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James Payn**

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2) ***



'BEGONE!' HE CRIED; 'BEGONE! BOTH OF YOU.'

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

BY

JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF 'BY PROXY' ETC. ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

SECOND EDITION

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OF
THE SECOND VOLUME.



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN.

CHAPTER XIX.

ANOTHER DISCOVERY.



WHEN folks are not in accord, and especially if there is fear on one side, communication of all kinds is difficult enough, but personal companionship is well-nigh unendurable. Often and often in evenings not so long ago William Henry had hesitated to come in on his father's very doorstep, and turned away into the wet and wind-swept streets rather than thrust his unwelcome companionship upon him. Not seldom, in the days between the death of his wife and Margaret's coming to Norfolk Street, Mr. Erin had left the supper table without a word, and sought his own chamber an hour before his time, rather than endure the sight of the boy whose very existence was a reproach to him, who had had the ill taste to survive his own beloved child, and who had not a pleasure or pursuit in common with him. Now, however, all this was

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changed; and nothing was more significant of the alteration in the old man's feelings towards William Henry than the satisfaction he took in his society. So close an attachment the young man might well have dispensed with, since it kept him sometimes from his Margaret; but he nevertheless was far from discouraging it, since he knew that such familiarity tended in the end to ensure her to him.

It was the antiquary's whim—or perhaps he thought that association of ideas might help to incline the young man's heart towards him—to read at night Shakespeare's plays with him, as they had been wont to do when William Henry was yet a child and no coldness had as yet sprung up between them. At times the young fellow's attention would flag a little; his thoughts would fly after his heart, which was upstairs in Margaret's keeping; but as a rule he shared, or seemed to share, the old man's enthusiasm. His comments and suggestions on the text were always received with a respect which, considering what would have been their fate had they been hazarded six months ago, was almost ludicrous. Such illogical changes in personal estimation are not unexampled; even in modern times there have been instances where the sudden acquisition of wealth, or the unexpected succession to a title, have invested their astonished possessors with attributes in no way connected with either rank or riches; in the present case the admiration expressed was, however, remarkable, because the very qualities of literary judgment and the like, which were now acknowledged, had been of old contemptuously ignored. William Henry, who had never himself ignored them, was content to find them recognised at last by whatever means, and exchanged his views upon the character of Hamlet with the antiquary with cheerful confidence and upon equal terms.

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One night they were reading 'Lear' together, and had come to those lines wherein the Duke offers Kent half the administration of the kingdom. To this Kent replies—

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I have a journey, sir, shortly to go:
My master calls me; I must not say 'No.'

'Do you not think, sir,' observed William Henry, 'that such a couplet is somewhat inappropriate to the occasion?'

'How so?' inquired the antiquary. It was noteworthy that he took the objection with such mildness. The notion of anything in Shakespeare being inappropriate was like suggesting to a fire-worshipper that there were spots on the sun.

'Well, sir, it strikes me as somewhat too brief and trivial, considering the subject on which he speaks. Now what do you think of this by way of an emendation?' He drew from his pocket a slip of paper on which the following lines were written in his own handwriting:—

Thanks, sir; but I go to that unknown land
That chains each pilgrim fast within its soil,
By living men most shunned, most dreaded.
Still my good master this same journey took:
He calls me; I am content and straight obey.
Then farewell, world; the busy scene is done:
Kent lived most true; Kent died most like a man.

The antiquary's face was a study. A few months ago it is doubtful whether anything from William Henry's pen would have obtained so much as patient consideration. Of his son's genius Mr. Erin had always thought very little; he esteemed him indeed no more worthy of the title of man of letters than his friend Mr. Talbot himself; but his productions were now on a very different plane. They demanded his best attention and such admiration as it was possible to give.

'Still my good master this same journey took:
He calls me; I am content and straight obey,'

he murmured. 'That is harmonious and natural; a certain simplicity pervades it: yes, my lad, that is creditable.'

'I venture to think,' said the young man deferentially, 'that the opening lines—

Thanks, sir; but I go to that unknown land, &c—

are not devoid of merit.'

'Devoid? No, certainly not devoid. Courteous in expression and—um—to the point, but somewhat modern in tone.'

Without speaking, but with a smile full of significance, the young man produced a roll of paper and laid it before his companion.

'Great heavens! what is this?' exclaimed Mr. Erin, straightening out the manuscript with trembling fingers, while he devoured it with his eyes.

'It is something that you hoped to find at Stratford—at Clapton House,' returned William Henry, quietly. 'How often have you told me that some manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays must needs be in existence somewhere! You were right; this is the original, or at all events a very early manuscript, of "Lear."'

"Lear"? Shakespeare's "Lear"? My dear Samuel, you take my breath away. And yet the handwriting seems incontestable; and here is the jug watermark, a clear proof at least of its antiquity. You have read it, of course: does it differ from the quartos?'

'Yes, materially.'

'Thank Heaven!—I mean, how extraordinary! One can hardly, indeed, wish a line of Shakespeare's to differ from what is already engraven in our hearts; but still to get his first thoughts! Truly a rapturous day!'

'I rather think, sir,' said William Henry, 'that after investigation you will acknowledge that these were not only his first thoughts but his best thoughts. There is a polish on the gem that has heretofore been lacking. The manuscript will, if I am not mistaken, prove Shakespeare to have been a more finished writer than has been hitherto imagined. There are many new readings, but once again to refer to that speech of Kent's: you admired it in its modern form, into which I purposely cast it, confident that its merits would not escape you even in that guise; out in its proper and antique dress just be so good as to re-peruse it; perhaps you will give it voice, the advantage of a trained utterance.'

Thus advised, Mr. Erin, nothing loth, repeated the lines aloud:—

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Thanks, Sir; butte I goe toe thatte unknowne land
That chaynes each Pilgrime faste within its soyle.

He read sonorously and with a somewhat pompous air, but effectively; the dignity of the subject sustained him; moreover the sight of the old spelling and quaint calligraphy stirred him as the clang of the trumpet moves the war-horse to exhibit his best paces.

'It is certainly very fine,' was his verdict upon his own performance. 'Who does not pronounce that speech replete with pathos and energy must resign all pretensions to poetical taste.'

'But as an emendation on the received version,' persisted William Henry—

'I have a journey, sir, shortly to go—

will you not admit that it compares favourably with *that?*'

'I consider it, my dear Samuel,' was the solemn reply, 'a decided improvement.'

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He spoke in a tone of conviction, which admitted of no question; sudden as his conversion was (for in praising what in fact he had believed to be his son's composition he had gone to the extreme limit that his conscience would permit), it was perfectly genuine.

There are only a very few people in the world who form an independent judgment on anything upon its intrinsic merits. Most of us are the slaves of authority, or what is supposed to be authority, in matters of opinion. In letters men are almost as much victims to a name as in art. The scholar blind to the beauties of a modern poem can perceive them in an ancient one even where they do not exist. He cannot be persuaded that Æschylus was capable of writing a dull play; the antiquary prefers a *torso* of two thousand years old to a full-length figure by Canova. This may not be good sense, but it is human nature.

'I need not ask you,' continued Mr. Erin, after a pause, during which he gazed at the manuscript like Cortez, on his peak, at the Pacific, 'whether this precious document came from the same treasure house as the rest?'

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'Yes, sir; it almost seems as if there were no end to them. I have not yet explored half the curious papers on which my patron seems to set so little store.'

The antiquary's eyes sparkled under his shaggy brows; if the young man had read his very heart he could not have replied to its secret thoughts more pertinently. An hour before he had hardly dreamt of the existence of such a prize, but, now that it had been found, it at once began to suggest the most magnificent possibilities. This was the first, but why should it be the last? If the manuscript of the 'Lear' had survived all the accidents of time and chance, why not that of the 'Hamlet' also—the 'Hamlet,' with its ambiguous utterances, so differently rendered by the Shakespearean oracles, and which stood so much in need of an authoritative exponent?

When a man (for no merit of his own beyond a little bribery at elections) is made a baronet, he is not so enraptured but that he beholds in the perspective a peerage, and even dreams that upon a somewhat ampler waistcoat (but still his own) may one day repose the broad riband of the Garter.

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'What is very remarkable in the present manuscript,' continued William Henry, 'is that it is free from the ribaldry which but too often disfigures the plays of Shakespeare.'

'The taste of the time was somewhat coarse,' observed Mr. Erin. It was almost incredible even to himself, but he felt that his tone was deprecatory; he was actually making apologies for the Bard of Avon to this young gentleman of seventeen.

'Nevertheless I cannot believe that Shakespeare pandered to it,' observed William Henry gravel. 'These things are in my opinion introduced by the players of the period, and afterwards inserted in the stage copies of the plays from which they were literally printed; and thus the ear of England has been abused. If the discovery of this manuscript should clear Shakespeare's memory from these ignoble stains, it will be a subject of national congratulation.'

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'Very true,' assented Mr. Erin. He felt that the remark was insufficient, wanting in enthusiasm, and altogether upon a lower level than the other's arguments; but the fact was his mind was dwelling upon more personal considerations. He was reflecting

upon his own high position as the proprietor of this unique treasure and on what Malone would say *now*.

These reflections, while they filled him with self-complacency, made him set a higher value upon William Henry than ever; for, like the magician in the Arabian story, he could do nothing without his Aladdheen to help him.

CHAPTER XX.

A TRUE LOVER.

IF Mr. Erin imagined that 'what Malone would say *now*'—i.e. after the discovery of the 'Lear' manuscript—must needs be in the way of apology and penitence, he was doomed to disappointment. So far from the circumstance carrying conviction to the soul of that commentator, and making him remorseful for his past transgressions, it seemed to incite him to the greater insolence, just as (so Mr. Erin expressed it) the discovery of a new Scripture might have incited the Devil not only against it, but against the old ones. He reiterated all his old objections and fortified them with new ones; he refused to accept the testimony of the Hemynge note of hand, which had satisfied his friend and ally Mr. Wallis; he repeated his horrid suggestions that the Shakespeare lock was a girl's ringlet, and, in a word, 'raged' like the heathen. Having declined to look at the 'Lear' upon the ground of 'life being too short for the examination of such trash,' he pronounced it to be 'plain and palpable forgery.' 'Three words,' he said, 'would suffice for the matter,' and published 'An Inquiry into Certain Papers Attributed to Shakespeare,' extending to four hundred pages quarto.

