinge yonder; but a seafaring chap like you—There, that should warm you. Well, on the 10th of September 1832, an emigrant ship of more than a thousand tons"—

"A thousand devils!" cried Derrick, starting to his feet; "do you wish to drive me mad? I tell you I was on board of her myself. Tell me about the woman that came ashore lashed to the spar."

"What! then, you do know about it after all?" grumbled the old man, removing his pipe from the corner of his mouth, an action which represented the greatest amount of astonishment of which he was capable. "Why the deuce did you bother me to spin you the yarn, then? A man at my time of life ain't got much breath to throw away, I can tell you."

"How was she dressed? What had she on?" inquired Derrick, upon whose ears his short-winded host's remonstrance had fallen unheeded.

"Devilish little," returned the old fellow gruffly: "nothing but a petticoat, and what my Mary calls a body—but which I should call a bust—and a sailor's pea-jacket, and that was not rightly upon her, but tied between her and the spar, to save her dainty limbs, poor girl; and it is my opinion that he was an honest-hearted chap

as put it there, and almost deserved to have her for himself. But there they were, brother and sister, so *that* couldn't be. Moreover, she couldn't have got better off than she did, that's certain. Lord, to think that there poor, friendless, penniless, clotheless creature—as I had thought to be almost lifeless too, when me and Sir Robert dragged her in from the hungry waves—should come to be Lady Lisgard of Mirk Abbey— What's the matter with the man? Hi, nurse, hi! Confound the woman, how she sleeps! Where the devil's my stick?"

Mr Jacob Forest's temper was hasty, but he had no intention of inflicting corporal punishment on the respectable female who was too deeply plunged in slumber to attend to his cries. He desired his stick in order that he might smite the battered gong that hung at his bedside, and upon which (besides using it as a gentle indication of her presence being required) he was accustomed to execute an imitation of ship's "bells" throughout the watchful night. Before, however, he could lay his crippled fingers upon the instrument required, Ralph Derrick, who had fallen from his chair upon the carpetless floor, began to recover his senses, and with them his speech.

"Don't be alarmed, sir—don't call your nurse," said he, gathering himself up; "it is only a sort of fainting-fit to which I am subject—indeed I was born with them."

"And you'll die with them too, some day," thought old Jacob to himself, as he stared with undisguised apprehension at his visitor's white face and shaking limbs. "Don't you think you had better take a little more rum—or stay, perhaps it's that that's done the mischief?"

"No, it's not that," answered Derrick bitterly, as he filled himself a wine-glass of the liquor neat. "I'm better now, and I shan't give way again. But I remember the man that took such care of the woman you speak of, just before the vessel parted; and your mention of it gave me quite a turn. *I* didn't know he was her brother; but he was much more careful about her safety than his own—God knows."

"Very like," rejoined the old fellow, "and what I should have expected, even if they had not been so near related. She was just the sort of woman that any man worth his salt would be willing to lay down his life for. His Christian name was Ralph, was it not, the same as yours?"

"Yes, it was," answered the other gravely. "Who was it that told you that? I forgot, though; it is painted in the church-window."

"I found it out for myself," continued the old fellow cunningly, "long before that there memorial window was put up; for my Lady never talked about it even to Mary. But there was *Ralph Gavestone* written inside the collar of the pea-cot, and I kept it for many a year myself until the moth got in it, because I thought the sight of it might distress the poor lady."

"Women soon get over that sort of thing," said Ralph in a grating voice.

"Well, yes; sooner or later, I daresay they do. And a very fortunate thing it is, in my opinion, that such is the case. It would be very bad for us all, and particularly for seafaring folk, if we never smiled again because a party as we liked happened to be drowned, like some king of England as my Mary once read about to me when I was down with my first fit of the rheumatiz. Why, *I've* lost a couple of brothers myself in that same way, and very good chaps they were; but why should I make myself wretched because they're gone to Heaven? Take another pipe, man. Why, you're not going to leave me surely?"

"Yes, I am, Jacob Forest," answered Derrick gloomily. "I have heard all that I want to know, and more—much more! If you have any message for your daughter, I'll take it to her. I am going off to Mirk at once."

"You may tell her—but no; I'll tell her myself, and not trouble you," answered the old fellow hastily, purple at least as much with rage as rum. "I don't wish to be under the slightest obligation to a fellow as looks in upon a poor cripple under pretence of friendship, and then directly he's heard all he wants, and drank all he can, and had one of his fits as he was born with, all as snug as can be—Hi, nurse, hi! Damme, if the fellow hasn't actually left the front-door open!" And the invalid applied himself to his gong with a fury that would have roused the Seven Sleepers, had they chanced to have been slumbering (let alone taking a nap with their clothes on) in the adjacent room. "Push my table nearer," cried he to his terrified attendant, "and give me paper and pens. Yes, my Mary particularly begged of me to let her know at once in case he called, and I will do so; but I will also take leave to tell her what a selfish scoundrel, in my opinion, he is; and I'll mention his alarming fits. If she has found any reason to be dissatisfied with the beggar, I'll give her some more; and mind, Nurse, this is posted before seven o'clock. He shall find a cool reception at Mirk Abbey, or my name is not Jacob Forest!"

Epistolary composition was not an accomplishment in which the old sailor was an adept, and the mechanical part of the operation was a very slow one with him, by reason of his infirmities; but nevertheless he managed to indite a missive more or less to his mind, long before the early mail went out from Coveton, and his faithful attendant did his bidding by posting the same.

CHAPTER VII. THE TRIUMPHAL ARCH.

IT is the morning that immediately precedes Sir Richard's fete-day, and all at the Abbey are as busy as a hive of bees. Mrs Welsh is engaged in incessant warfare with a "professed cook" of the male sex, who has been imported from town with an army of myrmidons clad in white aprons and head-pieces; and Mr Roberts carries the key of the cellar about his person as religiously as though it were an amulet, exceedingly regretting that the person who has undertaken to purvey the cold collation to the tenantry does not also furnish the wine. For three shillings or three shillings and sixpence the bottle, he argues, as good a sherry as they have any right to taste might be set before Farmer Beeves and that sort and yet we are about to give

them the old "West India," as stood old Sir Robert sixty shillings a dozen a quarter of a century ago; nay, even four dozen of cobweb-bed port, the age of which is absolutely unknown, have been set aside for the after-dinner tickling of those rough palates, which would as lief or liever (thinks Mr Roberts) have gin and whisky-punch. The gentle folks, to be sure, dine with them, but you never catch *them* (Mr E. has observed) doing much in the way of drink at a three o'clock dinner in a marquee. There is to be dancing in the said tent, which has been boarded for that purpose, later in the evening; and a ball will take place at the Abbey likewise, to which all the "county" has been invited, and perhaps a little more.

It was a difficult matter even for Sir Richard, who had a specialty for such solemn follies, to decide exactly what were "county families" and what were not, and where the imaginary line that divided the ball-room from the marquee was to be laid down. The social difference between the person of the least importance that had the *entrée* of the former, and the person of the greatest importance who was consigned to the latter was, of course, infinitesimally small, and the decision involved all the difficulties with which the theologians afflict themselves concerning the future position of the indifferently Good and the tolerably Bad.

What had Mr Jones, M.E.C.S. of Dalwynch, done that he should be admitted into Paradise, while the crystal bar was obstinately interposed against the entrance of Mr Jones, M.B.C.S., from the capital of Wheatshire? Nothing of himself, was the baronet's stern decree; but it could be proved beyond cavil that the former was remotely related to the Davey Joneses of Locker Hall, a family of immense antiquity, and distinguished in our naval annals; whereas the latter had no higher connection to boast of than Thomas Jones, J.P. of Allworthy Court (himself only admitted to the higher sphere by reason of a fortunate marriage), and was therefore, as it were, predestined to sit below the salt.

There were, however, some exceptions even to this Draconian system. Dr Haldane, for instance, was importuned with an earnestness that Sir Richard would never have used to any peer of the realm, to honour this occasion with his presence, and break through his stubborn resolve not to set foot within Mirk Abbey; but the old man, although greatly moved, declined the invitation. Madame de Castellan, too, notwithstanding she was such a new-comer to the county, was called upon at Belcomb by Sir Richard in person, and though she was not well enough to see him, expressed herself by letter as hugely gratified by the object of his visit; albeit at the same time she gave him to understand that all festivities were just now distasteful to her, and indeed that she had not the strength for them. "As for his Coming of Age," added the old Frenchwoman, "she was not at all sure that such an event was a subject of congratulation, though, if it had been his marriage-day, then indeed she might have come, if it were only to make his young bride jealous." Besides these two refusals, there were scarcely any. The popularity of the Lisgard family, and the gorgeous scale of the promised entertainment—the engagement of the Coldstream band was ascertained beyond a doubt, and there was a whisper afloat concerning fireworks, and even that the ornamental water was to be illuminated—combined to attract not only everybody who was anybody, but a still vaster throng of nobodies at all. Every inhabitant of Mirk, from the grandparents to the babes in arms, for instance, were invited to take their fill of beef and beer, if their digestion permitted of it, and if not, there was plenty of rich plum-pudding; for besides the marquee, half the Park had been put under canvas, in order to make the festivities as much as possible independent of the weather, and presented the appearance of a miniature camp, which would be still more the case upon the morrow, when the scene was enlivened by the uniforms of the "Lisgard's Own," as some of the "yellows" had wickedly christened the Mirk Volunteer Corps.

Altogether, there was every reason for Sir Richard's being in the best of spirits. Master Walter, too, secretly conscious of having been a much worse boy than he was known to be, and feeling that he had met better luck, if not than he deserved, certainly than he could reasonably have expected, was in high feather; he was deeply grateful to his mother that she had abstained from reproaching him with the contents of the letter written by Mr Abrahams, the settlement of whose claim she had taken upon herself; and he well knew that the most welcome way in which he could shew his gratitude would be taking part with a good grace in his brother's triumphal entrance upon his twenty-first birthday. Rose, who had obtained her ends, as well as full substantial forgiveness (which was all she cared for) for the means employed, and foresaw the prostration of half the young men of the county at her pretty feet upon the morrow, was in excellent humour with herself, and therefore with the world. As for Letty, it is unnecessary to say more than that she felt a measureless content in the society of Mr Arthur Haldane, who passed all his days just now up at the Abbey, having placed his valuable services entirely at the disposal of Lady Lisgard, and generally found his duties led him into the vicinity of her Ladyship's daughter. His taste for table decoration and floral devices, though newly developed, was really, Letty affirmed, of a very high order, and as she was perpetually appealing to it, there can be no doubt that she believed what she said. All at Mirk Abbey, in short, were, or seemed to be, in a state of pleasurable excitement and joyous expectation, save its unhappy mistress. In vain, Sir Richard tried to persuade himself that she was only suffering from a feeling of responsibility—apprehensive lest anything should go wrong in the arrangements of the all-important morrow; in vain, Master Walter endeavoured to pacify his own mind with the thought, that although a part of his mother's anxieties might have been caused by his own misdoings, all trace of them would disappear so soon as she should discover that his intention of divorcing himself from the turf, as well as all other kinds of gambling, was as sincere as it really was. Letty did not attempt to gloss over the fact, that her mother looked both ill and wretched, but rather reproached herself that though this was the case she could not help feeling happy in the company of her lover. Perhaps it was the contrast to the festive air worn by all around her that made my Lady's face look so pinched and woeful; but certainly, as the fête-day approached, her cheeks grew more and more pallid, and her eyes sank in deepening hollows.

On the morning in question, the postbag, through some delay on the railway, did not arrive until the family were at breakfast; my Lady, with her scarcely touched dry-toast before her, watched Sir Richard open it, and distribute the contents with an anxiety she could not conceal.

"There is nothing for you, dearest mother," said he, in answer to her inquiring looks.

"Who, then, is that for?" returned she, pointing to an unappropriated letter he had placed at his left hand.

"Only a note for Forest, which I daresay will keep till we have left the table," said he smiling; "although, if you had your way, I know she would be attended to before everybody. It has the Coveton post-mark, and

doubtless comes from old Jacob."

"Who is ill," said my Lady rising. "I do not see why Mary's correspondence should be delayed more than that of any one else. I have finished my breakfast, and will take it to her at once."

When she had left the room, Sir Richard remarked with asperity, that his mother's kindness really rendered her a slave to "that woman Forest."

"That is so," assented Master Walter; "and I have of late observed that her spirits are always at the lowest when she has been having a confab with Mary. Is it possible, I wonder, that being balked of that fellow Derrick, Mistress Forest can have taken up with any new-fangled religious notions—I have heard of old maids doing such things—which are making her miserable, and my mother too?"

"For shame, Walter!" cried Letty. "Do you suppose mamma is capable of any such folly?"

"I don't believe for a moment that she is a victim to any delusion herself," explained Walter; "but she sympathises with everybody she has a liking for, and the society of any such morbid person would be very bad for her. Between ourselves, I don't think that Madame de Castellan coming here has done her any good. That's a precious queer old woman, you may depend upon it. Not only did she decline to permit old Rachel and her husband to continue to sleep at Belcomb, which, considering its loneliness, one would have thought she would have been glad to do, instead of their occupying the lodge a quarter of a mile away; but it is said that she absolutely dismissed her French maid the day after her arrival, and therefore lives entirely alone!"