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Whereto Mr. Erin responded at equal length, with 'a studious avoidance of the personality which Mr. Malone had imported into the controversy,' but at the same time taking the liberty to observe that in acting his various parts on the stage of life, Fortune had denied that gentleman every quality essential to each, inasmuch as he was a critic without taste, a poet without imagination, a scholar without learning, a wit without humour, an antiquary without the least knowledge of antiquity, and a man of gallantry, in his dotage. This was a very pretty quarrel as it stood; but, far from being confined to two antagonists, it was taken up by scores on each side: it was no longer 'a gentle passage of arms,' as the combat à *outrance* used to be euphoniously called, but a *mêlée*. Only the ancient rules of a fair fight were utterly disregarded; both parties went at it hammer and tongs, and hit one another anywhere and with anything. One would have almost imagined that instead of a disagreement among scholars it had been a theological controversy.

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To the statement that no one who was not a fool or a knave believed in the Shakespearean manuscripts, Mr. Samuel Erin, scorning to make any particular rejoinder, replied by simply publishing a list of those who had appended their names to his certificate. To this he added a footnote stating the opinion which Dr. Parr had expressed concerning the Profession—namely, that there were many beautiful things in the liturgy of the Church of England, but all inferior to it, which produced a vehement disavowal from that hot-tempered cleric; he mentioned that he had never stated anything so foolish, and that the words in question had been used by Dr. Warton, an observation which caused some coolness between the two learned divines.

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To say that William Henry, the football between these two opposing parties, enjoyed it, would be an exaggeration; he liked being in the air—and indeed he was lauded by many persons to the very skies—but did not so much relish the being knocked and trodden under foot below.

As a popular poet once remarked of the reviewers, 'I like their eulogies well enough, but d—n their criticisms,' so the young man would have preferred his notoriety to have been without this alloy; but on the whole it pleased him vastly.

Margaret was almost angry with him for taking men's hard words so coolly, but comforted herself by reflecting that her Willie must have a heavenly temper.

'As for me,' she would say, 'I could scratch their eyes out. It drives me wild to listen to what uncle sometimes reads aloud out of their horrid pamphlets.'

To which the young fellow would gallantly reply, 'To have such a partisan, who would not compound for fifty such detractors? And, after all, these good people have a right to their own opinions, though it must be confessed they express them with some intemperance. I have given them the "Lear" manuscript, but I cannot give them the taste and poetic feeling necessary to

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appreciate it.'

What of course had wounded Margaret was not their antagonistic criticism, nor even their supercilious contempt, but the accusations they had not scrupled to make against William Henry's good faith. One does not talk of the 'poetic feeling' of a hostile jury. But love has as many causes of admiration as Burton in his 'Anatomy' finds for melancholy; and the young fellow's very carelessness about these charges was, in Margaret's eyes, a feather in his cap, and proved, for one thing, their absolute want of foundation. If she did not understand all the niceties of the points of difference between the 'Lear' manuscript and the 'Lear' as it was printed in her uncle's quarto edition of the play, it was not for want of instruction. There was little else talked of in Norfolk Street, which was perhaps one of the reasons which made the visits of Frank Dennis still more rare. It was clear that the whole subject of the Shakespearean discoveries was distasteful to him; and it must be confessed that he did not even affect that interest in them which good breeding, and indeed good nature, would have seemed to suggest. As to the comparative merits of the old and new readings, or rather, as Mr. Erin maintained, of the accepted and the original text, he had no opinion to offer one way or the other. 'I am no critic,' he would say; 'so that while my differing from you might give you some annoyance, my agreement with you could afford you no satisfaction'—a remark that did not by any means content the antiquary.

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When one's friends have no opinions of their own it cannot surely hurt them to adopt *our* opinions, and it is only reasonable that they should do so. It was quite a comfort (because not wholly looked for) to find that when pushed home on a subject within his own judgment Mr. Dennis's heart in these matters was at least in the right place. Thus, when referring one day to the onslaughts of his opponents, Mr. Erin instanced as an example of their microscopic depravity a certain objection that had been made to the Hemynge's note of hand. 'You know, of course, my good fellow, how it has been proved beyond all dispute that there were two John Hemynges.'

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'I was here when Mr. Albany Wallis came and the other deed was found,' was the young man's reply.

'Tut! tut! why, that of course; but, dear me, how behindhand you are. One would really have thought as an old friend, however little interest you take in these matters for their own sake, that you would have kept abreast with us so far. Why, this receipt here has been found since then, with a memorandum in the bard's own hand, "*Receipt forre moneyes givenne me bye the talle Hemynge onne accounte o' the Curtain Theatre.*"'

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'I did not happen to have heard of it,' said Dennis, regarding the new-found treasure, if not with indifference, certainly with some lack of rapture.

'Well, now you see it,' continued Mr. Erin with irritation. 'Of course it disposes of all doubt in that direction. But now, forsooth, the note of hand is objected to upon the ground of its seals.'

'Good heavens!' ejaculated Dennis, and this time it was evident that he was really moved.

'No wonder you are indignant. I now remember that I drew your particular attention to the document in question. Well, it is almost incredible that their accusation has shrunk to the puny charge that a note of hand, even in Shakespeare's time, would not have had seals appended to it. Is it not amazing that human nature can stoop to such detraction? If it had been Malone—a mere reptile—who makes a point of the Globe being a theatre instead of a playhouse—but this is some lawyer it seems, a child of the Devil, I'll warrant, like the rest of his craft.'

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Considering that William Henry, now Mr. Erin's 'dear Samuel,' had been articted to a conveyancer with the idea of becoming a lawyer himself when full grown, this was a somewhat sweeping as well as severe remark; but, carried away by the torrent of his wrath, the speaker was wholly unconscious of this little inconsistency.

'As if every one did not know,' he continued—'not to mention the fact that in Malone's own prolegomena the Curtain Theatre is so called in Stackwood's sermon, A.D. 1578—that in the Elizabethan times every one not only spelt as he liked, and differently at different times, but appended seals to their documents or did without them, as opportunity served. Is it not even probable that Hemynge, being a player and knowing little of business, may have been particularly solicitous of every form of law being observed,

however superfluous, and in even so small a matter? Is it not in accordance, I ask, with what we know of human nature that it should be so?’

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It was clear that this was no extempore speech, nor even a discourse the claims of which could be satisfied by pen and ink, but one very evidently intended to be printed. Its deliverance gave Frank Dennis time to recover from a certain dismay into which Mr. Erin’s communication had thrown him.

‘Just so,’ he said; ‘you are right, no doubt. The objection as to its being contrary to custom to append seals seems frivolous enough.’

‘And the ground has been cut away from the first, you see, in all other directions,’ exclaimed the antiquary triumphantly. ‘Margaret,’ he continued in high good humour as his niece entered the room, ‘permit me to introduce to you a convert. Mr. Frank Dennis has been hitherto little better than a sceptic, but the light of truth is beginning to dawn upon him through crannies. He has been moved to confess that the note of hand at least is genuine. I have a letter to write before the post goes out, so will leave him in your hands to continue the work of conversion.’

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The door closed behind him before Frank Dennis, always slow of speech, could form his reply; but he gave Margaret the benefit of it.

‘I never told your uncle,’ he said in a grave pained voice, ‘that I believed the note of hand to be genuine.’



‘What *does* it matter?’ exclaimed Margaret reproachfully. ‘I cannot tell you how these miserable disagreements distress me; of themselves, indeed, they are of no consequence, but they irritate my uncle, and have a still worse effect, Frank, upon you. I can ascribe it to no other cause, indeed, that you have almost entirely ceased to visit us.’

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This was not quite true; moreover, it was a dangerous assertion to make, likely to draw upon her the very reproach she had always feared, and which she felt was not undeserved. She trembled lest he should reply, ‘No, that was not the reason; it is because you have preferred William Henry’s love to mine.’

It was to her relief, therefore, though also to her great surprise, that he answered in his habitual quiet tone, ‘Perhaps it is, Margaret.’

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She did not believe it was, and was convinced that in saving so he had laid a burthen upon his conscience for her sake. His nature, she well knew, was so honest and simple that it shrank from even an evasion of the truth, and the very fact of his having thus evaded it to spare her showed her the depth of his affection. If he, then, still loved her, was it not cruel, she reflected, to ask him to her home to witness her happiness with another? She would miss his company, for that was always pleasant to her as that of a tender and faithful friend; but was it not selfish of her to invite it? It was obvious that he came unwillingly, and only in obedience to her behest. If she ceased to importune him he would certainly cease to come, but she would not lose his friendship. When—that is, if—Willie and she were married, it would be different with him; he would then come and see them as the friend of both.

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‘Of course it’s very unfortunate,’ she stammered, with her eyes fixed on the ground, ‘but since my uncle is so thin-skinned about these manuscripts, and you, as he says, are so dreadfully sceptical, it would perhaps be better—until the whole affair has subsided—’

She looked up for a moment in her embarrassment of speech and met Frank’s face; it was gazing at her with an expression of pain and pity and patience which she did not understand and which increased her perplexity.

‘Yes, Margaret, you are right,’ he said: ‘I am better away from here for the present. My coming can do no good, and, as you have surmised, it gives me pain.’

At this the blood rushed to her cheeks, but he went on in the same quiet, resolute tone, as though he had made no reference to his love for her at all.

‘When one cannot say what one will, even when nature dictates it, it is clear that one is in a false position. I shall not come to Norfolk Street any more.’

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‘But you are not going away—I mean from your home?’ exclaimed the girl, alarmed by an expression in his face which seemed to forebode some worse thing than his words implied.

‘No, Margaret; I shall be at home, where a word from you will find me at your service always—*always*.’

He spoke with such a tender stress upon the word that she felt a great remorse for what she had done to him, though indeed it had been no fault of hers. It is impossible, under the present conditions of society at least, that a young woman should make two young men happy at once; one of them must go to the wall. Perhaps if this one had put himself forward instead of the other matters might have been otherwise; the peach falls to the hand that is readiest. There

are men that never win the woman they love till she becomes a widow; for my part, in the meantime—but I am writing of Frank Dennis. He was of a patient disposition, and had a very moderate opinion of himself. And yet his love for Margaret was great, and so genuine that he could have been content to see her happy with another man. Why he was not now content was because he did not think she would be happy; but he did not tell her so, for, though honesty might suggest his doing so, honour forbade him. There is an honour quite different from that of the fanfaronnading sort, one which has nothing to do with running a fellow-creature through for a hasty word, or with ruining some one else to pay our card debts—a delicate, scrupulous sense of what is becoming even in our relations with our enemies, a flower of a modest colour which grows in the shade. This was the sort of honour that Frank Dennis possessed, and which prompted him now to keep silence, when he might have said something which would have been much to his own advantage.