"No wonder, then, she was so uncommonly anxious to get Mary," observed the baronet; "and I am sure I wish she may, for my mother's sake. I have no doubt they are now both closeted together over that old dotard's letter from Coveton. As if there was not enough for my poor dear mother to do and think of just now, without bothering herself with her waiting-maid's father's rheumatism."

Sir Richard was right: my Lady and her confidential servant were at that very moment in the boudoir perusing with locked doors old Jacob's letter. From it Lady Lisgard gathered what had happened at Coveton as certainly as though the writer had been aware of it all, and written expressly to inform his daughter.

"He has found it out," said she with a ghastly look. "He had that fit, as your father calls it, at the moment when he learned for the first time that the girl who came ashore alive and myself are one and the same. Poor Ralph, poor Ralph!"

"Dearest Mistress, I think it is Poor You who are most to be pitied. Great Heaven, he will be here to-night, or to-morrow at latest! To-morrow—in the midst of all the merry-making about Sir Richard."

"Yes, Sir Richard!" exclaimed my Lady bitterly. "The poor bastard that thinks he is a baronet! But let him come, let him come, I say." My Lady rose from her seat with clenched fingers and flashing eyes. "I will defend my children with my life—nay, more, with my honour. If I perjure myself to save them from shame and ruin, will not God pardon me? Who is there to witness against them save this man alone? And is not my word—my oath—as good as his?" She stepped to the little bookcase that ran round the room; and from the corner of it, half-hidden by the framework, took down a dusty volume—one of a long series, but the remainder of which were in the library. It was the *Annual Register* for the year 1832. Under the head of "Shipping Intelligence," where the tersest but most pregnant of all summaries is always to be found—the deaths of hundreds of poor souls, the misery of thousands of survivors, and the sudden extinction of a myriad human hopes, all recorded in a single sentence—was written: "In the storm of the 14th September, the emigrant vessel, *North Star*, foundered off the South Headland with all hands on board—supposed to have sprung a leak." Then a few weeks later, the following paragraph: "From the *North Star*, emigrant ship, supposed to have been lost on the night of the 14th of last month, with all hands on board, there came on shore at Coveton, lashed to a spar, a solitary survivor, a young woman. Although much exhausted and bruised, she had received no vital injury, and her recovery is said to be assured. Her case excites much interest in the locality in question."

The "solitary survivor!" continued my Lady thoughtfully. "Who is there to gainsay it, save this man?"

"Your own heart, dearest mistress," answered the waiting-maid solemnly. "That would not permit you to deny him, even if your conscience would. Could you meet him to-morrow face to face"—

"No, no," exclaimed my Lady shuddering; "I never could. I was mad to think of such a thing—so mad, that I trust the wickedness of the thought may be forgiven.—I am to drive into Dalwynch this afternoon about—what was it, Mary?"

"About your watch, which ought to have come home last evening, my Lady."

"Yes, my watch. There is not any time to lose."

"Indeed not, dear mistress: not an hour, I should say, if I were in your place. I tremble to look out of window, lest I should see him coming yonder over the Windmill Hill."

"Yes, fixed as fate, and furious with her who has deceived him. Poor fellow, who can blame him? I can see him now."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the waiting-maid, fleeing to the window. "Haste, haste away, or there will be murder done!"

"He is not there," returned my Lady in a low, calm voice, "but I see him all the same. Pallid with scorn, yet bent on avenging himself. Resolved to claim his wife at any hazard, even in spite of herself. It will be terrible that he should be here in any case; but if he found me here, as you say, there might be murder done. Not that I fear for myself, God knows: I am too wretched for that."

"Oh, my Lady, had you not better start at once?"

"No, Mary; I must go first to Dr Haldane's, since the time has come. But if, in the meantime, this—this unhappy man should arrive, be sure you send the carriage for me at once to the doctor's house. I can escape him that way for certain. Perhaps, then, I may never cross this threshold any more—never clasp my dear ones in my arms and call them mine again—never say: 'My own Walter—Richard—Letty.' How can I bear to think upon it! Don't cry, Mary, for you see *I* do not. You know what to do in case he comes; the carriage to Dr Haldane's instantly: and afterwards—we have settled that long ago."

"I shall forget nothing, dearest mistress. If I live, all will be done that you have resolved upon."

"Dear Mary, trusty friend, may Heaven reward you."

My Lady had her bonnet on by this time, but lifted up her veil to kiss her faithful servant. "If by God's gracious will, somehow or other this misery should after all have no evil end, Mary, how happy we shall be! How we shall talk of this with our arms round one another's necks! There is a friend, says the Scripture, which sticketh closer than a brother; but I have found a servant better even than such a friend. Good-bye, dear; if it should chance to be 'Good-bye.' Don't weep, don't speak. See that my path is clear, that I meet no one—Great Heaven, what is that knocking? Can he be come already?"

"No, dearest, no," sobbed the poor waiting-maid. "They are putting up the triumphal archway, that is all."

She left the room to see that there was nobody in the passage, or on the back-stairs, by which her mistress was about to leave the house.

"The triumphal archway," muttered my Lady with tearless aching eyes. "I would to Heaven they were putting the nails into my coffin instead."

CHAPTER VIII. FLED.

MY Lady returned to the Abbey at the usual luncheon-hour, and partook of that meal (if sitting at the table can be called so doing) with the rest of the party; while Mary Forest kept watch at the boudoir window, with her mistress's opera-glasses in her hand, scanning the Windmill Hill.

There was no likelihood of Derrick's coming for hours yet, since he had not arrived already by the same train that had brought old Jacob's letter; but there was just a possibility of this. However, he did not come. The unfrequented road, which on the morrow would be thronged with the vehicles of Sir Richard's guests, had not a single passenger. It was one of the two ways we have spoken of leading to Dalwynch, and the shorter in point of distance, although not of time, because of the winding hill; but Derrick, coming from the direction of Coveton (not by the Dalwynch line, but another railway), could approach Mirk by no other route.

Immediately after luncheon, the carriage drew up at the door.

"I will not offer to go with you, dearest mother," said Letty, "because there is so much to do at home, and the more because you will be absent yourself. But you will come back as soon as you can—there's a darling!—won't you? Nothing goes on as it should at the Abbey without you."

"Yes, dear Letty! I will come back as soon as I can."

My Lady cast a wistful look at her three children. She would have given a thousand pounds to have thrown her arms around their necks, and wept her fill; but such an indulgence might have cost them and her far more than that, or anything which money could estimate. What if her strength should fail her—if she should "break down," as the saying is, at this supremest moment? She could only trust herself to nod and smile.

The whole party went out to the front door to see her off. The two young ladies standing on the hall steps with their arms round one another's waists (although I much doubt if they had grown to be the friends that they once were); Master Walter kissing his white hand to her with all the grace and fondness of a lover; Sir Richard handing her into the carriage with stately but affectionate courtesy. "The lower road—to Lever's the watchmaker's in High Street," said he to the coachman, "and don't spare the horses." Then, as the carriage drove away, he observed to the others: "What a strange freak it is of mamma to be going to Dalwynch at such a time as this about her watch. However, she ought to be back by five o'clock at latest."

The carriage did return even before that hour; but it did not contain my Lady. It only brought back a letter from her, which the footman was instructed to place at once in the hands of her elder son. The man, however, had some difficulty in finding Sir Richard, who was superintending some finishing-touches that were being given to the interior of the marquee—the arrangement of certain flags over the place he was to occupy on the morrow. Sir Richard tore open the note, fearing he knew not what; then uttered a tremendous oath. His people stared, for unlike some "young masters," the baronet scarcely ever misbehaved himself in that way. "Where did you leave my Lady, sirrah?" inquired he roughly of the footman.

"At the railway station, Sir Richard. Her Ladyship took the train for town."

"Where is Miss Letty? Walter—Walter," cried the baronet, "come here."

"Hollo, what is it?" answered the captain, a little sulkily, for he was engaged in setting up an emblem composed of various weapons of war at the other end of the marquée; and pretty Polly, the gatekeeper's daughter, was handing him up certain highly-polished swords, and he was playfully accusing her of using them in transit as mirrors. "You haven't found out a mistake in the almanac, and that you came of age the day before yesterday, have you?"

"Worse than that," returned poor Sir Richard simply. "Read that, man. What, in Heaven's name, are we to do now?"

"Let us go in and see Letty," said Walter gravely, after he had read the note. "Perhaps she knows something about it; and if not, you may take your oath that Mary Forest does."

"Do *you*, Walter? Don't trifle with me," said the baronet earnestly; "if any business respecting yourself has taken my mother away, I conjure you to tell me all."

"No, Richard. I give you my word that I know of no reason for this extraordinary conduct. It is true that that letter from Moss Abrahams gave her some annoyance, but that matter was settled long ago. I am as surprised and dumbfounded as yourself."

"Dearest Richard!"—here he again perused my Lady's note—"urgent necessity compels me to leave home for a time. You will have the explanation on the 15th. That there may be many, many happy returns of to-morrow to you, dear boy, is the heartfelt prayer of your loving Mother."—"How extraordinarily strange! When is the 15th? Let's see."

"The day after to-morrow," rejoined Sir Richard gloomily. "What will tomorrow be without our mother? Good Heaven, how dreadful is all this! Is it possible, think you, to put the people off?"

"Utterly out of the question, Richard; we should require five hundred messengers."

They were walking on the lawn, and had now arrived at one of the open windows of the great ball-room, a splendid apartment, although the highly-decorated pink ceiling had been likened by a pert young architect (who wanted to persuade the baronet to let him pull down the Abbey, and build another one) to the ornaments on a twelfth-cake. Mrs Walter, Letty, and Arthur Haldane were all very busy here, but the last two not so entirely occupied with the work in hand as to be unaware of one another's presence. At another time, Sir Richard would have been annoyed at seeing them so close together, and obviously so well pleased with the propinquity, but now he was really glad to meet with the young barrister, for whose judgment he had a great respect.

"Letty—Arthur," cried he, "read this. Do either of you know, can either of you guess, what on earth it means?"

"Mamma not to be here to-morrow!" ejaculated the former, when she had read the note. "I can scarcely believe my eyes." But at the same time there came into her mind that vague but saddening talk which her mother had held with her but lately, when my Lady had said her malady was not one the doctors could cure. Arthur read the note twice over, not so much to master its contents, perhaps, as to frame his own reply to what had been asked of him.

"I certainly do not know," said he, "what can have taken your dear mother at such a time as this. We may be sure, however, it is no mere freak of fancy, but that it is done for what she believes to be your good."

"Our good!" broke forth Sir Richard impatiently. "How can it be for good that I should be placed to-morrow in a position the most embarrassing that can be conceived? What am I to say when people ask me 'Where is your mother?' Imagine what they will think of her absence on such an occasion, the most important"—

"Let us rather imagine, Richard," interrupted Letty, laying her hand upon his arm, "what our dear mother must be suffering at this moment. As Arthur says, it can be no trivial matter that takes her thus suddenly away from us; and although she may have over-estimated its urgency, we may be sure that it is her anxiety for others—that is, for us—which has caused her to do so. Mamma is incapable of a selfish action."

"I am not speaking for myself alone, Letty," returned the baronet hotly.

"I did not accuse you of doing so, Richard. What I mean is this, that however much you may feel this misfortune, mamma has to bear the burden of its cause—whatever that may be—alone. She is thinking at this moment of the alarm and sorrow she has excited here, and we maybe sure is feeling for us at least as much as we feel for ourselves; and in addition to that, she has this trouble to bear, at even the nature of which we cannot guess."

Sir Richard frowned, and did not reply; but Arthur unobserved stole Letty's hand, and pressed it, in token of his loving approval. "And who is the person who is to give us the explanation on the 15th, think you?" said Walter. "I'll wager—or at least I would do so, if I hadn't given up betting—that Mistress Forest can tell us if she would."

"Then let us send for her at once," cried Sir Richard hastily; "anything is better than this suspense."

When the servant called for this purpose had been despatched: "I do not presume," said Arthur gravely, "to dictate what is your duty; but if the case were mine, Sir Richard, and my mother had expressly stated that her motives would be explained at a certain date, I should hardly like to extract them beforehand from her confidential servant. Forgive me, for I know I am addressing one who is himself a man of the most scrupulous honour."

The baronet bit his lip. "I don't know, I'm sure, Haldane. It is true, since my mother has gone to town, that nothing we can do can bring her back in time for—But at all events there can be no harm in asking how long she is likely to be away.—Ah, here is Mistress Forest. We want to hear about my Lady, Mary. She has gone to London, it seems, and we are not to know why until the day after to-morrow. Now, we are not going to ask you her reasons."

"Thank you, Sir Richard," said Mistress Forest, her puckered eyes looking really grateful.

"But what we do desire is, that you will tell us how long she will be away."

"I am sure I can't tell, sir; Heaven knows I wish. I could," answered the waiting-maid fervently. "She sent a big box over to Dalwynch by the carrier yesterday: that's all I know about it."

"Then she herself is not going to give us the explanation in person, you think?" said the baronet gloomily.

"No, Sir Richard: not in person; at least, I believe not. Somebody else is going to do that for her."

"And you know who that will be?" returned the young man sternly.

"I think—at least; yes, I know, sir; but it's not me," added the waiting-maid hastily. "I hope I know my place better than that. But my Lady bade me say nothing about it, and, with all respect, wild horses should not tear it from me."

Here Mistress Forest, who had always entertained considerable terror of her austere young master, could not forbear casting a beseeching glance towards Arthur Haldane.

"We already know from Mr Haldane's own lips," observed Sir Richard with emphasis, and looking in the same direction, "that he is not in possession of the secret of my Lady's departure."

"I certainly said as much," returned Arthur haughtily; and with that, either because he was really annoyed, or did not wish to be further questioned, he stepped out upon the lawn, and walked away.

"All this is very unsatisfactory, and strange, and bad," said the baronet, after a considerable pause. "But

nothing is to be got, it seems, by asking questions. We must do then the best we can for to-morrow without my mother—you Letty, assisted by Mrs Walter here, must do the honours of the Abbey in her place—and I wish to Heaven," added he, as he turned upon his heel, "that the day was well over."

"What a nice agreeable temper Richard has, when anything goes wrong," observed Walter, twirling his moustaches. "I'm hanged if I don't think it's that which has driven my mother away from home. She naturally enough concludes he will be unbearable when he becomes the master."

"Fie, fie, Walter!" said Letty. "I think it is much more that she can no longer bear to listen to the cruel things she hears her two sons say of one another. She has spoken to me of it more than once of late with tears in her eyes."

"Well, Sir Richard *has* a bad temper, Letty, there's no doubt about that," observed Mrs Walter, striking in in defence of her husband.

"Yes; yet there are many things worse than that, Rose, and mamma has been accustomed to Richard all his life; but she has had trouble upon trouble for the last six months, *as I am sure you cannot deny*, and it is likely in the state of health to which I know she is reduced, that she feels herself totally unequal to the part she would be expected to play to-morrow."

"I think Mr Haldane knows more of the matter than he chooses to say," observed Rose, at once carrying the war into the enemy's camp.

"I don't think you quite understand him," returned Letty, executing the same strategic movement; "anything like duplicity is altogether foreign to his character."

"He looks simple enough certainly," remarked Rose quietly. "But I noticed that when Sir Richard asked him whether he knew, or could *guess* what had taken Lady Lisgard from home, he confined himself to replying that he did not know."

Letty made no answer, but applied herself with heightened colour to the occupation in which her brothers had interrupted her. Walter smiled sardonically, thinking of certain female savages he had been reading of that morning in some paper in the *Field*, *apropos* of rifle-grooves, who were expert in propelling poisoned darts from blow-pipes; then catching sight of his handsome face in one of the mirrors with which the ball-room was wainscoted, he nodded, as though he recognised some friend he was constantly in the habit of meeting, yet was always glad to see, and sauntered out. At first, he made mechanically for the marquee, but stopping himself, not as it seemed without some contention in his own mind, he turned his steps to some other part of the Park. "No," said he to himself gaily, "I will be a good boy. It is true, I have had devilish hard lines lately, but then it was partly deserved. How, the poor mother has had just as hard, and has not deserved them a bit. I will do nothing that can cause her trouble now—not even run the risk of a bit of harmless flirtation, for there always *is* a risk about that, somehow. I wonder whether Letty was right about her going away; I'm sure I can't help Richard quarrelling with me—he *will* do it. And then there was that matter of Moss Abraham's—upon my life it must have been very trying to the dear old lady. And then there was my affair with Rose—humph! Well, I'm very sorry, Heaven knows, if my conduct has in any way contributed to such a catastrophe; but it's something, my dear mother, let me tell you, when your troubles are of that sort that you *can* run away from them. What an infernal fool I have made of myself in every way!"

CHAPTER IX. THE UNINVITED GUEST.

OLD Jacob Forest had made a well-grounded complaint when he cried out with such vehemence that that fellow Derrick had actually left the front door open, and the Guard-ship and his rheumatism more exposed to the rigour of the elements even than usual; but to do his visitor justice, this rudeness was not committed with intention; Ralph knew not what he was doing; he was out of his mind with fury and despair.

"Damn her!" screamed he, plucking the little bunch of violets from where he had placed them so tenderly but an hour before; "so she was false, too, like the rest of them. She had no more heart in her than a woman of stone; and I have been worshipping her all my life, just as a savage worships his idol. No wonder I took to that young son of hers—how like! how like!—and like, too, in his selfish soul! Why, I was calling yonder Sea a while ago a cruel smiling traitress—because in her wrath I thought that she had swallowed this woman up. But the sea is honest enough compared to her. She puts up painted panes to my memory, does she, with the money of the very man she has married! Hypocrite! Wonton! Liar! She has held converse with me, knowing who I was, across that man's very grave, and let me pour my heart out before her, drop by drop, when she might have stanch'd it with a word. How *could* she do it? How *dared* she do it?—she that is a God-fearing woman, forsooth! But I suppose that all is fair against a castaway. Let her look to it now, though. Ralph Gavestone is not a man, as I told her then, to be crossed with impunity—far less to be cajoled, betrayed, insulted, Wronged! Richard Lisgard, too!—Sir Richard, as the bastard calls himself!—*your* hour of bitterness is drawing nigh too, and I will not spare you. There is no memory now of the beloved Dead to stay my hand; there is the knowledge of the treacherous living to make the blow all the surer and the more fatal. Love—nay, even the impress of where I thought love had lain within me, but it was not so—is cancelled out, and Mercy with it. Friendship—bah, I have found out what that is worth! There is nothing left me, nothing in the world, now, except Revenge! Lord it, Sir Richard, for yet a few hours more, among your truckling neighbours, your fawning tenants, for your time is short indeed. They may be your humble and obedient servants still, but what will they think of you, what will they say of you, behind your back, when they come to learn who you are? If your mother has the right to rule at Mirk, then I will rule there too: and you shall serve; and if not—then she

is my wife still, and leaves you for me. There will be a downfall for your pride! Lady Lisgard of Mirk Abbey to be claimed by a 'drunken brawler'—do you suppose that I forget such words as those—and forced to be once more plain Lucy Gavestone, for the wife of a vagabond like me has scarcely the right to be termed 'madam.' The law will give her to me: there is no doubt of that. The righteous Law, which is to be always upheld—remember that, my game-preserving friend—no matter what hardships it may entail upon individuals, or even what injustice it may commit in exceptional cases. How sweet it is to remember such words of wisdom, against which, in my ignorance, I was wont to fight tooth and nail. You will not forbid me the Abbey, I suppose, when I come thither to claim my wife. To-morrow, or next day at furthest, will introduce you to your stepfather; for I have made up my mind to acknowledge you, just as though you had been born in lawful wedlock.”

Breathing forth these cruel threats, and feeding upon their fulfilment in his mind, Ralph Derrick lay awake for hours in his chamber at the *Royal Marine*, and had hardly fallen asleep when the omnibus started for the morning train. The horn, and noise of the wheels aroused him, and he leaped up out of bed with an oath, because he knew that he had missed that, his earliest opportunity, of getting to Mirk. However, having rung his bell, he learned from the waiter that it would be quite possible yet, by taking a carriage and four horses, to reach the junction before the Coveton train, which, besides, had to wait there for the mid-day mail. “Of course,” said the waiter, rubbing his hands, and speaking with a hesitation induced by the contemplation of Ralph's scanty kit, “it will be a very considerable expense, and perhaps”——

“Curse the expense, and you too!” ejaculated the whilom gold-digger in his old flaming manner. “Here's a ten-pound note; and let my bill be settled and the horses put to within five minutes.”

“But your breakfast, sir?”

“A glass of brandy and a piece of bread: that's all I want; quick, quick!”

The waiter departed at full speed—his anxiety to execute Derrick's orders being at least equalled by his desire to communicate them to his mistress and the chambermaids. They were only accustomed at the *Royal Marine* to the Newly Married, who were rarely in a hurry, and never broke their fast upon brandy and bread; and to these Ralph certainly afforded a lively contrast.

The four horses carried him along at a great rate, and the old-fashioned carriage swung from side to side down every hill, so that if motion could have soothed his perturbed spirit, on the principle of like to like, it should have grown calmer with every mile. But fast as he sped, his thoughts flew on before him—and in them he was already at Mirk Abbey, denouncing, exposing, Avenging, until physical inaction became intolerable, and thrusting his head and shoulders out at the window, he bade the astonished post-boys pull up, and let him out, for that he would have no more of such travel. Then once more he pursued his way on foot, and had walked two-score of miles before he put up for the night, at one of the same inns at which he had stopped upon his way down to Coveton.

But exercise, even in this violent degree, could now no longer avail him. He was still consumed with bitterness and anger, and the desire of vengeance. He could not sleep; and he had lost all appetite for food. He drank, as he had never drunk since he was in Cariboo; glass after glass of raw spirits, to the wonder of his tolerably well-seasoned host, who looked to have him for quite a permanent guest, overtaken, as it seemed must come to pass, by delirium tremens. Brandy, however, could now affect him nothing; except perhaps that it added fuel to his rage. On the third day, he grew impatient of his slow progress, and took the train upon a line of rails that brought him within a dozen miles of Mirk. As soon as he got out at the station, he inquired for a vehicle to take him to his journey's end.

“You wish to go to Mirk Abbey, do you not, sir?” said the porter respectfully (for Ralph always travelled first class).

“That's my business, and not yours,” retorted Derrick angrily, but without surprise; for it seemed to him natural enough that the purpose which was consuming his whole being should be recognised in his external features.

“Nay, sir; I meant no harm. It is not business, but pleasure, that is taking all the world to Mirk to-day. Everything here that has four wheels, and even that has two, has been already engaged; but if you don't mind waiting an hour or so, there will be a return-fly.”

But, with a contemptuous oath, Ralph had already resumed his journey on foot, looking neither to left nor right, but keeping his eyes steadfastly fixed on the wind-mill, he could even now see afar off, and which he knew crowned Mirkland Hill. The afternoon was already far spent, and by the time he reached the spot in question the dusk had already deepened into dark. On one side of the road lay the white gate and little hedge belonging to Belcomb; on the other, the great Windmill, with its dilapidated wall still unrepaired, and over which a young man was leaning and looking towards the valley with longing eyes. Ralph followed the direction of his gaze, and perceived the noble outlines of Mirk Abbey “picked out” in lines of many-coloured flame—its every window aglow with light, and the shadowy Park itself islanded with two large shining spots, which old experience taught him at once were walls of canvas well lit up within.

“What is going on there?” asked he of the miller, for such the young man's dress proclaimed him to be.

“Why, victuals and drink, to be sure,” replied the lad, in a tone that bespeaks a grievance; “and music and pretty girls to dance to it, and fireworks, and I don't know what all. And here am I, the only young man in the parish that is not to enjoy himself at it: just because Master Hathaway happens to have a pressing order in hand, I am to keep the mill going all to-night. I don't say I wishes it to rain—for that would spoil everybody's sport—but if the wind would be so good as to fall, and stop the mill, why, I wouldn't whistle to try and set it agoin again.”

“Yes, by the by,” said Ralph, “I heard something at the station about some goings-on at Mirk, but I didn't take much heed. What is it, lad? And why are they all so gay down yonder at the Abbey?”

“Why, it's Sir Richard coming of age, to be sure,” answered the lad. “You must hail from a darned long way off, not to know that; and yet I seem to know your face. Why, you're Mr Derrick, ain't you, as used to lodge at the Lisgard Arms? I thought so. Well, you'll find nobody there now, for Steve has been taken into favour again

—thanks to my Lady, I believe—and is up at the Park with the rest; and they won't let *you* into the grounds, you know; so you might just as well stop here, and have a chat with a poor fellow as"—

Striking his stick with violence against the ground, Ralph strode away down the hill. This, then, was the very time for him to come upon the inmates of Mirk Abbey, while they were holding their heads highest, and to cast them down to the very dust. If his determination had needed strength, if the sharpness of his revenge had wanted an edge, both had been supplied by the careless words of the miller's boy. Before the night was out, not only that lad, but all the parish, nay, all the County, should learn that he, Ralph Derrick, could not only be no longer forbidden to enter the Lisgards' doors, but would perhaps even rule within them as the husband of my Lady herself.

The village, as he had been forewarned, was as deserted as Auburn itself, and the inn fast closed. But the iron gates of the Abbey were flung back, as though to welcome all comers, and the rheumatic lodge-keeper and his wife had betaken themselves with their pretty daughter to the festive scene within. So Ralph strode, undenied, up the long dense avenue, made darker by the glancing lights at the far end, like some embodiment of Misfortune, about to paralyse Youth and Hope with a word. The fairylike splendours of the scene before him seemed to him like a house of painted cards, which, at his finger-touch, should collapse in utter ruin; his frown should silence all those melodies that jarred so on his reluctant ears; that merriment should be turned into wailing, or still better, into scornful laughter. The scene of pride should be made a place of shame.