'Good-bye, Margaret,' was all he said, as he took her hand in his. He would, if he could, have even eliminated a certain tenderness from his tone, because he knew it gave her pain; but he could not so utterly conquer nature.

'Good-bye, Frank,' was all she said in reply, or dared to say.

She was thinking of him and not of herself at all. It was pity for him which made her voice falter and her soul quail within her, lest at that supreme moment he should have demanded from her, once for all, another sort of dismissal.

As to love, her heart was loyal to her Willie; and yet, though she would not have confessed it even to herself, she had a secret sense as the door closed upon this other one that she had burned her boats.

CHAPTER XXI.

A TIFF.

WHEN one is not *en rapport* with one's friends about any particular subject, in which for the time they are interested, it is better to leave them, for it is certain they would rather have our room than our company. If you happen to be at Bullock Smithy, for example, during a contested election, when your host at the Hall and all his family are looking forward to the regeneration of the species—conditional upon the return of Mr. Brown—and you don't much care about it yourself (or even doubt of its being accomplished that way), you had better for the present leave the Hall and revisit it under less exciting circumstances. They will politely lament your departure, but privately be very glad to get rid of you. You may be (you *are*) a charming person, but just now you are a little in the way. They resent your presence as spirit-rappers resent that of 'the sceptic,' as they call every one endowed with reason and common-sense. The common harmony is disturbed by it as by a false note.

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Thus it happened that the withdrawal of Frank Dennis from his friends in Norfolk Street was upon the whole a relief to them. They could talk unreservedly among themselves of the subject that lay next their hearts, and which was really assuming great importance for all of them.

If the mere amount of the Shakespearean manuscripts could have assured, as it undoubtedly made more probable, their authenticity, the voice of detraction ought to have been silenced; for there was some new discovery made in that wonderful treasure chamber of the Temple almost every day. Contracts and mortgages, theatrical disbursements, miscellaneous letters, deeds of gift, all immediately relating to Shakespeare, if not in his very hand, were constantly being found. Records which a few months ago would have filled Mr. Erin's heart with rapture were now, indeed, welcomed by him, but almost as a matter of course. 'The gentleman of considerable property in the Temple,' as the antiquary had been wont to vaguely term him, had now grown as familiar to him as though he had had a name as well as a local habitation.

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'Well, what news from our friend to-day, Samuel?' was the cheery question he would address to his son on his return home every evening, and it was very seldom that there was no news.

Mr. Erin indeed had cause to be grateful to this unknown person, since he had (though not without reluctance) given permission for the publication of the papers, which had accordingly been advertised to appear in a handsome quarto at two guineas. They included all the documents, the 'Lear' (of which unfortunately three leaves were missing) and a few pages of 'Hamlet.' These last differed but little from those of the accepted text, a circumstance which did not escape the notice of the enemy, who did not hesitate to aver that the forger, whoever he was, had found 'Hamlet' too difficult a nut to crack.

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The best reply, as Mr. Erin wisely concluded, to so coarse a sarcasm was the publication of Shakespeare's Deed of Trust, conveying the 'Lear' to John Hemynge, in which he said, 'Should this bee everre agayne Impryntedd, I doe order tyhatt itte bee so doun from this mye true written Playe, and nott from those now prynted'—an injunction which, had there been an entire copy extant, would doubtless have included the 'Hamlet' also.

To the 'Miscellaneous papers and legal instruments, under the hand and seal of William Shakespeare, including the tragedy of "King Lear" and a small fragment of "Hamlet,"' was prefixed a preface by Mr. Erin himself, setting forth the circumstances under which they had come into his possession, challenging criticism and defying inquiry. This publication was of course the crucial test. While our opinions are expressed *viva voce*, or even with pen and ink, they are of little consequence to the world at large, however much they may affect our little circle of friends and enemies. I know many persons who might have remained in possession of great works of genius in manuscript had they not been so indiscreet as to print them; the annalist's sarcasm of *nisi imperasset* applies to authors as well as kings.

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The book evoked a storm of censure. 'My eyes will scarcely

permit me to read it,' wrote Malone ('posturing as a sick lion,' sneered Mr. Erin), 'but I have read enough to convince me that the whole production is a forgery.' Others fell foul of the style, the ideas, the very punctuation of the discovered manuscripts. They acknowledged that the phraseology was simple, but added that 'it was that sort of simplicity that belongs to the fool.' As it was some time before the advocates of the discovery could get out their rejoinders—with which many of those who had signed the certificate were busy—Mr. Samuel Erin had for the present a pretty time of it. He was like a man caught in a downpour of hailstones without an umbrella. He never blenched, however, for a single instant; one would have thought that waterproofs and overalls had been invented before his time for his especial behalf. But poor Margaret trembled and shivered. How could people be so wicked as to say such things of Willie! She would not have been so distressed had she not seen that he shrank from these stings himself. Womanlike, she concealed her own pain and strove to comfort him.

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'As for these imputations upon your honour, Willie, they are not worth thinking of; it is as though they called you a negro, when every one who has ever seen you knows you to be a white man. Still less need you trouble yourself about their criticisms; for what can it matter to you whether the manuscript, or the printed copy, of Shakespeare's works has the greater worth?'

'That's true,' assented the young fellow; but by his knitted brows and downcast looks she knew that it did matter to him nevertheless.

'This is what I have always feared for you, should you publish a book of your own,' she went on earnestly. 'You are so sensitive, darling. How thankful I am that Shakespeare (who can afford to smile at it) is bearing the brunt of all this, and not you!'

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Then came the 'rejoinders,' like sunshine after storm. 'There was not an ingenuous character or disinterested individual in the whole circle of literature,' wrote one enthusiastic partisan, 'to whom the manuscripts had been subjected who was not convinced of their authenticity.' They had 'not only convinced the scholar and the antiquary, but the paper-maker.' As to the secrecy observed with respect to their origin and possessor, 'what becomes of the acumen of the critic if such details are necessary to establish the genuineness of such a production? His occupation is gone.' As to the intrinsic merits of the 'Lear,' the seal of Shakespeare's genius was stamped upon it. 'A wit so pregnant, an imagination so unbounded, a knowledge so intuitive of the weakness of the human heart as was here exhibited could belong to no other man. If it was not his, it was inspiration itself.'

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'Here, indeed,' thought William Henry, 'is something like criticism. This is an independent opinion with which the carping of prejudice or personal malevolence is not to be mentioned in the same breath.'

And, indeed, if these eulogies had been the products of the best minds in the most perfect state of equilibrium they could scarcely have given him a more exquisite gratification. He had a sensation about his forehead as though a wreath of laurels rested there, or even a halo. He touched the stars with his head, and if he moved upon the earth at all it was on wings. It was delightful to Margaret to see him thus. She hardly recognised in him, exultant and self-conscious, the same young fellow whom she had known depressed and obscure. She was proud beyond measure of the position he had made for himself in the world of letters, but happier still because it seemed to make him hers, to put her uncle's consent to their union beyond all question. Yet, as love's fashion is, she still pictured to herself at times delays, opposition, and even obstacles.

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'We must not be too sure, my darling,' she said to him lovingly one day, 'though all things seem to smile on us. It is but the promise after all, the bud but not the flower, the blossom but not the fruit.'

'True,' he answered thoughtfully; 'all this is but a mock engagement; the battle has yet to come. It is something, however, that the fighting will be on the same field; one at least knows the ground.'

She stared at him, in doubt as to what he meant; then, as if alarmed by her wondering looks, he stammered out, 'I was thinking of Mr. Erin; we now know him thoroughly, or rather he has become another man from what he was.'

'My uncle has changed, no doubt, and for the better,' she said.

'There is change everywhere and for the better,' he answered,

smiling.

He took from his pocket one of the printed cards which were now formally issued to purchasers of the lately published volume for leave to examine the manuscripts.

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SHAKESPEARE.
Admit Albany Wallis, a subscriber, to view
the papers.

'Think of Mr. Wallis having bought the book! Malone and he have quarrelled about it, it seems.'

'Not about the book,' put in Margaret quietly; 'I am afraid he is not even yet a true believer, but I like him better for having bought the book than even if he were. He felt he had behaved badly to us when he came here with that wretched Mr. Talbot, and his purchase of it was by way of making some amends. Where he differed from Mr. Malone was about the John Hemyngde deed you brought from the Temple; Mr. Malone has had the malevolence to stigmatise even that as a forgery; but, as Mr. Wallis points out, since you were away from Norfolk Street only three-quarters of an hour, such a fraud was impossible and out of the question. He is a just man with a mind open to conviction, and he has had the courage to confess himself in the wrong.'

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'Whoever told you all this?' inquired William Henry in amazement.

'A person who is no friend of his, but, like him, has a generous nature.'

'Methinks you do protest too much,' observed the young man drily. 'No one was saying anything against your informant, who it was easy to perceive was Mr. Frank Dennis. I thought he had literally withdrawn his countenance from us of late, as he has done long ago in another sense.'

'No one can control his own opinions, Willie,' said Margaret gently. 'I have heard you yourself say a hundred times, concerning this very matter, that every one had a right to them, but, since the very knowledge of Frank's entertaining certain views (though he never expressed them except upon compulsion) was an annoyance to my uncle, he thought it better to absent himself.'

'But still you meet him elsewhere?'

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'I met him in the street the other day by accident. He gave me, it is true, the information I have just given to you, but he did not volunteer it. It was I who spoke to him first about Mr. Wallis.'

'It seems he took great care to undeceive you as to that gentleman's having any belief in me.'

'In *you*, Willie? We never even spoke of *you*.'

This was very true: he had become a subject to which, for Frank's sake, she never alluded in Frank's presence.

'Well, of course I am not responsible for the manuscripts; but do you suppose that Dennis was thinking of them, for which he does not care one farthing, even if he was talking of them? He was thinking of *me*. When he depreciates them to you he depreciates me; when he quotes the opinion of Mr. Wallis or of any one else he is quoting it against me. You need not blush, Margaret, as if my mind had just awakened to a suspicion of the truth. Do you suppose I don't know what Mr. Frank Dennis has been after, all along?'