No one of all the crowd of holiday-makers seemed to take notice of his presence, though he carried with him, from spot to spot, the only scowling face that was to be seen among them. He stood at the opening of the great marquee, and watched the dancers; his evil eye scanned each gay couple as they whirled before him, but settled upon none whom it had come to wither. Sir Richard and his brother had inaugurated the proceedings there by taking part in a few dances, but had then withdrawn themselves to the ball-room within. In the second tent, reserved for the humblest class of guests, the mirth was already growing somewhat uproarious; but there was one among the company, who, though he took two glasses for other folk's one, looked as sober as an undertaker; and Derrick came behind this man and plucked his arm.

"Steve," said he, "I want a word with you. Come out with me, and leave these capering idiots."

The landlord of the *Lisgard Arms* did not even make a pretence of being glad to recognise his late lodger: he had been received, as Hathaway's lad had stated, into favour at the Abbey once more, through the intercession of my Lady, but he was still upon his good-behaviour, and it excessively annoyed him to see the original cause of Sir Richard's displeasure with himself once more at Mirk, and intruding where he was least welcome. However, the two withdrew together apart from the crowd.

"What is it, Derrick? I think it is foolish of you venturing here. I am sorry to say that I have promised not to receive you again at my inn. I did not dream of your coming back, or else I would never have done so."

"Don't trouble yourself about that, Steve. If I stay at Mirk at all, it will be here, at the Abbey."

"At the Abbey! You have been drinking, Derrick. Now, take my advice, and be off; at all events, for the present. To-day, when everybody is being entertained by Sir-Richard, folks would resent any insult put upon the family, I can promise you—it's the worst day you could possibly have selected to force your way in here."

"No, Steve, the best day—the only day. I would have given ten thousand pounds, I tell you, rather than have missed it, or have arrived to-morrow instead."

"I am glad you are so rich, man," returned Steve drily, "for it is the impression down here that you lost all your money upon that French horse at the Derby; poor Master Walter, too, you led him into a pretty mess, it seems."

"Curse Master Walter!" ejaculated Derrick angrily. "He's a mean skunk, if ever there was one."

"People don't think so hereabouts, Mr Derrick; and I should recommend you not to express your opinion quite so loudly. If any of these volunteers heard you speaking of their captain in that way, you would not escape with a whole skin."

"That's my look-out," answered Derrick roughly. "I want you to tell me where I can find Sir Richard. I have particular business with him; something for his private ear."

"It isn't about my Lady, is it?" inquired the other eagerly.

"Yes, it is. How came you to think of that? Eh?"

"How could I be off on it, man? Is she not the uppermost thought of everybody here? Do you really bring any news of her? And, look you, if it's bad news, don't tell it. I don't like that ugly look of yours, Mr Derrick. If you have done any harm to my Lady, I, for one, will help to wring your neck round."

"Do you mean to say she is not here?" gasped Ralph, without heeding his last words.

"Of course not; didn't you know that? She's gone away, all of a sudden. Sir Richard quite broke down when he alluded to it in his speech. He said that urgent business had compelled her to be in London; but Roberts told me that the family themselves have no idea why she took herself off"—

"Ah, but they do though," exclaimed Derrick scornfully. "And I know, too, or I'm much mistaken. She's trying *that* dodge on, is she? Not at home, eh? And she supposes that I shall leave my card, and go away like any other well-conducted visitor. She'll find me an acquaintance whom it is not so easy to drop, I fancy. So my Lady has fled, has she?" continued he. "Hadn't the pluck to blazon it out, eh? She won't, however, have flown very far from her young chicks, I reckon. And, perhaps, it's just as well that I should cut the comb of this young bantam, Sir Richard, while his mother's out of the way; not that I feel an ounce of pity for her, either."

"You'll feel a horsewhip about your shoulders, Ralph Derrick, before you're a quarter of an hour older, or else I'm much mistaken," observed Steve ruefully. "I'll have nothing more to say to you, and that's a fact. You are not only drunk, but stark mad. I never heard a fellow go on with such a farrago of rubbish. Look here, if you'll come home with me at once, you shall have as much brandy as you can drink; but you shan't kick up a row here. See, one of the ball-room windows is wide open, and Sir Richard himself, for all you know, may—Confound the fellow, it will be only kindness to tell Styles, the policeman, to take him up."

Derrick had burst away from Steve, and was running across the lawn to the very place where the Lisgard

family had discussed their mother's departure upon the preceding evening.

CHAPTER X. OUT OF THE CAGE.

THE immense ball-room was now a blaze of light, and full, though by no means crowded, with brilliant company. One of the windows, as Steve had said, had been thrown up, and through it the scene was as distinctly displayed to Ralph as though he were within.

He stood there alone, for a feeling of respect kept others from the immediate neighbourhood.

He beheld fair Letty, hostess and belle in one, moving from group to group, who broke out into smiles at her approach; he beheld dark Rose whirl by "in gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls"—the self-same "parure" which had enslaved poor Anne Rees—and followed by many an admiring eye. He beheld Master Walter's smiling face bent down to whisper to some blushing girl, who forgot, perhaps, for the moment that the handsome captain was already married—that he had been entrapped by that scheming young person with the extremely self-confident manner. Lastly, he beheld the man he sought talking with a gentleman of apoplectic habit, and the air of a prosperous licensed victualler, but who was no less a personage than the Earl of Marrobone, and Lord-lieutenant of Wheatshire. His Lordship had sought the open window for fresh air, and the two were conversing upon county matters, in which Sir Richard, young as he was, already took the keenest interest.

"You will take your seat on the bench at once, Sir Richard, I hope," were the first words which Derrick caught. "Your commission is, of course, already made out, and you will probably receive it to-morrow."

"I thank you, my Lord. Yes, I shall make a point of being a regular attendant at the petty sessions."

"And you will be wanted, too, at Dalwynch; for between ourselves, the old general yonder is a little past his work in that way. I don't wish to prejudice you, I am sure, against a man in such a respectable position; but the fact is, he and I are not such good friends as we might be. He wants me to make Mr Chesham—you know, of course, who that is, the relation in which they stand to one another, and so on—a magistrate for the county. Now, I do think that that is a distinction which should never be conferred upon any natural son—that is, unless the family of the father should be really of mark, which is not the case with our friend the general, whatever may be said of Lady Theresa. I don't think, because a man has married into the peerage, that he should therefore be himself admitted to all the privileges of good birth."

"With all deference, my Lord," returned Sir Richard stiffly, "I consider that under no circumstances whatever, no matter whether the father be peer or commoner, should the commission of the peace be conferred upon a bastard."

"Then Richard Lisgard must never sit upon the bench at Dalwynch!" exclaimed a malignant voice close beside the speaker.

In an instant, Sir Richard was upon the lawn without, face to face with his insulter. No one in the ball-room, save the two gentlemen who had been conversing together, had overheard the exclamation, and his Lordship had not caught it distinctly. The band was playing on, as accurately as before, and the dancers were dancing in tune; the cavaliers were whispering their soft nothings, and the ladies making their sweet replies, while the two men without—the one so scrupulously apparelled in the latest fashion, the other dishevelled, travel-stained, and in all respects what we call "a Rough," but both as brave as lions—were grappling one another by their throats. Sir Richard, who never forgot any man's face—a faculty not uncommon with persons of his class and character—had recognised Ralph Derrick, the turbulent interloper in his parish, the evil counsellor of his brother, at the first glance; and enraged at his audacious trespass at such a time, quite as much as by his late brutal insult to himself, which he set down as the result of drink, he threw himself upon the gold-digger with the utmost fury. The Earl of Marrobone stepped outside also, and closed behind him the ball-room window; the stout old nobleman was one of the coolest hands in England, and never lost his presence of mind. Even thus debarred from making that public exposure of the young baronet which Derrick had promised himself, he might have said something which his Lordship would not have forgotten—for he was one of those who had seen too much of the world to believe anything untrue merely because it seemed impossible—but that, at the first touch of Sir Richard's fingers, Ralph's fury deprived him of all utterance except a few desperate imprecations. He would have liked, with folded arms, to have impeached the young baronet as a base-born impostor (for he felt convinced that the reason for my Lady's flight was known to him and the rest of the family), and have stated his own wrongs in a few earnest and pregnant words before the whole company in yonder room; but now that he had his enemy so close, "the blind wild beast of force within him, whose home is in the sinews of a man," was driven to strike and strike again. So the precious half-minute that elapsed before help came to Sir Richard, was wasted, and Derrick found himself helpless, and with his wrongs untold, in the clutch of half-a-dozen men, and one of them the village policeman, whom Steve had found at last, and despatched for that very purpose.

"Take him and lock him up," exclaimed Lord Marrobone, perceiving that Sir Richard was too excited to speak. "A night in the watch-house will sober the drunken brute, and cool his courage. Take him away, I say," for Ralph began to weave afresh his choicest flowers of speech—mere onion-ropes of the wickedest words—"and put the foulmouthed scoundrel into quod!" So they bore Ralph forth, not without very rough treatment, through the gates, and cast him into a small but well-secured tenement, known as "the Cage," but so seldom used in the orderly little village, that it was in the occupation of a certain white rabbit and her family (pets of the constable's children), who had to be ejected, to make room for this very different tenant.

Sir Richard Lisgard went up stairs to refit, and returned to the ball-room, where none had even remarked his absence, with an unimpeachable white cravat concealing an ugly bruise upon his windpipe; but all smiles had departed from his noble features, and it was observed by Mrs Walter Lisgard, in confidential conversation with the Honourable Poppin Jay, that her dear brother-in-law looked more like Don Quixote de la Mancha even than usual. He had made up his mind that, under the circumstances, it was impossible he could be upon the bench of magistrates while Derrick's case was being entered into, and was disturbed by the apprehension that the old general would not look upon the matter in a sufficiently important light, or punish the offender with all the rigour of the law.

By no means quietly, however, had the affair passed off without doors. There was nothing, according to rumour, which drunken Derrick had not done in the way of misbehaviour towards the young baronet, from bad words to the use of a bowie-knife, and nothing which he did not deserve. The news flew from mouth to mouth like wildfire; the tenantry, the peasantry, and the household were all in possession of the facts—and of very much more than the facts, within half an hour of their real or supposed occurrence. Last of all to hear it was Mistress Forest, for whom a wholesome respect was entertained by all the domestics, and to whom, being notoriously the object of Derrick's affections, it was of course a delicate matter to communicate such intelligence. Little Anne Rees, however, stole up stairs to Mary's own room, where she knew my Lady's waiting-maid was sitting, far from all the noise and gaiety, and thinking sadly of her poor dear mistress and her troubles. "O ma'am, please ma'am, such a dreadful thing have happened!" said she. "Mr Derrick have come back again.—Don't ye faint; don't ye take on so" (for Mistress Forest had turned as white as Anne's own apron); "he's not dead. But he's gone and pitched into Sir Richard before all the company, and they fought together dreadful, I don't know how long."

"What did he say, girl?" exclaimed Mistress Forest eagerly; "I mean, what did they fight about?"

"Well, he did not say much, didn't Mr Derrick, beyond cussing most uncommon strong. It took six on 'em to carry him away, for all the world like a corpse, except for his kicking and swearing; and when they said he would be up before the bench on Thursday, he said 'He wished it was to-morrow, that was all;' and at the same time he laughed that wicked, that it went quite cold to the small of my back."

"And where have they put the poor man, after all?"

"In the Cage, ma'am. The key was not to be found, but they've barred him up just like a wild beast. And oh, Mistress Forest, it isn't my place, and I ask your pardon, but don't you give him no more encouragement, for he *is* a wild beast, and nothing less, if you could only see him."

"That will do, Anne; though I'm obliged to you for coming to tell me. I must speak to Sir Richard to-morrow, and try and beg him off. Good-night."

"And aren't you coming down to supper, nor to see the fireworks, nor nothing?" inquired the little maid in amazement.

"No, Anne; I was not in a humour for such things before, and certainly I am not so now. I am going to bed."

But no sooner had the grateful little girl—who, though she waited no longer on Mrs Walter (who had brought her own maid with her), yet always remembered that she owed her enfranchisement to Mistress Forest—gone down stairs, than Mary took up her bonnet and cloak, and hurried softly after her. It was impossible not to meet persons at every turn; but it was not difficult, in the general hubbub and excitement, to avoid their observation; and this she did. The night was very dark; and once away from the gleam and glitter of the house and lawn, Mary had to slacken her pace even down the avenue she knew so well. When she was half-way down it, as nearly as she could guess, she heard a noisy throng of men approaching from the other direction, and shrank on one side, behind a tree. Some of them carried lanterns, and as they went by, she recognised Styles, the rural policeman, and also Mr Steve.

"I am as sorry as can be," the latter was saying, "and would much rather see the poor fellow well away."

"Take care you go no further than wishing, however," responded the guardian of the law. "It would be a bad night's work for any man who should let that fellow out, mind you: ordered into custody by the Lord-lieutenant hisself, and charged with assault and battery of a baroknight—I never set eyes on such an owdacious scamp."

"He's simply mad, that's all," returned Steve, sadly—"mad with drink. For whoever heard one in his senses, or even drunk in a natural way, talk such infernal rubbish! Didn't he say he was 'my Lady's' husband!" The answer was drowned in a great shout of laughter, and so the men passed on. Mary waited until she was sure there were no more to come, then walked on with her arms outstretched before her, as fast as she dared go. Suddenly there was a sharp and rusty shriek behind her, and a glare of lurid light which shewed her the gateway right in front.