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'I will not pretend to be ignorant of what you mean, Willie,' said Margaret firmly, 'but you are quite mistaken if you imagine that Frank Dennis has ever breathed a word to me, or, as I believe, to any one, to your disadvantage: he has a loyal heart and is a true friend.'

'A friend, indeed!' said William Henry scornfully.

'Yes, indeed and in need. I will lay my life on it, Willie. A man who detests all falsehood and deceit, and even if he entertained an unworthy thought of a rival would hold his peace about him.'

'That is why, no doubt, he did not speak of me,' put in the young man bitterly. 'Detraction can be conveyed by silence as well as by a forked tongue.'

'You are both unjust and unkind, Willie.'

'Still the fact remains that, whenever you see this gentleman, I do not rise—I will not say by comparison, because I believe you love me—but I do not rise in your opinion. You cannot deny it; your face

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confesses it. Under these circumstances you can hardly think me unreasonable if I ask you for the present not to meet Mr. Frank Dennis, even "by accident in the street."

'I will not speak to him, Willie, if you object to it,' said Margaret in a low voice. She was the more distressed at what he had said because she had a secret consciousness that it was not undeserved. He did not indeed sink in her opinion after her talks with Frank, and certainly did not suffer by contrast; but, on the other hand, he did not rise, while her confidence in the genuineness of the Shakespearean documents did sink.

Thence arose misgivings as to the future, doubts whether Willie would be permitted to win her, and a certain unsteadiness, not indeed of purpose but of outlook.

'Of course you must speak to him if you meet him, Maggie,' continued William Henry in a tone from which all irritation had disappeared; 'only for the present do not seek his society. You will not long have to deny yourself the pleasure, since in a few weeks—that is, I intend very shortly to ask Mr. Erin to give you to me for my very own.'

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'Oh, Willie! He will never do it,' she returned, not however with much conviction, but as one who toys with doubt. 'I am sure he does not dream of your having such an intention.'

'Then he must be as blind as Gloster, Maggie.'

This allusion to the 'Lear' was somehow—it would have been difficult to say why—unwelcome to her. Love no doubt depends upon very small and comparatively mundane matters, but still that her hopes of marriage with her lover should hang upon the general belief in the genuineness of an old manuscript seemed a little humiliating. She would have far preferred, had it been possible, that William Henry should have won his way to a modest competence by his own pen. Perhaps he had hopes of this, and some surprise in store for her; or why should he have used that phrase 'in a few weeks'? It was true that he had substituted for it a more vague expression, but she could not help thinking that he had some definite plan in his mind to precipitate events. What *could* it be?

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CHAPTER XXII.

A BARGAIN.

'THE book goes bravely, Samuel,' observed Mr. Erin, as father and son were sitting together one evening with Margaret between them. William Henry's hand was resting on the back of her chair, and at times he addressed her in tones so low that his words must needs have had no more meaning for a third person than if they had been in a foreign tongue. Yet both his contiguity and his confidences remained unreprieved. Perhaps among other recently developed virtues in the young man it was put down by Mr. Erin (who himself had a quick eye for the main chance) to William Henry's credit that he never questioned his father's right to treat the Shakespearean papers as his own, or to demand any account of his stewardship with respect to them.

The antiquary, however, had scruples of his own, which, if they did not compel him to part with hard money, induced him to look upon his milch cow with very lenient and indulgent eyes. [47]

It was surely only natural that these two young people should entertain a very strong mutual attachment; through long familiarity they doubtless seemed more like brother and sister to one another than cousins. It could not be said, in short, that Mr. Erin winked at their love-making, but he shut his eyes to it. It would have been very inconvenient to have said 'No' to a certain question, and quite impossible to say 'Yes.' It was better that things should take their own course, even if it was a little dangerous, than to make matters uncomfortable by interference.

'From first to last, my lad,' he continued in a cheerful voice, 'we shall make little short of 500*l.*, I expect.'

'Indeed,' said William Henry indifferently. To do him justice he cared little for money at any time, and just now less than usual. His appetite, even for fame, had for the present lost its keenness. Love possessed him wholly; he cared only for Margaret. [48]

'To think that a new reading of an old play—though to be sure it is Shakespeare's play—should produce so much!' went on Mr. Erin complacently. 'Good heavens! what would not the public give for a new play by the immortal bard?'

'The question is,' observed William Henry, 'what would *you* give, Mr. Erin?'

The remark was so unexpected, and delivered in such a quiet tone, that for a moment the antiquary was dumbfounded, and between disbelief and expectancy made no reply.

'My dear Samuel,' he murmured presently, 'is it possible you can be serious, that you have in your possession——'

'Nay, sir,' interrupted the young man smiling; 'I never said that. I do not possess it, but within the last few days I have known of the existence of such a manuscript.'

'You have known and not told me!' exclaimed the antiquary reproachfully; 'why, I might have died in the meantime!' [49]

'Then you would have seen Shakespeare, and he would have told you all about it,' returned William Henry lightly.

'Do not answer your father like that,' said Margaret in low, reproving tones.

It was plain, indeed, that Mr. Erin was greatly agitated. His eyes were fixed upon his son, but without speculation in them. He looked like one in a trance, to whom has been vouchsafed some wondrous vision.

'I know what is best,' returned the young man under his breath, pressing Margaret's shoulder with his hand. His arm still hung over her chair; his manner was studiously unmoved, as becomes the master of a situation.

'Where is it?' gasped the old man.

'In the Temple. I have not yet obtained permission to bring it away. Until I could do that I felt it was useless to speak about the matter—that I should only be discredited. Even you yourself, unless you saw the manuscript, might hesitate to believe in its authenticity.' [50]

'The manuscript?' exclaimed Mr. Erin, his mind too monopolised by the splendour of the discovery to descend to detail; 'you have

really seen it, then, with your own eyes? An unacted play of Shakespeare's!

'An unpublished one, at all events. I have certainly seen it, and within these two hours, but only in my patron's presence.'

'He said that whatever you found was to be yours,' exclaimed Mr. Erin petulantly.

'Well, up to this time he has been as good as his word,' said William Henry smiling.

'Indeed he has,' remarked Margaret. 'We must not be ungrateful, uncle.'

'Nevertheless, people should perform what they, promise,' observed the antiquary severely.

For the second time Margaret felt a gentle pressure upon her shoulder; it seemed as though Willie had whispered, 'You hear that.'

'The play is called "Vortigern and Rowena,"' continued the young man.

'An admirable subject,' murmured the antiquary ecstatically.

'It is, of course, historical; there are Hengist and Horsus.'

'Horsa,' suggested Mr. Erin.

'Shakespeare writes it Horsus; Horsa was perhaps his sister.'

'Perhaps,' admitted the antiquary with prompt adhesion. 'And the treatment? How does it rank as regards his other productions?'

'Nay, sir, that is for you to judge; I am no critic.'

'But you tell me that your patron will not part with it.'

'I have not yet persuaded him to do so; but I by no means despair of it, and in the meantime I have a copy of it.'

'My dear Samuel!'

'At first I tried to commit it to memory, but found the task beyond my powers. It is a very long play.'

'The longer the better,' murmured the antiquary.

'But not when one has to get it by heart,' observed William Henry drily. His tone and manner were more in contrast to those of the elder man than ever; as one grew heated the other seemed to grow cooler and cooler. There was no question as to which of them, just at present, was likely to prove the better hand at a bargain.

'But why do you talk thus, Samuel? The play, the play's the thing; since you have it why do you not produce it? You cannot imagine that delay—indeed, that anything—can enhance the interest I feel in this most marvellous of our discoveries.'

William Henry's face grew very grave.

'It is true that whatever is mine is yours, in a sense,' he said; 'but still you must pardon me for remarking that they are *my* discoveries.'

Margaret started in her chair; if she had not felt William Henry's grasp upon her wrist—for he had shifted his position and was confronting the antiquary face to face—she would have risen from it. She had never given her cousin credit for such self-assertion, and she trembled for its result. She did not even yet suspect it had a motive in which she herself was concerned; but the situation alarmed her. It was like that of some audacious clerk who demands of his master a partnership, with a certain difference that made it even graver.

'What is it you want?' inquired the antiquary. He too had become conscious that the relations between William Henry and himself were about to enter on a new phase; nevertheless his tone was conciliatory, like that of a man who, though somewhat tried, cannot afford to quarrel with his bread-and-butter.

'I am the last man, I hope, to be illiberal,' he continued. 'If I were dealing with a stranger I should frankly own that what you have, or rather, hope to have, to dispose of is a valuable commodity; to me, indeed, as you know, it is more valuable than to any mere dealer in such wares. Nevertheless I hope you will be reasonable; after all it is a question of what the thing will fetch. I suppose you will not ask a fancy price?'

William Henry smiled. 'Well, some people might think it so, Mr. Erin, but it is not money at all that I require of you.'

'Not money?' echoed the antiquary in a voice of great relief. 'Well, that indeed shows a proper spirit. I am really pleased to find that we are to have no haggling over a matter of this kind, which in truth would be little short of a sacrilege. If you have fixed your mind

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upon any of my poor possessions, though it should even be the "Decameron," the earliest edition extant, and complete except for the title-page—'

'It is not the "Decameron," sir.'

'Or the quarto of 1623, with marginal notes in my own hand. But no; that is a small matter indeed by comparison with this magnificent discovery. I hardly know what I have which would in any way appear to you an equivalent; but be assured that anything at my disposal is very much at your service.'

'Then if you please, sir, I will take Margaret.'

'Margaret!' Mr. Erin repeated the name in tones of such supreme amazement as could not have been exceeded had the young man stipulated for his wig. Perhaps his surprise was a little simulated, which was certainly not the case with Margaret herself; she sat in silence, covered with blushes, and with her eyes fixed on the table before her, very much frightened, but by no means 'hurt.' While she trembled at Willie's audacity she admired it.



'THEN, IF YOU PLEASE, SIR, I WILL TAKE MARGARET.'

Mr. Erin shot a glance at her which convinced him that he would get no help from that quarter. If she had not been cognisant of the young fellow's intention it was clear that the proposal he had made was not displeasing to her. The antiquary ransacked his mind for an objection that would meet the case; there were plenty of them there, but none of them fit for use and at the same time strong enough. A very powerful one at once occurred to him in the question, 'What do you propose to live upon?' but unhappily the answer was equally obvious, 'Upon *you!*' A most intolerable suggestion, but one which—on the brink of a bargain—it was not convenient to combat.

For a moment, too, the objection of consanguinity occurred to him, that they were cousins; an admirable plea, because it was quite insurmountable; but though this might have had its weight with Margaret, he doubted of its efficacy in William Henry's case, inasmuch as he probably knew that they were *not* cousins. To have this question raised in the young lady's presence—or indeed at all—was not to be thought of. In the end he had to content himself with the commonplace argument of immaturity, unsatisfactory at the best, since it only delays the evil day.

'Margaret? You surely cannot be serious, my dear lad. Why, your united ages scarcely make up that of a marriageable man. This is really too ridiculous. You are not eighteen.'

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The rejoinder that that was an objection which time could be relied on to remove was obvious, but William Henry did not make it. He was not only playing for a great stake; it was necessary that it should be paid in ready money.

'I venture to think, Mr. Erin,' he said respectfully, 'that our case is somewhat exceptional. We have known one another for a long time, and very intimately; it is not a question of calf love. Moreover, to be frank with you, my value in your eyes is now at its highest. You may learn to esteem me more; I trust you may; but as time goes on I cannot hope commercially to be at such a premium. Now or never, therefore, is my time to sell.'

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Though he spoke of himself as the article of barter he was well aware that Mr. Erin's thoughts were fixed upon another purchase, which, as it were, included him in the same 'lot.'

'But, my dear Samuel, this is so altogether unexpected.'

'So is the discovery of the manuscript,' put in the young fellow with pitiless logic.

'It is like springing a mine on me, my lad.'

'The "Vortigern and Rowena" is also a mine, or I hope will prove so,' was the quick rejoinder.

Whatever might be urged against William Henry Erin, it could not be said that he had not his wits about him.

'You have only the copy,' objected the antiquary, though he felt the argument to be inadequate, since it was liable to be swept away.

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'Nay,' returned the young man, smiling, 'what becomes of the acumen of the critic, if internal evidence is insufficient to establish authenticity? His occupation is gone.'

This was Mr. Erin's favourite quotation from the 'Rejoinder;' to use it against him was like seething a kid in its mother's milk, and it roused him for the first time to vigorous opposition. It is possible that he also saw his opportunity for spurring the other on to gain possession of the precious document.

'That is all mighty fine, young sir, but this is not a question of sentiment. I must see this play in Shakespeare's own handwriting before I can take your most unlooked-for proposal into consideration at all. At present the whole affair is in the air.'

'You shall see the play,' said William Henry composedly.

'Moreover,' continued the antiquary with equal firmness, 'it will not be sufficient that I myself should be convinced of its authenticity. It must receive general acceptance.'

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'I can hardly promise, sir, that there will be no objectors,' returned the young man drily; 'Mr. Malone, for example, will probably have something to say.'

The mention of 'that devil,' as the antiquary, in moments of irritation, was wont to call that respectable commentator, was most successful.

'I speak of rational beings, sir,' returned Mr. Erin, with quite what is called in painting his 'early manner.' 'What Malone may take into his head to think is absolutely indifferent to me. I speak of the public voice.'

'As heard, for instance, at the National Theatre,' suggested William Henry earnestly. 'Suppose that "Vortigern and Rowena" should be acted at Drury Lane or Covent Garden, and be received as the *bona fide* production of Shakespeare? Would that test content you?'

That such an ordeal would be of a sufficiently crucial nature was indubitable, yet not more so than the confidence with which it was proposed. If the least glimmer of doubt as to the genuineness of the Shakespearean MSS. still reigned in the antiquary's mind the voice and manner of his son as he spoke those words would have dispelled it. The immaturity of the two young people was not much altered for the better since Mr. Erin had cited it as a bar to their union, but, under the circumstances now suggested, their position would be very materially improved. A play at Drury Lane in those days meant money in pocket; a successful play was a small fortune, and might even be a large one. He would have greatly preferred to have this precious MS., like the others, for nothing, but, after all, what was demanded of him was better than being asked to give hard cash for a pig in a poke. It was only a promise to pay upon conditions which would make the payment comparatively easy.

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'If "Vortigern and Rowena" is successful,' continued William

Henry with the quiet persistence of a carpenter who strikes the same nail on the head, 'it must be understood that I have permission to marry Margaret as soon as she pleases.'

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Poor Mr. Erin looked appealingly at his niece. 'You will surely not be so indelicate,' his glance seemed to say, 'as to wish to precipitate a matter of this kind?' But he looked in vain. She did not, it is true, say, 'I will though;' there was even a blush on her cheek, which might have seemed to flatter his expectations: but she kept silence, which in such a case it was impossible to construe otherwise than as consent.

Some old gentlemen would have hereupon felt themselves justified in saying that 'young women were not so forward in their time,' or 'that such conduct was in their experience unprecedented,' a reflection, to judge by the frequency with which it is indulged in under similar circumstances, that would seem to give some sort of consolation; but the antecedents of Mr. Samuel Erin were unhappily, as we have hinted, not of a sufficiently ascetic nature to enable him to use this solace.

'Perhaps you would like to read the play?' suggested William Henry.

'Very much,' replied the antiquary with eagerness.

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'Just as you please, Mr. Erin. It is yours of course, upon the understanding, supposing it to realise expectation, that we have your consent to our marriage.'

'Very good,' replied the antiquary, without any eagerness at all, and in a tone which (had such a substitution been feasible) would have better suited with 'Very bad.'

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CHAPTER XXIII.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY.



THAT had gone before as regarded the Shakespeare MSS. sank into almost insignificance as compared with the stir made by the 'Vortigern and Rowena.' The superiority of new

lamps over old ones has, with that well-known exception in the 'Arabian Nights,' been pretty generally acknowledged in all climes and times. If a scrap of writing from the great genius, who had left nothing of himself behind him, save, as had been hitherto supposed, a couple of signatures, had had its attractions; if the original drafts of a well-known play or two had set the town by the ears; one may imagine the excitement produced by the discovery of a brand-new drama in the master's hand. Mr. Samuel Erin's door in Norfolk Street was positively besieged by applicants to view the wonder.

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That gentleman, however, declined for the present to gratify the public curiosity. Conscious as he was of the importance of his own position, he was also fully aware of the necessity of strengthening it against all comers, among whom must necessarily be many foes. William Henry had been as good as his word. He had, though with great difficulty, persuaded his patron to part with the precious manuscript, which had been duly placed in the antiquary's hands. Both by external and internal evidence he was fully satisfied with its authenticity; but it was necessary that the world without should share his conviction. Mahomet, it seems, was for a considerable time content with a single believer; nor when we consider that that believer was his wife, is it discreditable to his claims. If he could only have converted his *valet de chambre* also, he ought to have been well satisfied. Mr. Erin, as we are aware, was in a much better position as to followers, but then he wanted so much more. Mahomet, so far as we know, had not just then a two-guinea edition of the Koran in hand, the sale of which was beginning to slacken. It was doubtful whether the immediate publication of the 'Vortigern' might not injure its predecessor, unless its genuineness could be better authenticated.

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To this end, Mr. Erin took the bold step of convening a committee of commentators and critics to report upon the MS. A selection was made from those who had signed the certificate, and who were therefore favourable; but others were invited who had not so compromised themselves, and even who might be supposed to be hostile, including Mr. Albany Wallis. No one could say that it was a hole-and-corner business, far less that the assembly was packed. It would, without doubt, have been much more agreeable to Mr. Erin if it had been, for he had to listen to some very unpleasant things. These, for the most part, it was true, were said by small men. Just as in the great railway meetings of the present day, the shareholder who has just put enough in the undertaking to qualify him to speak at all is always the most loquacious, so the second-rate critics, who had not much chance of being listened to in the world without, were, if not the most sceptical, the most vituperative; and poor Mr. Erin was not a chairman who could ignore them. The style, the matter, the calligraphy of the 'Vortigern,' nay, even the very paper on which it was written, underwent the sharpest scrutiny and evoked some very bitter remarks. Dr. Parr and Dr. Warton, the two great cards of the certificate, were strongly in favour of the play, and carried many with them, including the laureate Pye, and his brother poet, Sir James Burgess. But there were also many adversaries.

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The fact was, notwithstanding that famous dictum about the occupation of the critic being gone if the intrinsic merit of a work was not sufficient to establish its genuineness, and though the

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excellence of the 'Vortigern' was on the whole admitted, the story of how it came into William Henry's hands was the real obstacle to its acceptance. His patron of the Temple was too much wrapped in mystery to be satisfactory to the minds of most.

The committee was to sit for two days, and then decide by vote upon the all-important question, was there or was there not sufficient evidence before them of the authenticity of the play? William Henry was always present, a witness whose examination was always proceeding, but, as it were, in a circle. The keenest expert could get nothing out of him beyond what had been already got. He had nothing to tell, save what he had already told. His manner was cool and collected, and produced a favourable impression. Sir James Burgess said, 'If this young man is not speaking the truth, he is a marvellous actor, and we are informed, upon authority which in this case can certainly not be disputed, that he is but seventeen.' The authority was not quite so good as Sir James imagined, but the fact was as he stated it.

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Alone with Mr. Erin and Margaret, the young fellow was even more self-reliant; he was hopeful. Whatever decision the committee might arrive at, there was still, he would say, the appeal to the public; and in that he expressed his confidence. In this Mr. Erin could not agree; if the play was discredited by those who had been so solemnly convened to judge of it, he doubted of its acceptance out of doors. On the second and all-important day there was even a fuller attendance than on the first. Among the new-comers was the Bishop of St. Andrews, a good-natured divine enough, but who produced an unfavourable impression by quoting Porson's 'Iambics,' 'Three children sliding on the ice,' which the great professor pretended to have found in an old trunk among some manuscript plays of Sophocles—an obvious satire upon the Shakespearean discoveries. Greek wit is never so mirth-provoking as to endanger life, but at this specimen it was difficult for Mr. Samuel Erin to force a smile. What even more depressed him was the unexpected arrival of Mr. Reginald Talbot. How this young man had gained admittance he could not understand; but at such a time the real ground of objection to him could not, of course, be stated. Public opinion had been challenged, and on the brink of its decision it would have been madness indeed to have any altercation with one who had evinced his scepticism.