"They have begun to fire the rockets," muttered she; "so there will be nobody in the village, that is certain." The little street, much lighter than the way by which she had hitherto come, was indeed quite empty, but by no means noiseless; a sound of confused shouting came dully up from the bottom of the hill, where, as she well knew, the Cage was situated; and truly, as Anne Rees had said, it struck upon the ear like the roaring of some angry beast making night hideous. Mary stopped for a moment to listen; and when she went on, her face was paler, though not less determined-looking than before.

"Sir Richard is a bastard—a bastard—a bastard! My Lady is not nearly so good as she should be; and I'm her husband in the lock-up! Down with the Lisgards—down with them; and down they shall come!"

These were the words, but interspersed with the most hideous imprecations, with which Mistress Forest's ears were greeted as she approached the little round house. Taking advantage of a momentary pause in the stream of denunciation, she knocked with her clenched hand at the nail-studded door.

"Sir Richard is a bastard! no more Sir Richard than you are!" shrieked the voice within. "Be sure you go to the magistrates' meeting at Dalwynch on Thursday, and let all Mirk go with you; then shall you see pride have a fall, and the Lisgards come down with a run! Down with them—down with them—and down they shall come!"

"Ralph—Ralph Derrick, it is me."

"Who's me? a woman?" inquired the prisoner eagerly. "Then I'll tell you about my Lady, because you'll enjoy it. She's *not* my Lady; she's no more my Lady than you are."

"Ralph Gavestone, I know that," answered Mistress Forest, with her mouth glued to a crack in the door.

"Oh, you know that, do you? Then you must be the devil, whom I have lately suspected to be of the female gender, and am now convinced of it. You are of course aware, then, that I am her husband?"

"Yes, I am.—Will you be quiet, and go away to Dalwynch, and not try to enter the Abbey grounds again this night, if I let you out?"

"Certainly. To-day is Tuesday, or it was so before midnight. I shall therefore have to wait for my revenge till Thursday, if I am not set free; whereas, if you let me out, I can go to work at once; I can see an attorney to-morrow morning. That should please you rarely, if you are indeed the devil. There's another bolt still over the hole through which I kicked Steve's leg. I left my mark on some of them, mind you—R. G."

Mary Forest had opened the Cage; and behold there stood her whilom lover, bleeding and ragged, his red beard plucked a thousand ways, his features haggard, his eyes flaming with rage and hate.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said he, with something of softness in his turbid but vehement speech. "I might have known that, if I had thought a little. But it's no good, my partridge—plump still, though a little gray. I'm meat for your mistress now; I am the master of Mirk; or at least I shall be in a day or two. I'm her Ladyship's husband—better luck than she deserves, you'll think; and I can't be two women's husband at the same time, any more than my Lady could have two mates. That was her little mistake, for which she's about to reap the fruits. Sir Richard is a bastard—a bastard—a bastard!"

"You said that if I unbarred this door, you would start for Dalwynch," observed Mistress Forest firmly. "You used to be a man whose word could be relied on. Why do you not go?"

"I am going at once, my plump one. You have revenged yourself and me at the same time. There is no kindness in this, I well understand, you know; there is no such thing as kindness in the world."

"You are wrong there, Ralph Gavestone. It is because I love my mistress, rather than pity *you*—although I *do* pity you still—that I have come hither to save you from a night's lodging in such a place. It would have grieved my mistress to the heart to think you were so served, I know."

"To the *what?*" returned Ralph with a savage laugh. "To her *heart*, did you say? Why, the thing doesn't exist, wench! If, however, there does still cling to her anything of the sort, when I tell them that Sir Richard's a bastard, that'll wring it."

"Blessed are the Merciful, for they shall receive mercy," cried Mistress Forest, terrified at the deadly menace of his tone, and uttering her words as though they were a charm against an evil spirit.

"Blessed are the merciful!" echoed Ralph bitterly. "That may be so, for I have never known them; but cursed are the treacherous and the false! You have heard of the avenging angel—well, though my wings are so tattered and torn just now, that's me. Do you see the mimic lightning yonder over the Abbey? It will be stricken to-morrow from turret to basement by a forked shaft. Down with the Lisgards, and down they shall come!"

Shrieking this to a sort of frenzied measure, he suddenly broke away, and took the Dalwynch road, up Mirkland Hill. Mary listened with some feeling of relief to his fading strains, then sighed, and wiped from her eyes a few honest tears.

"He was not always a bad man, I am sure," soliloquised she pitifully, "and now God forgive him—he knows not what he's doing! He is mad."

CHAPTER XI. THE RECONCILIATION.

THE day after a great festivity in a great house is generally a dull one. It begins late; for both servants and guests are wearied, and there is nothing about it which is not inferior to other days except the luncheon, which in the way of "sweets," at all events, is always exceptionally good. Sir Richard, however, who went through life as nearly as could be to an automaton, was up at his usual time; and descending to the empty breakfast-room, beheld, seated in an arm-chair which he had wheeled to the window, a little wizzened old man, in brightest Hessian boots, drab breeches, and a cut-away coat with flap-pockets of the fashion of half a century ago.

"Dr Haldane!" exclaimed the young man in extreme amazement. "God bless my soul *and* body!"

"I hope he will, sir," rejoined the visitor drily, extending three fingers somewhat stiffly.

"No, sir; surely your whole hand!" cried the baronet warmly. "Your face is the pleasantest sight—save that of my dear mother's—that I could hope to set eyes on in Mirk Abbey; and I am not going to be fobbed off with such a salutation as that."

"You get nothing more from me, Richard, unless the business I have come about—very much against the grain, I can tell you—gets satisfactorily accomplished."

"Does it relate to my dear mother, sir?"

"Of course it does, young man. What else, do you think, would have had power to break my resolution—to bring me hither—to this room, in which I have not set foot these twenty years, and where I last sat, side by side—with— But what is that to you? I suppose a man is not very likely to be moved by the memories of a dead father, who pays no respect to the feelings of his living mother."

"I am not aware, Dr Haldane," began Sir Richard with some haughtiness—

"I know *that*, sir," broke in the other impetuously. "You are so wrapped up in selfishness—you and that scampish brother of yours—that neither of you have any thought except for your own miserable quarrels. You were not aware, I dare say, that their constant repetition is driving your mother into her grave, as they have already driven her from her once happy home; and it is because you don't know it—because you won't see it—that I am come hither, once for all, to inform you of the fact. But perhaps such a little matter has no interest in your eyes: in which case, I assure you, since it is entirely for her sake, and not at all for yours, that I have come, I shall be exceedingly glad to go away again."

"Have you any message to deliver, Dr Haldane," asked the baronet with an angry flush, "direct from my mother, or are you merely stating your own doubtless valuable, but quite unasked-for opinions?"

"I have a message from her to deliver to you, and to the rest of you, young man; and if you think it worth while to send for your brother and sister, you had better do so."

The young man rang the bell, and gave the necessary orders. Dr Haldane took up a book of family prayers that lay beside him, and grunted cynically as he read Sir Richard's name on the title-page. "What a work for a fellow like this to write his name in, who drives his mother out of her own house!" muttered he, and then affected to be immersed in the contents. The baronet did not reply, but occupied himself in opening his letters, one of which was from Madame de Castellan. That lady expressed herself as "desolated" at the news of her old friend's departure from the Abbey, the cause of which she was dying to hear. "If, however," ran the postscript, "the absence of my Lady was for any reason likely to continue, might not Mary Forest be despatched, at all events in the meantime, to Belcomb, where Madame was absolutely without any waiting-maid at all—with the exception of old Rachel—until another could be procured from France, to supply the place of wicked Annette, departed almost without a word of warning."

"Cunning old wretch!" murmured Sir Richard, crumpling up the pale thin paper with its scratchy foreign caligraphy, and throwing it into the grate. "She thinks of nothing but herself."

"How odd!" exclaimed the little doctor bitterly. "The lady's case must be quite unique."

Not a word more was spoken by either until Letty entered, a little pale, but looking exquisitely lovely.

"Dear Dr Haldane, who would have thought of seeing you *here*? How pleased I am!"

The doctor rose with alacrity from his seat, and kissed her affectionately upon the forehead.

"I am sure," said she with earnest gravity, "that you have brought us news of dearest mamma."

"So *you* have thought of her, have you, little one?" answered he fondly. (Letty was about three inches taller than the doctor.) "I fancied she would have been no longer missed. Everybody was so happy here yesterday, I am told; and everything went on so well without her."

"It did not, indeed," returned Letty indignantly. "Nothing seemed to go right in her absence, notwithstanding all I could do; and as for being happy, I can answer for myself and my brothers, that not five minutes elapsed all day without our thinking of her, and grieving for her loss. And oh, dear Dr Haldane, do you know why she has left us in this sad manner, and when we shall see her back again?"

"I have her own explanation of why she has left Mirk Abbey," replied the doctor; "but as for her return, that will depend upon yourselves—I mean upon Sir Richard and Captain Lisgard. For *you*, Letty, she bids me say have been at all times what a loving child should be to a parent.—Master Walter, your servant, sir.—No; I will not shake hands with a man who ruins his mother by gambling debts, and breaks her heart with hatred of his own brother."

"That is not true, at least I do hope, Walter?" said Sir Richard quickly.

"No; false, upon my honour," returned the captain. "My mother never told you to say that, sir."

"Not quite that—no, she did not," admitted the little old man, whose eyes had begun to lose their hard and inexorable expression, notwithstanding his harsh words, from the moment that Walter entered the room. It was so difficult even for a social philosopher to be severe and stern with that young man. "Yet I am bound to say, Walter, that it is you who have been most to blame with respect to that good mother, who only lives but for her children, and whose very love for them has compelled her to withdraw herself from beneath this roof. I will not now dwell upon your clandestine marriage; I leave yourself to imagine how the want of trust in your best friend as well as parent evinced in that hasty step must have wounded her loving heart. Nor do I wish—that is to say, your mother herself requests me not to bear hardly upon you with respect to your gambling debts. You know the full extent of them perhaps—yes, I was afraid of that—better than she does even yet; but she has paid enough of them already to seriously embarrass her own affairs."

"I have made a solemn promise never to bet or gamble more, Dr Haldane," said the captain hoarsely.

"I am glad of it, Walter; but what I was about to say was, that in this case, as well as in that of your marriage, it was not so much the error itself, as the want of frankness evidenced by your concealment of the matter. To be ashamed of having done wrong, is a proper feeling enough; but if it be not accompanied by the acknowledgment of the offence, it only shews one to be a coward, not a penitent. However, bad as your conduct has been in these two particulars, your mother would doubtless have done her best to forget, as she hastened in both instances to forgive it. But what she could *not* forget, since it happened every day and every hour, were the quarrels between yourself and your brother." Here the doctor turned sharply round on the young baronet, who had been hitherto listening, not, perhaps, without complacency, to the catalogue of his brother's misdeeds.—"I think, from what I have seen myself, Richard, that it is *you* who are most in fault here. It is no use your looking proud and cold on me. I never cared three brass farthings for such airs, though they now and then misbecame even your poor father, who was worth a dozen of you. But this ridiculous assumption of superiority—founded upon mere accident of birth—naturally offends a high-spirited young man like Walter, who, if he was in your place, would certainly not make himself *odious* in that way, however he might fail in other matters belonging to your position, which suffers nothing, I readily allow, in your able hands. That you have the administrative faculty in a high degree, sir, I concede; but this is not Russia, and if it were, you are not the Czar."

"No man in Mirk ever called me a tyrant, Dr Haldane."

"Perhaps no man ever dared, sir; but *I* dare to say that a son whose conduct is such that his mother can no longer bear to witness it, is something worse than a tyrant. And be sure that if you continue so to behave, you will never see her face under this roof again."

"My God, but this is very horrible!" cried Sir Richard, striking his forehead. "I had no idea—I never dreamed that matters were coming to any such pass as this.—Walter—brother, did it seem to you that we were so very like to Cain and Abel?"

The two young men embraced, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

"Oh, when you tell her what you have seen, sir, do you think my mother will come back?" cried Richard, with the tears in his fine eyes.

"I cannot say that; I am sure, however, that she will be greatly comforted. May I tell her that this is not a mere impulse of the moment, but that you are resolved from this time forth to be brothers indeed?"

"I will do my very best, Walter."

"And I mine, Richard," answered the other. "Don't reproach yourself like that"—for the vast frame of his elder brother shook with sobs—"it is much more my fault than yours: and you have been very good to me about my debts; kinder than most fellows in your position would have been—yes, you have, Dick; yes, you have. How very, very long it is since I have called you Dick; not since we were at school together! You used to call me Watty, then, you know."

"Yes, Watty; yes. I had almost forgotten it. Let us go to our mother at once, lad—as we used to do when we made up our quarrels in the old times—and ask her to come back again, and take her place here, where we all miss her so much.—Where is she, Dr Haldane?"

"I don't know—that is, I may not tell, my boy," returned the old gentleman hesitatingly, who, with Letty's hand fast clasped in his, was staring out of window as hard as he could, but his eyes were very dim.

"Have you nothing more to tell us, sir?" asked Sir Richard humbly.

"Well, no, boys. The letter"—

"The letter!" ejaculated Letty; "I remember now that dear mamma told me herself that when this very thing should come to pass—although I little knew at the time to what she was alluding—we should find a letter in her desk."

"It is not there now: she put it into my hands, and I—I tore it up," observed the doctor. "I have told you faithfully all that it contained, with one exception. I do not choose to speak of that, dear Letty, and I have your mother's permission not to do so."

"Let me speak of it, then," said Sir Richard, stealing his arm round his sister's waist, and kissing her very tenderly. "The message the doctor will not give respects yourself, dear, and his son Arthur. My foolish pride"—

"Pride, indeed!" broke in the little old man impetuously; "your confounded impertinence, I call it."

"Very well, doctor," continued the baronet smiling; "let it be so, if you will. I had the audacity to suppose, Letty, that Mr Arthur Haldane was not good enough for you."

"Nor is he," contested the little doctor with irritation. "Nobody's good enough for Letty Lisgard. But he is as good as can be found in England, that I will say, though the young man is my own son. And if he does not make you a pattern husband, I'll cut him off with a shilling."

"I shall be glad to give you away to such an honest fellow, Letty," said the baronet warmly; "so let that matter be considered settled."

It was very pleasant to see the blushing girl hiding her tearful face in the old man's arms. "O mamma, mamma," murmured she, "how happy I should be if you were but with us!"

"Well, well, that will be soon, I hope, my dear," said the doctor, patting her silken head. "I will do all I can on my part to persuade her: I am sure I shall make her happy with this news."

"Yes; but in the meantime," said Letty, "how terrible it must be for her to be all alone. If you know where she is, can you not at least send Forest to be with her?"

"No, no; but, by the by, I have forgotten to do your mother's bidding with respect to that very person. She expressly desired that until her own return to Mirk, Mary may be sent to Belcomb, where Madame de Castellan is just now in saddest need of her."

"Ay, she writes to me that she has lost her French maid," said Sir Richard, picking up the crumpled note: "in that case, Mary had better go off at once."

"There is worse trouble at Belcomb than that," remarked the doctor gravely. "That poor fellow Derrick, who, I hear, made so much disturbance at the *fête* yesterday, has met with a sad accident."

"Why, the man was put in the Cage quite safe," said Sir Richard.

"Yes; but unfortunately for himself, he was let out again, and starting in the dark over Mirkland Hill, whole drunk, and half mad, the poor wretch wandered into the mill-yard."

"Through that gap in the wall!" exclaimed the baronet with excitement. "Didn't I say the very last time we went by, that some accident would happen there, through that man Hathaway's neglect?"

"Well, it has happened now, with a vengeance," pursued the doctor drily. "I was sent for this morning at two o'clock, to Belcomb, where this poor fellow had been carried, because it was a better place for him to lie in than the mill. Hathaway had been working overtime, it seems; the sails were going till near midnight, and the story is that this poor fellow strayed beneath them, and was absolutely taken up and carried round; but, at all events, he lies there, very ill—dying, I think—with concussion of the brain, and Heaven knows what beside. I dare not move him even to examine his ribs."

"Good God! what can we do for him?" exclaimed Sir Richard. "Is there nothing we can send?"

"He has everything he requires, or that he ever will have need of, poor fellow, in this world. But old Rachel is not a good hand at nursing, while Madame de Castellan, although good-natured enough—for a

Frenchwoman—is quite incapable of such a task; so you couldn't do better than send Mary, as Madame has requested, though little knowing how much she would have need of her: her assistance will be invaluable, and indeed some sort of help must be had at once. I am going over there myself immediately, and will take her in my gig, if you can spare her, Miss Letty, and will tell her to get ready."

"By all means," cried Letty, hastily leaving the room upon that errand.

"Of course, all notion of prosecuting this poor fellow is now put out of the question, whatever happens," observed the doctor.

"Quite so—quite so," answered the baronet eagerly. "Poor drunken wretch; I am sure I'm very sorry. And I tell you what, Dr Haldane, if this man dies, there should be some sort of deodand laid upon that Mill. Hathaway ought to be punished for wilful neglect."

"That won't bring the poor man to life again, though," observed the doctor.

"No, of course not; though, if one may be allowed to say so, he really led such a sad life, by all accounts, it seems almost as well that he should end it. It would be a happy release, I mean, if he was to die, poor fellow; don't you think so?"

"Yes, I do. It would be better for himself, and better for others," returned the doctor very gravely.

"Just so," said Sir Richard; "better for all concerned. Poor man!"

CHAPTER XII. RALPH'S APPEAL.

HOWEVER Dr Haldane, at my Lady's own request, may have misrepresented to the young folks at the Abbey the motives which had caused her flight, he told them truth as respected Derrick. That unfortunate man had indeed met with the frightful mischance described. When he left Mary Forest on the previous night, his mind confused with vague revengeful passion, and his brain muddled with blows, as well as with the spirits he had of late taken in such quantities, and the effects of which were beginning to tell upon his exhausted frame, he had staggered up Mirkland Hill almost like one in a dream. The night was pitchy dark, and although ever and anon a burst of light came forth from the fireworks in the Abbey grounds, they were of course perfectly useless for his guidance. The top of the hill being quite bare of trees, was less obscure than the way he had already come, and in any other circumstances he could scarce have come to harm; but as it was, stumbling blindly on with his head low, he entered the mill-yard through that fatal gap in the wall, without even knowing he had left the highroad. The very roaring of the sails, which revolved dangerously near the ground, might have warned him, but that his ears were already occupied with the seething and tumult of his own brain; and when the terrible thing struck him, before which he went down upon the instant as the ox falls before the poleaxe, he never so much as knew from what he had received his hurt. There he lay for more than an hour, underneath the whirling sails, which one after another came round to peer over his haggard face, gashed with that frightful wound. The lad in charge knew nothing of what had happened, being engaged in the top story watching the fireworks in the park beneath; but about midnight he stopped the mill, and descending with his lantern, its rays by chance fell upon Ralph's prostrate body. Some persons returning from the festivities at the Abbey happened to be going by at that very time, and with their assistance he was carried across the road to the lodge at Belcomb (there being no sort of accommodation for one in his condition at the mill), and from thence to Madame de Castellan's little cottage.

That lady was for the time, as she had stated in her letter to Sir Richard, the sole inhabitant of Belcomb; but with the injured man, old Rachel and her husband the gatekeeper of course arrived, and the former did what she could as sick-nurse until the arrival of Dr Haldane, for whom a messenger was at once despatched. The old Frenchwoman, who was aroused with difficulty, and characteristically kept them waiting at the door while she made herself fit for the reception of company, was so shocked and terrified by what had happened, that she was at first of no use at all. She had expressed herself in broken English as being very glad to be of any service to the poor sufferer while they were bearing him within, and had even busied herself in procuring hot water and bandages; but no sooner did she catch sight of his ghastly face, seamed with that cruel gash, than all her resolution appeared to desert her, and she swooned away. By the time the doctor arrived, however, she had established herself in the sick-room, and although he had described her as incapable of doing much in the way of tendance, she was at least doing her best.

As for Ralph, he lay breathing stertorously, but quite motionless and unconscious. His mighty chest rose and fell, but by no means equably; his large brown hairy hands lay outstretched before him on the white coverlet; his face washed clean indeed from the recent blood-stains, but with the tangled beard still clotted with gore. It seemed strange that that powerful English frame of his should lie there so helplessly, while Madame, with her snow-white hair and delicate fragile hands, was ministering to him with such patient care; she that must have been his senior, one would have thought to look at them, by at least twenty years. Perhaps it was the sense of this contrast which caused the doctor to glance from the one to the other so earnestly, even before he commenced his examination of the wounded man.

"Will he live?" asked Madame in English. "God knows," added she with trembling accents, "that I have no other wish within my heart but to hear you say 'Yes.'"

"Of course, Madame," returned the other with meaning, "I do not pay you so ill a compliment as to suppose you to wish him dead, because he inconveniences you by his presence here; but I cannot say 'Yes' or 'No,' He is terribly hurt. The spine is injured; and there are ribs broken which I cannot even look to now. But it is here"—he pointed to the forehead—"where the worst danger lies: unhappily, the mischief has been done

when he was—in the worst possible state to bear such a blow in such a place.”

“Does he know, doctor”—

“He knows nothing, Madame; perhaps he may never know. You must not speak so much, however; or, if so, pray use your native tongue. It is better, if consciousness does return, that the brain should be kept quite quiet. I think you had better retire to your room, Madame, and leave myself and Rachel to manage.”

“Yes, yes, we can do very well, lady,” assented old Rachel. “This is not a place for such as Madame, is it, sir? If we could only get Mistress Forest, now; she is first-rate at nursing; she nursed me for three whole nights last winter, when I was most uncommon had with the shivers, caught a-come from Dalwynch in the spring-cart—and the cover on it, when it don't rain, is worse than nothing, for there's such a draught drives right through it”—

“Yes, yes,” interrupted the doctor impatiently; “you are quite right, Rachel. We'll send for Mistress Forest the first thing in the morning: she can easily be spared from the Abbey, now my Lady's away.”

“Ah, the more's the pity!” returned old Rachel. “And this looks almost like a judgment, don't it, sir, that this poor man, who was so rude to my dear mistress—or wanted to be, as I have heard—should have been carried in under her own roof here, feet foremost”—

“Be silent, woman!” broke in Madame de Castellan with severity. “We have nothing to do with Lady Lisgard's affairs here. This house is my house for the present; this wounded man is my guest.”

“Speak French, speak French, Madame,” exclaimed the doctor imploringly. “Did you not hear me say so before? You had much better return to bed.”

“No, no,” returned Madame, in her native tongue; “I cannot do it. I will be prudent, I will be careful for the future; but I cannot leave him, until, at all events, Mary Forest comes. O send her—send her, and let this woman go, whose presence is intolerable to me.”

Accordingly, in his visit to Belcomb about noon next day, the doctor brought Mistress Forest over with him, who was at once installed as Ralph Derrick's sick-nurse; old Rachel being sent home to the lodge. No change had as yet taken place in the sufferer; but the doctor's practised eye perceived that one was impending. This time, he made a long and earnest examination of his patient.

“Will he live?” asked Madame again, when he had finished, with the same, earnestness, nay, even anguish as before.

“There is hope; yes, I think there is hope,” returned the doctor cautiously.

“Thank God for that; I thank Him for His great mercy!” ejaculated Madame with clasped hands and upturned eyes.

“Who is that?” inquired a hoarse voice from the bed. The words were indistinct, and uttered with difficulty, but on every ear within that room they smote with the most keen significance. The two women turned deadly pale; and even the doctor's finger shook as he placed it to his lips, in sign that they should keep silent.

“Hush, my good friend,” said he to the wounded man, whose eyes were now open wide, and staring straight before him: “you must not talk just now; speaking is very bad for you.”

“Who is that who was thanking God because there was hope of my life?” reiterated Ralph. “Neither man nor woman has any cause to do that, I'm sure; while some have cause enough to pray that I were dead already, or at least had lost my wits. Doctor—for I suppose you *are* a doctor—have I lost my wits or not? Am I a sane man, or one not in my right mind?”

“Hush, hush; you are sane enough of course, except to keep on talking thus when I tell you that to speak is to do yourself the most serious harm.”

“You hear him—all you in the room here,” continued the sick man in a voice which, though low and feeble, had a sort of malignant triumph in it, which grated on the ear. “This doctor says I am quite sane. He says also that there is hope of my life—just a shadow of a hope. He is wrong there, for I shall die. But, anyhow, I lie in peril of death, and yet in my right mind. Therefore, what I say is to be credited—that, I believe, is the law; and even the law is right sometimes. What I am about to say is Truth—every word of it. I wish to make a statement.—No, I will take no medicines; pen and ink, if I could only write, would be more welcome than the Elixir of Life, but I cannot.” Here a groan was wrung from his parched and bloodless lips. “O Heaven! the pain I suffer; it is the foretaste of the hell for which I am bound!”

“O sir,” ejaculated Mistress Forest, moving to the bed foot, so as to shew herself to his staring eyes, “think of heaven, not of hell. Ask for pardon of God, and not of revenge upon man.”

“Ah, it is you, is it, good wench? I thought that no one else could have wished me well so piously a while ago. You did me an ill turn, although you did not mean to do so, when you let me out of the Cage last night. Was it last night, or a week, or a month ago?”

“It was only last night,” interposed the doctor gravely. “Now, do not ask any more questions, or I shall have to forbid them being answered. It is my duty to tell you that with every word you speak your life is ebbing away.”

“Then there is the less time to lose,” answered Derrick obstinately. “As for answering me, I do not want that. All I ask of you is, that you shall listen; and what I say, I charge you all, as a dying man, to remember—to repeat—to proclaim.” Here he paused from weakness.—“Doctor,” gasped he, “a glass of brandy—a large glass, for I am used to it. I *must* have it.—Good. I feel stronger now. Do you think, if you took down my words in writing, that I could manage”—here a shudder seemed to shake his poor bruised and broken frame, as though with the anticipation of torture—“to set down my name at the bottom of it?”