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Talbot had come in alone and taken his seat rather apart from the rest: his face looked less florid than usual, but resolute enough; after one glance round the room he fixed his eyes upon the ground. Every moment the antiquary expected to hear his blatant voice giving utterance to some offensive imputation; but he remained silent, listening to the pros and cons of his seniors, with no particular interest, as it seemed, in the matter.

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William Henry had seen him enter, of course—there were few things that escaped his observation—but had shown no sign of concern, far less of apprehension. He either did not fear him, or had screwed his courage to the sticking place. Now and then, indeed, he glanced nervously at the door; but from no fear of an enemy. He had some misgiving lest Margaret's anxiety upon his account might compel her to come and hear for herself how matters were going on; a very groundless apprehension, for nothing could have been more foreign to her retiring and modest nature than to have intruded herself upon such an assembly.

After all who wished to speak had had their say, the Laureate rose and addressed the meeting. He had listened very attentively, he said, to the opinions that had been advanced on both sides upon the subject of controversy; and if he could not say that he had himself come to a definite conclusion, he thought that he had at least gathered the general view of those present. The play before them was undoubtedly a remarkable one; he could not take upon himself to say from internal evidence whether it was, or was not, written by William Shakespeare, but, on the whole, he believed it to have been so. Persons better qualified than himself to judge of such matters had expressed themselves for and against the other proofs of its authenticity. Again, on the whole, these seemed to him to be in its favour. But what, after all, was their great stumbling-block was the mystery—and as it seemed to him the unnecessary mystery—that hung about its discovery.

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Here there were audible expressions of assent. Mr. Erin, pale and trembling, but much more with anger than with fear, was about to rise, but the Laureate waved him back. He was not going to have

his peroration spoilt by any man. There was a general murmur of 'Pye, Pye,' which under any other circumstances, would have sounded exquisitely humorous; it was like a bread riot of the upper classes. 'Under these circumstances,' continued the orator, 'if anyone can be found who has seen the MS. as it were *in situ*, and has met the unknown patron of the Temple in the flesh, so as to corroborate so far the testimony of this young gentleman' (here he pointed to William Henry), 'I, for one, shall have no hesitation in acknowledging myself a believer; but in the absence of such a witness I must take leave, at least, to reserve my judgment.'

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There was a long and significant silence. If the speaker had not expressed the views of the majority, he had done so for many of those present; while the want of corroborative testimony, such as he had indicated, was felt by all. Even Mr. Erin, perhaps for the first time, understood how evidence which had been, and was, perfectly conclusive to himself, might well fail, thus unsupported, to satisfy the public mind. He felt like the young blood who had recently been endeavouring for a bet to dispose within five minutes of a hundred sovereigns to as many persons on London Bridge for a penny apiece. His MSS. were genuine, but if he could not persuade people to believe it, where would be his profit?

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'Well,' continued the Laureate in self-satisfied tones, for he was pleased with the impression his eloquence had produced, and especially that he had reduced the antiquary—in whose mind he had created a desert and called it peace—to silence: 'Well! the question is, Is there such a witness as I have described?'

'Yes, there is.'

These words fell upon the general ear like a bombshell, but no one was more utterly astounded by them than Mr. Samuel Erin himself. He could hardly believe his ears, and when he looked to the quarter from which they proceeded—and to which every one else was looking—he could not believe his eyes; for the man that had uttered them was Mr. Reginald Talbot.

The young man was not, indeed, in appearance quite the sort of witness whom one would have chosen to establish the authenticity of an ancient literary document; though at a police court, in some case of assault (provided the victim was respectable, and he had been for the prosecution), he might have been passable enough. His dress was that of a young man of fashion, but not of good fashion; his manner was suggestive less of confidence than of swagger, and his face spoke of indulgence in liquor. On the other hand, this impression may have been partly caused by his contrast with these learned pundits, most of them in wigs, and some of them in shovel hats; he scarcely seemed to belong to the same race. The very eye-glass, which headed the cane he carried so jauntily in his hand, was out of keeping with *their* eye-glasses, and looked like some gay young lens who had refused to be put into spectacles, and was winking at life on its own hook.

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'Does any one know this young gentleman?' inquired Mr. Pye, with significant hesitation.

'Yes, I know him,' observed Mr. Albany Wallis. 'I have, it is true, but slight acquaintance with his personal character, but he comes of respectable parentage.'

'You may add that he has two hundred a year of his own, good money,' observed Mr. Talbot with some complacency, and a strong Irish accent.

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Mr. Pye looked at him very dubiously, and in spite of this assurance of his financial solvency, addressed himself to the previous speaker.

'In the case before us, Mr. Wallis—and I need not say how your opinion will weigh with us,—do you consider this gentleman as a dependable witness?'

Mr. Reginald Talbot turned very red, and, not having a retort on hand suitable to bestow on a poet laureate, very wisely held his tongue.

'I am bound to say,' said Mr. Wallis gravely, 'that Mr. Talbot has given some attention to the authenticity of the Shakespeare MSS., and up to this time he has expressed himself, and with somewhat unnecessary vehemence, to their discredit; any evidence he may therefore have to offer in their favour will have some weight with me.'

Then all the company awaited in expectant silence for Mr.

Reginald Talbot's narrative.

'What Mr. Wallis has said is quite right,' said that young gentleman, with unnecessary affability. 'I did use to think that there was something amiss with those Shakespeare papers. I had an idea that Mr. William Henry Erin yonder was playing tricks, so I made it my business to watch him. I hung about his chambers in the New Inn—they are on the ground floor, though pretty high up—and with a short ladder I have made shift to see what was going on when he was alone in his room, and little suspected it.'

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William Henry, standing apart with folded arms, listened to this confession of his former friend with a contemptuous smile. If it was a revelation to him, he displayed the indifference of a North American Indian.

'For days and days I watched him and discovered nothing. Then I dogged his steps to the city, where he went every afternoon; on two occasions he turned, as if to see whether he was followed, and I think he saw me.'

William Henry shook his head.

'Well, at all events I thought he did, and gave it up. The third time, walking on the other side of the street, and very careful to leave a safe distance between us, I tracked him to a staircase in the Temple. He stopped at a door on the first floor, and entered without knocking. I waited a bit and then followed him. An old gentleman was seated in the room alone, in an armchair, reading; he looked up from his book in great astonishment, and inquired very curtly who I was.'

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'I said that I came upon business of importance, after young Mr. Erin. He rose, and opening an inner door, exclaimed: "Here is a friend of yours, sir: what is the meaning of his intrusion here?" He spoke very angrily, but I felt that he had some reason for it, and when Erin came out and said, "Talbot, you have ruined me," I felt sorry for what I had done. There was nothing for it but to make a clean breast of it, and with many apologies, of which not the slightest notice was taken, I explained that curiosity, and a suspicion that the world was being gulled by these pretended discoveries, had induced me to look into the matter myself.'

"You are a spy, then," cried the old gentleman. I thought for a moment that he was going to throw me out of the window; but his rage instantly subsided. "Take him into the next room, Erin, and show him all," he said. He took me accordingly, and there I saw an immense quantity of old manuscripts strewed about the floor; I should say whole cartfuls of them. I was so sorry and so ashamed of myself that I never spoke a word till Erin let me out again.

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"I am sorry I came," I said; "but I am quite satisfied, sir, that Erin spoke the truth."

"I don't care a farthing, sir, whether you are satisfied or not," replied the old gentleman; "you have taken a mean advantage of your friend, and an unpardonable liberty with me."

"Then I told him upon my honour, and as I hoped to be saved, that I would never reveal his name to any human being.'

'He waved his hand contemptuously, and observed that my word and my oath together were not worth sixpence; but if I had any feeling for my friend, or any remorse for the baseness I had committed, I had better hold my tongue, since, if by my means his secret should be discovered, Erin should never darken his doors again, nor receive from him any of the benefits which it had been his intention to confer upon him. Erin himself did not speak to me at all; he has never spoken to me from that day to this; but hearing by accident of this meeting, I resolved to come here, and do what I could for him by way of reparation. That is all I have got to say.'

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This narrative made an immense impression. Mr. Samuel Erin sighed a great sigh of relief, and looked around him with triumphant exultation. He had not needed any confirmation of his son's story for himself, but he felt how opportune with respect to others was this young man's testimony—that in him, in fact, he had entertained an angel very much unawares. A murmur of satisfaction ran round the company, and the faces of even the most sceptical relaxed their severity. William Henry alone looked totally unmoved; like one who had all along been conscious that his character would be cleared, one way or another, and was indifferent in what way. Some questions were put to Talbot, but nothing was elicited to shake his evidence; indeed, since he had by his own showing taken his oath that he would not reveal the name of the Templar unknown, there

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was little more to be extracted from him.

The Laureate, in a short but dignified speech, observed that after the very testimony he had stated was the only thing wanting to his conviction had been forthcoming, he could not, in reason, offer any further objection to the authenticity of the play, and that for his part he admitted it.

To this the whole company, with hardly a dissentient voice, expressed their agreement, and the committee dispersed, after passing an all but unanimous resolution that the 'Vortigern and Rowena' was a genuine play of William Shakespeare's.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MANAGERS.

THE last two days had been very trying ones for the little household in Norfolk Street, and, though success had crowned their hopes, they bore marks of the struggle that evening. Even young William Henry, who, like the antiquarian Duchess (but with a difference), seemed to have been born before nerves had come into fashion, showed signs of the terrible ordeal through which he had passed; he was tender-footed, after the red-hot ploughshares.

The antiquary himself was almost in a state of collapse; while Margaret, as sensible and self-contained a girl as was to be found on either side of the Thames, between gratitude to Heaven and love to man, became for the first time in her life hysterical. All was well for her Willie at last, but she doubted; and with reason, whether, exposed to the brunt of the battle, and fighting for what was dearer to him than life itself, his honour, he had suffered as much as she had done, sitting in her little room apart from the *mêlée* and picturing to herself the terrors of defeat.

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She listened to their narrative of the proceedings with a fearful joy, deemed at first Mr. Pye the basest, and presently the best of men, and felt a secret gratitude to Mr. Albany Wallis that she would have found it difficult to explain: she had an impression that he was not their ally, but that a strong sense of justice, mingled perhaps with remorse for the part he had on a former occasion taken against them, had made him something more than neutral. Remorse, too, she herself felt as regarded the person to whom the final triumph was after all mainly owing.