“No, my poor fellow—no. You could no more grasp a pen at present than you could rise and leave this house upon your feet. You must feel that yourself.”

“I do—I do,” groaned Ralph. “It is all the more necessary, then, that you should listen. My real name is not that one by which I have, been known at Mirk. It is not Derrick, but Gavestone: the same name, good wench, by which your mistress went before she was married to Sir Robert Lisgard. But that was not her maiden name—no, no. Do you not wonder while I tell you this? or did I speak of it last night, when I was mad with

drink and rage?"

"You said something of the sort, sir; but I knew it all before that. You are my Lady's husband, and Sir Richard and the rest are all her bastard children—that is, in the eye of the law."

"You knew it, did you?" returned Ralph after a pause. "You were in the plot with her against me, then? I am glad of that. I should be sorry to have left the world fooled to the last; for I thought that you at least were an honest wench, although all the world else were liars. So, after all, you knew it, did you? Well, at all events, it is news to the doctor here."

"No, sir," returned the old gentleman, quietly applying some *Eau de Cologne* and water to the patient's brow; "I must confess I knew it also."

"And yet you told nobody!" ejaculated Ralph. "You suffered this imposture to go on unexposed!"

"I only heard of the facts, you speak of—from Lady Lisgard's own lips—two days ago at furthest," returned Dr Haldane; "and I certainly told nobody, since the telling could do no good to any human being—not even to yourself, for instance—and would bring utter ruin and disgrace upon several worthy persons."

"Ha, ha!" chuckled the patient hoarsely; "you are right, there. Disgrace upon that insolent Sir Richard, and on that ungrateful puppy, Master Walter."

"True," continued the doctor gravely; "and upon Miss Letty, who is dear to all who know her, but dearest to the poor and friendless."

"I am sorry for her," said Derrick; "but I am not sorry for my Lady—she that could look me in the face, and hear me tell the story of our early love, and of her own supposed death, to avert which I so gladly risked my life, and all without a touch of pity."

"No, sir, with much pity," broke forth Mistress Forest. "I myself know that her heart bled for you. She never loved Sir Robert as she did you, ungrateful man! She loved you dead and alive; she loves you now, although you pursue her with such cruel hate, and would bring shame upon all her innocent children."

"Ay, why not?" answered Ralph. "Have they not had their day, and is it not my turn at last? Who is the woman behind the curtains? Let her stand forth, that I may see her; she, at least, is not a creature of 'my Lady,' like you and the doctor here, and ready, for her sake, to hide the truth and perpetuate my wrongs. Let that woman stand forth, I say."

CHAPTER XIII. DYING WORDS.

THUS adjured, Madame de Castellan stepped forward to the same position which Mary Forest had occupied at the foot of the bed: nowhere else could Ralph see her, for he was on his back just as they had first laid him, and could not turn his face a hairbreadth to left or right.

"Who *are* you?" asked he bluntly. "I do not remember having seen your face at Mirk."

"They call me Madame de Castellan," replied the old lady in good English, "and I live here at Belcomb by favour of Sir Richard Lisgard."

"Ah, you have reason, then, to be friends with him and his," returned the sick man bitterly. "You will none of you see me righted. Curse you all!"

"I will not see you wronged, if I can help it, sir," replied the Frenchwoman solemnly, but keeping her eyes fixed always upon the floor.

"Will you not? Well, you have an honest face, I own; but faces are so deceptive! Mistress Forest's face yonder, for instance, is pleasant enough to look upon, but still she plays me false. Master Walter's again—why, he seems to have robbed an angel of his smile, and yet he is base-hearted like the rest; and, lastly, there was my Lucy—not mine now—no, no; but what a sweet look was hers! And there was guile and untruth for you! But that is what I have to tell you. You have said you will not see me wronged, and I must believe you, since there is none else to trust to here. Besides, you are too old to lie; you will be called to your own account too soon to dare to palter with a dying man. Yes, I am dying fast.—More brandy, doctor—brandy. Ah, that's life itself!—And yet, although you are so old, Madame, I dare say you remember your youthful days, when you were fair—for you *were* fair, I see—and courted. You were not without your lover, I warrant?"

"I was loved, sir," returned Madame, in low but steadfast tones.

"And did you marry the man you loved?"

"I did, sir. My husband was very dear to me, God knows, though we did not live long together."

"He died young, did he?"

"Alas, yes, and I was left alone in the world without a friend or a home."

"His memory did not fade so quickly that you could love and marry another man at once, I suppose?"

"His memory never faded," replied the old lady gravely, "for it has not faded now; but after an interval of three years, I married another man."

"And loved him like the other?"

"No, sir; there is only one true love—at least for a woman. But I was a dutiful wife for the second time; and there were children born to me—three children—inexpressibly dear; and when I lost their father, who loved me, though I could only give him grateful duty in return, I had something to live for still."

Whether the grief-laden tone of Madame touched him, or the sad story she was telling, Ralph's accents

seemed to lose something of their bitterness when he again broke silence.

"But if, lady, your first husband and true lover had, by some wondrous chance, returned, as it might be, from the very grave, and you were satisfied that it was he indeed, and knew him, although he knew *you* not, and he was living a bad life among bad company, with no one in all the world to call him friend, would you not then have held your arms out to him, and cried: 'Come back, come back!' and told him how you had loved him all along?"

"No, sir; not so. If I had been alone, like him, with only my own feelings to consult, I might, indeed, have so behaved; for my heart would have yearned towards him, as it does, Heaven knows, even now. But, sir, in such a case there would not only have been Love to be obeyed, but Duty. If this man were living the wild life you speak of, would he not have made a bad father to my poor children (left in my sole charge and guardianship by a just and noble man), an evil ruler of a well-ordered house, a bad example to all whom I would have had respect him? Nay, worse, would not my acknowledgment of him—which I should otherwise be eager to make, and willing to take upon myself the shame that might accrue to *me* therefrom—would not that, I say, have brought disgrace on those who had earned it not—have made my own children, lawfully begotten, as I had thought, all Bastards, and soiled the memory of an honest man, their father?"

A long silence here ensued, broken only by the sick man's painful breathing, and the sobs of Mistress Forest, who strove in vain to restrain her tears.

"I thank you, Madame," said Ralph very feebly: "you have been pleading without knowing it for one who—Do you see these tears? I did not think to ever weep again. Either your gentle voice—reminding me of the very woman of whom I had meant to speak so harshly—or perhaps it is the near approach of death which numbs these fingers, that would else be clutching for their revenge—I know not; but I now wish no one harm.—Doctor, you must feed this flame once more; let me but speak a very few words, and then I shall have no more use for Life.—Mary, good wench, come here. You will shortly see again that mistress whom you love so well, and have so honestly served. Tell her—Nay, don't cry; I do not need your tears to assure me that you feel for poor Ralph Gavestone—castaway though he be. I heard your 'Thank God' when the doctor said (though he was wrong there) that there was hope for me. Those were very honest words, Mary."

"I did not say them!" ejaculated the waiting-maid earnestly. "O Madame, tell him who it was that said them."

"It was *I*," murmured Madame de Castellan, coming close to the bedside, and kneeling down there.

"You, lady! Why should you pray so earnestly that I might live, whose death would profit many, but whose recovery none?"

"Because I have wronged you, Ralph. Yes, *Ralph!* You know me now. Do not ask to see my patched and painted face again, because it is not mine, but listen to my voice, which you remember. I am your own wife, Lucy, and I love you, husband mine."

"She loves me still," murmured the dying man: "she owns herself my wife, thank God, thank God!" The tears rolled down his cheeks, and over his rough and ghastly face a mellow softness stole, like the last gleam of sunset upon a rocky hill. Dr Haldane rose and noiselessly left the room, beckoning Mary to follow. The dying husband and his wife were left to hold their last interview alone.

"What I have been telling you, Ralph, as the history of another, is my own. I have never forgotten you. I have loved you all along. Forgive me, if I seem to have sacrificed you to—to those it was my duty to shield from shame. I could not bear to see disgrace fall upon my children, and so I fled from them, in hopes to save them from it. And yet I loved them so that I could not altogether leave them, but took this cottage in another name, and under this disguise, in order to be near them. *

** The author having been informed by a critical friend that he has exposed himself to the charge of plagiarism, by representing Lady Lisgard as thus assuming the character of another person, begs to state—first, that he has never had the opportunity of reading the powerful novel, East Lynn (wherein, as he understands, a similar device is employed); and secondly, that the idea of the metamorphosis is taken from a short story (written by himself) which was published in Chambers's Journal, under the title of "Change for Gold," so long ago as 1854.*

O lover, husband, who saved my life at peril of his own, a mother's heart was my excuse—be generous and noble as of old—forgive me!"

"Forgive you!" gasped the sick man: "nay, forgive *me!* How could I ever have sought to do you wrong! My own dear Lucy!" In an instant she had plucked away so much of her disguise as was about her face and head, and was leaning over him with loving eyes.

"How many years ago, wife, is it since you kissed me last?" murmured the dying man. "My outward sight is growing very dim; I do not recognise my Lucy's face, although I know 'tis she; but I see her quite clearly sitting in the cottage-porch beside the shining river. How it roars among the rounded stones, and how swiftly it is running to the sea! Round my neck, love, you will presently find the little locket with that dead sprig of fuchsia in it which you gave me when we plighted troth. Let that be buried with me; I have had no love or care for sacred things, but perhaps—They say that God is very merciful; and since He sees into our inmost thoughts, He will know with what reverence I held that simple gift, because it was your own, and you were His. I loved you most, I swear, because you were so pure and good, Lucy. Ah me! I wonder, in the world to come, if I or *he*"—

A piercing cry broke from my Lady's lips. "Spare me, Ralph—spare me!"

"Yes, yes. It was done for the best, I know. Don't fret, dear heart. Of course you thought me Dead. For certain, I am dying now—fast, fast. Thank God for that! It would have been a woeful thing, having thus found my Own, to have left her straightway, and taken my lone way through the world again, knowing the thing I know. But I would have done it, never fear. Are you sure of those two, Lucy—that were here a while ago—

quite sure? My dying curse upon them, if they breathe to human ear our sacred secret! They love you? That is well. I would have all the world to love you; and may all those you love repay that priceless gift with tender duty." Here he paused, as if to gather together his little remaining strength; and when he spoke again, it was with a voice so low that my Lady had to place her ear quite close to his pale lips to catch his words. But she did hear them, every one. "The prayers of a man like me may avail nothing, Lucy, but at least they can do no harm. God bless Sir Richard—yes, yes! God bless Master Walter's handsome face! God bless Miss Letty! That's what I said on Christmas-eve with Steve and the rest of them, not knowing whom I spoke of, and I say it now, for are they not my Lucy's dear ones! God bless *you*, my dear wife. Kiss—kiss."

Those were the last words of wild Ralph Gavestone. When the doctor and Mistress Forest re-entered that silent room, my Lady was upon her knees beside the pillow; she had closed the dead man's eyes, and folded his palms together, and taken from his neck the locket, but to be returned to him by a trusty hand when the time came.

CHAPTER XIV. AND LAST.

If there had happened to be any one upon whom poor Ralph's wild talk, on the night of the Abbey festivities, had made any serious impression whatever, it was destined to be removed by the inquest that followed upon his death. The very words he had made use of in his fury, his calling my Lady his wife, and stigmatising Sir Richard as her natural son, would have been held to be no slight evidence of his insanity, which, however, was abundantly proved by other testimony. The waiter at the *Royal Marine* at Coveton came in all good faith to take his solemn oath that, to the best of his judgment, the gent, with the beard, who had scandalised that respectable house by taking brandy for breakfast, was like no other man alive as he had ever served; or, in other words, was nothing short of a lunatic. The postboys whom he had commanded to stop and let him out before his chaise could be whirled over the first stage, pronounced him mad. The porter at the railway station, to whose civil inquiry as to whither he was going the angry man had returned so uncivil an answer, came to the same conclusion. No man nearer home, from the lord-lieutenant to the parish constable, and (even of his whilom companions) from Captain Walter Lisgard to landlord Steve, but gave it as his opinion that the man was mad. And the verdict of the coroner's jury being in accordance with the evidence, decided that the deceased had met with his death in the manner with which we are acquainted during an attack of temporary insanity, induced by Drink.

The nerves of Madame de Castellan had received much too great a shock, from recent occurrences, to permit her presence at the inquest; and, indeed, such an effect did they take upon her, that she left not only Belcomb but England itself almost immediately, declining with many thanks Sir Richard's offer—notwithstanding that Letty drove over in person to make it known to her—that she should take up her residence for the present at the Abbey itself. So Madame went back again to her native land as suddenly and almost as mysteriously as she had come; and after a while, wrote to inform her English friends that the domestic disagreements which had driven her from home were in a fair way to be healed, and that it was very unlikely that she should have to trespass upon their kindness any more.