'Where is Mr. Talbot, Willie?' she said excitedly. 'I should like to tell him, not only how much indebted I am to him, but how wrong was the judgment I had previously formed of him.'

'To be sure,' observed the antiquary naïvely; 'where *is* Talbot?' When the city has been preserved, as the Scripture says, nobody remembers the name of the obscure individual who saved it, and in the glow of victory Mr. Erin had clean forgotten his young Irish ally. 'I suppose his modesty prevented him from waiting to receive our acknowledgments.'

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'No doubt it was his modesty,' said William Henry drily. 'But as for your gratitude, Maggie, I think it is somewhat misplaced; if he has now done us good, he once did his best to do us harm, and thus far we are only quits.'

'That was a dirty trick his following Samuel to the Temple,' observed Mr. Erin; 'though, as it happened, it has turned out to our advantage.'

'Still, it is not every one who is ready to make reparation for an error,' said Margaret gravely.

To this there was no reply from her uncle. Margaret hardly expected any. He was a man who took the gifts which Heaven vouchsafed him without any excess of fervour; but from Willie she had looked for more generosity of spirit; on the other hand, he might be a little jealous (she had a vague impression that the young Irish gentleman had made some clumsy attempt in confederation with his eye-glass to recommend himself to her attention), in which case of course Willie was forgiven.

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'At all events,' she continued smiling, for this idea amused her, 'I shall not be considered forward if I thank Mr. Talbot on my own account when he next pays us a visit.'

'I shall not have the least objection,' returned William Henry in the same light tone—though his taking it upon himself to say so was significant enough of his confidence in his position—'but I am afraid you will not have an early opportunity of relieving your mind of its weight of gratitude. Talbot goes home to-morrow by the Irish packet.'

'Then you saw him after all, before he left this afternoon,' cried Margaret. 'Why, I understood that he had fled to avoid your thanks.'

'That was my father's view,' said William Henry, 'and such a touching one that I had not the heart to combat it; but as a matter of fact I did see Talbot for one moment, and of course I thanked him.'

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'Oh! Willie, Willie, why will you always make yourself out worse

than you are?' exclaimed Margaret reproachfully.

'I think we had better say nothing about it,' observed the antiquary thoughtfully. Margaret looked up rather sharply at him; she thought his words had reference to William Henry's modest concealment of his own virtues, and that he was disputing the fact; but, strange to say, though that estimable young man was before his eyes, Mr. Erin was not thinking of him at all. 'We will leave others to say what they like,' continued he, 'and fight it out among themselves. In twenty-four hours the whole town will be talking of nothing else.'

'You mean about the play, sir?' suggested William Henry.

'Well, of course; what the devil else should I mean?' returned the antiquary with irritation. It was disgusting that these two young people—for his niece looked as much at sea as his son—should be so wrapped up in one another and their commonplace affairs as to have forgotten 'Vortigern and Rowena' already. 'I think it will be better to rest on our oars and wait events.'

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'Shut our eyes and open our mouths,' said William Henry, 'and see what Heaven will send us.'

The remark was flippant, but the sense of it was in accordance with Mr. Erin's views. In his exaltation of spirit he even condescended to reply in the same vein.

'I shall open my mouth pretty wide, I can tell you, when the managers come; but we must not go to them.'

'You of course know best,' said William Henry modestly. If left to himself the impetuosity of youth would have led him on the morrow, cap (and MS.) in hand, to the stage-door of the nearest theatre.

'Fortunately, you see, we can afford to wait,' said Mr. Erin composedly.

William Henry glanced at Margaret, and Margaret dropped her eyes; Mr. Erin's sentiments, though intended to be comforting and even exultant, were, strange to say, not shared by these young people.

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They had not, however, to wait long. As Mr. Erin had predicted, the news that the committee appointed to investigate the claims of the 'Vortigern' MS. had decided in its favour flew swiftly over the town. 'From the palace to the cottage,' said Mr. Erin in his enthusiasm, though probably it only reached the cottage *orné*. Letters of congratulation poured in from every quarter. Even Malone was reported to have said that if it could have been done *incognito* he should have liked to see the manuscript. (What he really said was, 'I wish that Steevens had found it,' meaning that he should have taken a real pleasure in eviscerating *him*.) The opinion of antiquaries was divided; and if Reid and Ritson denounced the play, Garter-King-at-Arms was enthusiastic in its favour, and gave it more supporters than Heraldry ever dreamt of.

Before a week was over came Mr. Harris, proprietor of Covent Garden Theatre, to Norfolk Street in person. The announcement of his name set William Henry's heart beating more quickly than it had done even on that fateful afternoon in Anne Hathaway's garden. For the first time he shrank from the customary ordeal of investigation, and Mr. Erin interviewed the manager alone. As it happened, the young man need have been under no apprehension of a brow-beating. Mr. Harris was a practical man, of an expansive mind, which did not stoop to details.

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'The committee, I hear, sir, have decided in favour of this play of yours,' was his first remark; it was delivered with quite unnecessary abruptness, but it was not the tone alone which grated upon Mr. Erin's ears.

'This play of mine, as you have thought proper to term it, Mr. Harris,' he replied with dignity, 'is Shakespeare's play.'

'So you say, and, indeed, so many other people say, or I should not be here,' was the cool rejoinder. 'Between ourselves, Mr. Erin, and, speaking as one man of the world to another, I don't care a farthing—certainly not a Queen Anne's farthing—whether it is Shakespeare's play or not. The question that concerns *me* is, "Do the public believe it to be such?"'

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'Am I to understand, then, that you do not wish to examine the MS.?'

'Examine it? Certainly not. My time is very much occupied—it is in five acts, is it not?'

'It is in five acts,' assented the antiquary; he could hardly trust

himself to reply, except in the other's words. Mr. Harris's indifference, notwithstanding that it promised to facilitate matters, was most offensive to him. 'Mr. Pye has been so good as to promise us a prologue for the play.'

'That's good; "Prologue by the Poet Laureate" will look well in the bill. We must have an epilogue ready, even though'—here he smiled grimly—'we never get so far as that.'

The suggestion of such a contingency—which, of course, meant total failure—in cold blood, filled up the cup of the antiquary's indignation. He almost resolved, whatever this man offered, to decline his proposition to bring out the play. [90]

'Mr. Merry will write the epilogue,' he replied icily.

'A very good man—for an epilogue,' replied the manager drily. 'Well, we must strike while the iron's hot, or not at all. We must not give the public time to flag in its enthusiasm, or, what will be worse, perhaps, to alter its opinion. There is risk of this even now, but I am ready to run it, and I'll take the play.'

'The devil you will!' said Mr. Erin.

'Yes, I will,' continued the manager calmly, taking, or pretending to take, this explosion of his companion as an expression of admiration of his own courage; 'it will cost a good bit of money, but I'll take it and never charge you a farthing for placing it on the boards. It's an offer you are not likely to get again, I promise you.'

'I'll take your word for that,' said the antiquary quietly; he had passed the glowing stage of indignation, into that white heat which looks almost like coolness. 'I don't think any other human being would venture to make so audacious a proposal. Have you really the impudence to ask me to give you a play of Shakespeare's for nothing?' [91]

'For nothing? What, do you call the advertisement nothing? How is an author's name established? How does he acquire fame and fortune but through the opportunity of becoming known? And how could he get a better one than having his play acted at Covent Garden?'

'I was not aware that Shakespeare stood in need of an advertisement, Mr. Harris,' returned the antiquary grimly. 'And even supposing that, thanks to you, he becomes popular, he is not a rising young author; should "Vortigern and Rowena" be ever so successful, that would not enable us to find another of his plays.'

'It would be a great encouragement to do it,' answered the manager impudently. 'However, there's my offer!'

'And there's my door, Mr. Harris.' And Mr. Erin pointed to it with unmistakable significance. [92]

'Stuff and nonsense!' said the manager. 'What do you want? How do you suppose plays are brought out, man? Come, what do you say to half profits?'

'No!'

'Then, look here—now, this is your last chance, as I'm a Christian man.'

'Then I shall have another,' said Mr. Erin. It was the first approach to an epigram he had ever made in his life. Anger is a short madness, genius is a kind of madness, and so, perhaps, it came about that fury suggested to him that lively sally.

'A hundred pounds down, and half profits: that is my last word,' cried the manager.

'No!' thundered the antiquary. He was still upon his legs, with his outstretched arm pointing to the door like a finger-post.

The manager walked into the passage, opened the front door, and held it in his hand.

'A hundred and fifty, and half profits.'

'No.'

'Very good; more than a hundred and fifty pounds for the play of a Shakespeare who spells *and* with a final *e* I will not give.'

The door closed behind him with a great bang, which sounded, however, less like a thunder-clap to Mr. Erin than that concluding sarcasm. He was not aware that a pamphlet had been published that very morning, which pointed out that the spelling of *and* with an *e*, a practice pursued throughout the 'Vortigern,' had been utterly unknown, not only to Elizabethan times, but to any other. [93]

When Mr. Erin rejoined his two young people, who were waiting for him with no little anxiety in the next room, there was no need to

ask his news. His face told it.

Nevertheless, Margaret said, 'Well, uncle?' before she could stop herself.

'It is not well,' he answered passionately; 'it is devilish bad.'

'But surely Mr. Harris was not uncivil?'

'Uncivil? Who wants his civility? Who but a fool would expect it in a theatrical manager? Bring me the play—the "Vortigern."' [94]

'What is the matter now?' inquired William Henry.

His manner, as usual, was imperturbable. Mr. Erin—so great was the revolution wrought in him by recent circumstances—seemed at once to derive comfort from it. 'Well, it's very unfortunate, but it seems that an objection has been discovered—insignificant in itself—but which seriously affects its genuineness.'

'Indeed? There have been a good many not insignificant objections—and yet it has been generally accepted,' said the young man smiling.

'It's nothing to smile at, I do assure you, if what that fellow said is correct.'

He had the manuscript before him, and was examining it with nervous eagerness through his glasses. 'Yes, here's one, and here's another *and* with an *e*. Why should Shakespeare spell *and* with an *e*?' [95]

He looked up sharply at his son, as if asking a riddle of one who has the answer to it.

'I am sure I don't know, sir,' replied William Henry quietly. 'He spelt things pretty much as he pleased.'

'That's true, that's true. But just now it's certainly most disappointing that there should be any hitch. The very stars in their courses seem to fight against us.'