The real history of that lady's coming to Belcomb was never absolutely known to more than two persons, and perhaps more or less rightly guessed at by a third. From the moment that my Lady recognised her first husband in Ralph Derrick, she never concealed from herself the possibility of her having to leave the Abbey, and become perhaps a lifelong exile from home and friends for her three children's sakes, but especially for that of Sir Richard. Perhaps she exaggerated the depth to which family pride had taken root in the heart of her eldest son; but she honestly believed that the knowledge of his being illegitimate would have killed him. Although she could never have possessed the strength of mind, even had she enjoyed the requisite want of principle, to deny in person Ralph's claim to her as her lawful husband, she justly argued that he would be utterly unable to establish his case in her absence. He could summons no witness whose testimony would go half so far as her own tell-tale face; while his own character was such, that no credence would be given to his statement, unless supported by strong and direct evidence. Thus situated, my Lady turned over in her mind scheme after scheme of flight, without hitting upon anything that gave much promise, and all of which entailed a residence abroad, cruelly far from those dear ones from whom she was about, with such a heavy heart, to flee for their own good; but when she had, perforce, as we have seen, to take Mistress Forest into her confidence, something arose out of a conversation between them concerning their old life together at Dijon, which suggested that ingenious artifice which she eventually put into effect.

Madame de Castellan had been dead some years, though of that circumstance my Lady's children were unaware, albeit Sir Richard had heard a good deal of her when a boy, and had even some dim recollection of her personal appearance when she was a guest of his father and mother's at the Abbey.

Of this remembrance, my Lady took advantage. Mary and herself in that old school-time at Dijon had been used to act charades at Madame's house, and that circumstance no doubt put into Lady Lisgard's mind the idea of personating the old Frenchwoman herself. My Lady had learned from those amateur performances the secrets of "green-room" metamorphosis; * she was naturally endowed with no small power of mimicry; and she could speak French like a native.

** How a few strips of black plaster on the teeth can counterfeit age and toothlessness, let any of our fair readers experiment for themselves.*

Supposing that the desired transformation could be effected, what securer plan, and one more unlikely to

be suspected, could be found than that secluded cottage of Belcomb, so close to the Abbey, and whither all news relating to her children could be brought to her at once through Mary, who, it was arranged, should be transferred to Madame's service in the manner that was afterwards actually adopted. The letter purporting to come from Dijon, and taken by Sir Richard's own hand from the post-bag, had been placed therein by Mary Forest, who had used her mistress's key at an earlier hour, and found that communication from Arthur Haldane concerning Ralph's departure for Coveton, which necessitated such immediate action on the part of my Lady. There was not one day to be lost in making her preparations, and indeed from that time she had been ready to start at a moment's notice, though, as it happened, there was no need for such urgent haste. The counterfeit visit in person to the Abbey was of course running a considerable risk, but the establishment of the fact of Madame de Castellan's arrival at Belcomb, my Lady had rightly judged to be of paramount importance; indeed, that being effected, it is doubtful even if the unhappy Ralph had not met with so sudden an end, whether any suspicion of Madame and my Lady being one and the same person would have ever existed. The most difficult matter connected with my Lady's flight was in truth, after all, to find a reason for it sufficient to satisfy the minds of those she left behind her. The children would have been slow to believe that she could bring herself to leave home and them, simply because her two boys did not get on well together, for in that case, absentee mothers should be considerably more common than they are. But, fortunately, not only did the flame of discord between Sir Richard and Master Walter continue to burn, but received plenty of unexpected fuel, such as at any other time would have caused my Lady unutterable woe, but which, under present circumstances, were almost welcome to her. Walter's clandestine marriage with the very girl to whom his brother had offered his own hand, was an incident so painful as to give my Lady an excuse for almost anything; but Walter had left the Abbey, and it was important that he should return thither and make things unpleasant, as he could not fail to do by the mere fact of his presence there with Rose. Sir Richard, with his *fête* in view, was easily persuaded to ask the new-married couple down, and all things worked together for ill, which for once was my Lady's "good."

Then, again, Walter's debts—of the full extent of which, however, his mother was never informed—gave her an additional cause of serious dissatisfaction; and lastly, Sir Richard's opposition to Letty's marriage with Arthur Haldane, made up a very respectable bill of indictment. At all events, as we have seen, it was acknowledged so to be by the parties against whom it had been filed. The consciences of both Sir Richard and Walter were really pricked; and, besides, there was the painful fact of their mother's departure from her own roof, owing to their conduct, whether it justified such an extreme measure upon her part or not. Moreover, the delegate to whom my Lady had committed the disclosure of her motives, had been well chosen. It was necessary that a third person should be admitted to the knowledge of my Lady's secret, in order that her affairs might be transacted during an absence which might be prolonged for years, or even for her lifetime; and where could she find so tried and trustworthy a friend as Dr Haldane? The fact, too, of his visiting the Abbey in person, after an interval of so many years, and even after his so recent refusal to be present on the all-important occasion of Sir Richard's coming of age, gave additional weight to the mission upon which he came. It brought about, as has been shewn, a genuine reconciliation between the brothers, and even exacted from them a solemn promise that their disagreements should henceforth cease. Nor was it destined that the good doctor's friendly offices should cease with this. When the day came to lay Ralph Derrick's body in its coffin, the old philosopher—nay, cynic, as many held him to be—placed very reverently with his own hands that little locket around the dead man's neck, which he had treasured as the most precious thing he owned for more than half a lifetime. And on the morrow, when they buried him in Dalwynch churchyard, the doctor followed him to the grave, not only as the "deceased's medical attendant," but as his chief and only mourner, with a tender pity for the world-battered and passionate man, who had thus found rest at last. He stood beside the round black mould, when all had departed, with that wise, sad smile upon his face, which he always wore when he was thinking deepest; and though "Poor fellow, poor fellow!" was all he said, it was a more pregnant epitaph than is often to be read on tombstones.

After a little, the good news came to Mirk from France, that my Lady, trusting to what she had heard from her old friend, was coming home again. The only stipulation she made was, that her withdrawal from the Abbey was not to be alluded to by any of her family, for which, indeed, added she, there would be the less necessity, since the principal cause of it—the ill-feeling between her sons—no longer, as she was delighted to understand, existed. Of course, Lady Lisgard could not prevent "the county" from canvassing the matter, any more than she could have forbidden a general election; and, in truth, her affairs were almost as much talked about as politics after a dissolution of parliament. She and her sons had each their partisans, who argued for their respective clients often with great enthusiasm, and sometimes with an ingenuity worthy of better premises. But it was the general opinion that Master Walter's marriage was at the bottom of the whole business, and that that designing woman, Rose Aynton, had sown dissension in what had once been one of the best-conducted and most united families in Wheatshire.

An account of the inquest in the local journals, a paragraph in the *Times*, headed "Curious Catastrophe," and an allusion to Don Quixote's adventure *apropos* of the homicidal wind-mill, in a comic print, exhausted the subject of Ralph Derrick's death.

But my Lady returned to Mirk Abbey in deep mourning, it was understood in consequence of the sudden death of Madame de Castellan, which occurred, singularly enough, almost immediately after her leaving Belcomb.

It was thought very unfortunate that the two old friends should thus have never been permitted to meet. Madame's demise, however, of course left Mary Forest free to rejoin her former mistress, in whose company, indeed, she returned to Mirk.

We have said that besides the two persons in possession of my Lady's secret, there was a third who had his shrewd suspicions. But if Arthur Haldane's legal training had really enabled him to come to the right conclusion in the matter, it also judiciously restrained him from saying anything about it.

He had never cause to use that memorandum which we saw him set down in his pocket-book of Miss Letty's opinion. "It seems to me that people should be taken for what they *are*, let their birth be what it will;" but we believe that it was not without a reason that he committed it to paper. Although entirely without ancestral

pride, and with a very hearty contempt for any such folly, as matters stood, Letty was just the sort of girl who, upon finding herself illegitimate, would have refused to carry out her engagement, from the apprehension of attaching disgrace to the man she loved; and therefore Arthur thought it well to record her own argument against herself, in case any such occasion should arise. Not many months elapsed, however, before this possible obstruction was removed, in the pleasantest manner, by the union of these two young people; and a happier or better assorted couple it is not my fortune to know.

Sir Richard remains a bachelor, although as staid and decorous in his conduct as any married man; even more so than some, it is whispered—but then, who can seriously blame charming Master Walter? The cause of the young baronet's celibacy is strenuously held by many to be Miss Rose Aynton's rejection of him long ago, for *that* has oozed out, somehow or other, divulged perhaps by the young woman herself in some moment when her vanity for once overcame her prudence; but, at all events, Sir Richard has acted very generously towards his brother's wife (that's how these gossips put it), and her husband Captain Lisgard's debts have been settled, and he has been entirely "set up" with respect to his pecuniary affairs; and, moreover, he runs no risk of being again embarrassed. If it is really true that he occasionally forgets that abrupt ceremony which took place between himself and Rose at the Register Office (and somehow the thing does not recur to the memory with such force under those circumstances as when one is married in the usual way by the combined endeavours of several clergymen), and indulges in little flirtations, he has at least forsworn both the turf and the gaming-table. We do not say that he is given up entirely to his military duties, but he is in the enjoyment of an excellent staff appointment, and possesses the fullest confidence both of his commanding officer and of that functionary's wife; which latter, we all know, is essential to the position of an aide-de-camp. But the fact is, that almost everybody likes Master Walter, and will continue to do so (although perhaps somewhat less as he grows older) to his dying day. And why not?

Dieu l'a jugé. Silence, sings a true poet upon the death of the first Napoleon: *Que des faibles mortels la main n'y touche plus! Qui peut sonder, Seigneur, ta clémence infinie? Et vous, fléau de Dieu, qui sait si le GÉNIE N'EST PAS UNE DE VOS VERTUS?* And what has thus been greatly written of genius, may also surely be said in a less sense of what we call (for lack of a better word) Manner. England has lately followed to his grave with weeping eyes, a statesman—both honest, indeed, and able—but whose chief claim to her affection rested upon this comparatively humble gift, so precious because so rare. When combined with youth and personal graces, as in Walter Lisgard's case, it is well-nigh irresistible, and has always been so from the days of Plato and Xenophon. Too often worthless in themselves, or rendered so by being "spoilt" by all who meet them; not seldom empty-headed, or with heads turned by conceit and flattery; and almost always destitute of reverence for sacred things, whether divine or human—natural or doctrinal—we yet prefer the company of those thus dowered to that of the Wise, the Witty, or the Good. Their smile is a pleasure; their very presence is a harmony; and prayerless themselves, they evoke the supplications of the pure in their behalf.

Even Rose herself continues to be to some extent infatuated with Master Walter—although he is her own husband—a feat surely far more difficult of accomplishment than for the *valet de chambre* of a hero to believe in his master's reputation. At all events, it is beyond question that she grows very jealous of the captain. Master Walter has never been jealous of *her*; not, indeed, that he has had any serious reason to be so, but because such a baleful sentiment is never allowed to enter his well-contented mind. He is thoroughly persuaded that if his wife loves anybody else in the world beside herself—that that person is her husband; and he is right. He, too, has a genuine affection for one other individual beside Captain Walter Lisgard; and this is for his mother. We all know that she returns it seventyfold.

My Lady lives a tranquil and not unhappy life in her old home with dutiful Sir Richard, very pleasantly diversified by frequent visits from dear Letty and her husband—their last advent being a particularly grateful one, since they brought with them a little stranger, aged six weeks, whom it was always a matter of difficulty to extricate from grandmamma's loving arms. But my Lady's whitest days are those rare ones which her darling Walter finds it possible—so pressing are his military duties—to spend at somewhat sombre Mirk. Then she is happy; then she is almost her old self as we first knew her, before those deep tones, speaking from the grave, upon Mirk Abbey lawn at Christmas-time, broke in upon her calm harmonious days. Master Walter has no child. This troubles her sometimes; but at others she feels very thankful for it; for if he had a son, or should Sir Richard marry and beget one, would not a certain, however venial, imposition he perpetuated in the descent of the title? Even now, when no great harm seems done, my Lady's conscience is not altogether at ease; nay, once, so disturbed it grew, that she took secret counsel on the matter with Dr Haldane.

"Dear Lady," said he, "if any human being could be bettered by the disclosure you hint at, or any human being was wronged by your reticence, I should be the first to say: 'Tell all;' but as things stand, it would, in my opinion, not only be Quixotic, but downright madness to disentomb that woeful secret, which lies buried in Ralph Gavestone's grave. Moreover, I understood it was his dying wish that his story should remain untold."

This last observation, delivered with great simplicity, was the best remedy for my Lady's troubled mind that the good doctor could have prescribed. But when this moral patient of his had left his consulting-room quite cured, the radical philosopher permitted himself a congratulatory chuckle. "Gad," said he (he used the interjections of half a century ago), "it is lucky my Lady questioned me no further. *My* difficulty lies in permitting a person of title more than there need be in this misgoverned country. If the Lisgards had a peerage in their family, I should think it my duty to explode the whole concern. But I don't suppose one baronet more than there is any necessity to suffer, *can do much harm.*"

So Sir Richard Lisgard, little dreaming upon how unsatisfactory a tenure it is held, keeps his title unmolested; and "my Lady" (Heaven bless her!) is still the honoured mistress of Mirk Abbey.

THE END.

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