'It is an unfortunate conjunction, that is all,' said the young man, smiling again. 'The objection of which Mr. Harris speaks may be new, but not the spelling: *and* was so spelt in the Profession of Faith, for example.'

'Indeed! That had escaped my recollection. Come, that is satisfactory. All those, then, who signed the certificate will be with us. It was foolish of me to be so discouraged.'

'And did Mr. Harris decline the play on the ground of *and* being written with the final *e*?' [96]

'Well, no, he didn't decline it.'

'He only used that argument, perhaps, in order to get it at a cheap rate?' suggested William Henry.

This, as we know, had not been the case; he had pretty broadly hinted that he did not believe it to be Shakespeare's play at all, and even that there might be plenty more where the 'Vortigern' came from, but so bound up in these wondrous discoveries had Mr. Erin's mind become, that it was distressing and humiliating to have to confess as much, even to his son and niece.

'Why, yes; he wanted it cheap, and therefore of course depreciated it. He only offered one hundred and fifty pounds for it and half profits.'

William Henry looked up amazed. For the first time his self-control deserted him. In his heart he thought the antiquary a fool for having refused such terms; but it was not the rejection of the terms that annoyed him so much as the rejection of the chance of having the play produced at a theatre like Covent Garden. His feelings, in fact, were precisely the same as those on which Mr. Harris had counted—without his host.

'The money in hand may be small, sir, but the half profits—in case the play were successful—as I feel it must have been, might have been well worth having.' [97]

Mr. Erin began to think so too by this time. After all, what did it matter whether the manager were a believer in the play or not, had his theatre been only made the channel of its introduction to the public? He sat in moody silence, thinking whether it would be possible, after what had passed, 'to win that tassel gentle,' Mr. Harris, 'back again.' It was certain that he (Mr. Erin) would have to swallow a very large leek first.

The servant-girl entered, bringing a slip of paper upon a salver, the name, no doubt, of one of those thousand and one persons who were now always coming to ask permission to see the MS.

'Two gentlemen to see you, sir,' said the maid.

The antiquary glanced at the name, and then, as high as a gentleman of sixty *can* leap, he leapt from his chair.

Margaret, thinking her uncle had been seized with some malady—presumably ‘the jumps’—uttered a little scream of terror.

‘Good heavens! what is it?’

‘Sheridan!’ he cried triumphantly. ‘There are more fish in the sea, Samuel, than have come out of it, and better ones; see, lad, it’s in his own handwriting; he is here in person—’Richard Brinsley Sheridan, favoured by Dr. Parr.’”

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CHAPTER XXV.

TWO DISTINGUISHED VISITORS.

RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN—

The pride of the palace, the bower, and the hall,
The orator, dramatist, minstrel who ran
Through each mode of the lyre and was master of all—

was a very great man in those days in many ways; but what made him just now of especial importance to Mr. Samuel Erin was that he was the manager of Drury Lane Theatre.

That Mr. Harris, of Covent Garden, should have snapped at the 'Vortigern' bait had been a satisfactory circumstance enough (though indeed he had only 'sucked it' and got off the hook), but the coming of Sheridan was quite another matter. Compared with him, all other managers were small fry.

It was with a less assured demeanour, therefore, than usual, and with an expectancy somewhat tempered with awe, that Mr. Samuel Erin repaired to the parlour. Even the MS. in his hand had lost some of its virtue in view of the authority who was about to pronounce upon it; it was almost as if he had been a young author with his own play; a work of immense original genius, but which he was about to submit for the first time to a leading publisher. It was some relief to him to feel that Dr. Parr would be present, who was well known to him, and a believer in the Shakespearean manuscripts.

As he entered the room the great man came forward to shake him frankly by the hand. His manner was more than gracious, it was genial, and seemed to put him at his ease in a moment. His appearance was not imposing—a man of forty-five inclined to corpulency, with a loose-fitting coat secured by one button over the chest, and a carelessly knotted white neck-cloth—he wore his own hair, already very grey, tied behind with a black riband. His face was puffy, and evinced signs of what was even then called 'free living. What redeemed it, however, and invested the whole man with marvellous attraction were his bright and sparkling eyes, which glittered with merriment and good humour. The antiquary was so fascinated with them that for the moment he took no notice of the other person in the room, till Sheridan called his attention to him.



THE OTHER, INSTEAD OF TAKING HIS HAND, DREW HIMSELF UP.

'You have doubtless seen our friend here pretty often before, Mr. Erin?' he said smiling.

The antiquary turned round and held out his hand mechanically. The other, however, instead of taking it, drew himself up to his full

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height (which was a good way), put his hands behind him, and bowed stiffly; it was not Dr. Parr but John Kemble.

Mr. Erin, as a playgoer, had of course seen him 'pretty often before,' but generally in royal robes or in armour, attired as a king or a warrior; as it happened he had never before seen him in plain clothes. He had a noble figure and a handsome face—though, strange to say, not a very mobile one—and, so far, was in strong contrast to his companion; the difference in expression was even greater. Mr. Kemble had a sternness of demeanour that was almost forbidding, and which reminded Mr. Erin on the instant that he was an intimate friend of Malone's.

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'I did not expect the honour of a visit from Mr. Kemble,' said the antiquary drily.

'I did not come, sir, of my own free will,' was the uncompromising reply, delivered in deep tragic tones. 'I am here at the request of my friend Mr. Sheridan.'

'Quite true,' observed that gentleman, his eyes dancing with laughter at the antagonistic attitude of his two companions; the tragedian like a stately St. Bernard with stiff tail, who resents the attention of some half-breed of no insignificant stature, and that ventures to entertain a very tolerable opinion of itself.

'I dragged him here, Mr. Erin, like iniquity, with cart-ropes. The quarrels of commentators, I know, are like the bars of a castle; they'll be shot rather than open their arms to one another. For my sake, however, I hope you will, both of you, make a truce while this little matter of business is under discussion; then to it again hammer and tongs with all my heart.—Now, where's this play?'

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Mr. Erin produced it from his breast-pocket, into which he had hurriedly thrust it.

'Oh, that's it, is it? Gad! he carries it about with him as a mother carries a newborn babe, whose paternity has never been questioned.'

Kemble smiled, as Coriolanus might have done at the mention of gratitude.

'I think, Mr. Sheridan,' said the antiquary in an offended tone, 'if you will be so good as to glance at yonder certificate, including among other authorities your friend Dr. Parr, you must admit that the legitimacy of "Vortigern and Rowena" is tolerably well established. Herbert Croft, Dr. Walton, the Poet Laureate, Sir James Bland Burgess, are vouchers—'

'Weighty enough, indeed,' interposed the manager impatiently; 'anything ought to go down with such names attached to it. But the play, the play's the thing. Let's look at it.'

It was a detail, if report spoke true, that Sheridan did not always insist upon. He had offered to accept a comedy from the authoress of 'Evelina' unread, and to put it on the boards of Drury Lane. Even now, when the manuscript was spread out before him, he seemed to shrink from the task he had imposed upon himself.

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'Gad!' he exclaimed, 'there seems a good lot of it!'

'There are two thousand eight hundred lines in all,' explained Mr. Erin gravely.

'Fourteen hundred lines are deemed sufficient for an acting drama,' observed Mr. Kemble acidly.

'The dramas of William Shakespeare, sir, with which I happen to have some acquaintance,' returned the antiquary with bitter significance, 'extend in more than one case to a greater length than the "Vortigern."'

'Come, come, Kemble,' said the manager good-naturedly. 'Surplusage is no error, and one can hardly complain because one gets two plays for the price of one. Now, Mr. Erin, would you prefer to be present at our investigation or not? Mothers generally shrink from an inquest upon even a foster-child, but there have been Roman matrons—'

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'I make it an invariable rule, Mr. Sheridan,' put in the antiquary hastily, 'though on the present occasion there is no ground, of course, for its being put in practice, never to permit the literary offspring of which you speak to leave my hands.'

'Afraid of body-snatching, eh? Think of you and me wanting to steal a play, Kemble! Why, Drury Lane is a perfect foundling hospital for them. However, just as you please, sir.'

Then, while Mr. Erin sat apart affecting to be immersed in a folio

(but with his ears wide open), the two sat down to the manuscript, from which Kemble now and then read aloud in deep sonorous tones, which were not always so sarcastic as he intended them to be.

There was a certain rhythmical roll in many lines like the thunder of the surf, and also (as in its case) a head of foam which gave the impression of strength. For example:—

Full fifty breathless bodies struck my sight;
And some with gaping mouths did seem to mock me;
Whilst others, smiling in cold death itself,
Scoffingly bade me look on that which soon
Would wrench from off my brow this sacred crown,
And make me too a subject like themselves.

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From Kemble's mouth at least such lines were not wanting in majestic vigour, though he lent it to them involuntarily. It was evident enough, indeed, that he was adverse to the acceptance of the play, while Sheridan was in favour of it. What doubtless furthered Mr. Erin's hopes was that Sheridan had notoriously no very high opinion of Shakespeare himself; he thought his genius exaggerated. Presently Kemble came to the three best lines in the tragedy—

Give me a sword,
I have so clogged and badged this with blood
And slippery gore, that it doth mock my grasp;
A sword I say!

A speech he delivered with fine emphasis.

'Come, that is better than "Titus Andronicus," anyway,' said Sheridan slyly.

'An echo, sir, a mere echo of "Richard the Third,"' growled the tragedian.

'Let us hope it will answer with "Richard the Fourth,"' was the laughing rejoinder.

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Their disagreement was like the conflict between the whale and a sword-fish, and could have but the same end.

'I don't mean to say that some things here are not better than others,' said Kemble doggedly, 'though perhaps I may be permitted to add that you hear them to the best advantage; but to me the whole thing has a false ring.'

'Perhaps it's my want of ear,' returned the manager; 'but do you think, Mr. Kemble,' here he sank his voice to a whisper, 'that many people *have* good ears?'

The drollery and even roguishness of his face as he hazarded this inquiry was indescribable. The tragedian 'put the question by' and pursued his argument.

'Whatever you think of Shakespeare, Mr. Sheridan, you must allow that he at least always wrote poetry. Now, much of what I have had the honour to read to you is not poetry.'

'But let us suppose Shakespeare was drunk.'

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'Sir!' exclaimed the tragedian in an offended tone.

'Sir!' echoed the antiquary, dropping the folio with a crash.

'Good Heavens! gentlemen, may not one even put a postulate? Even Euclid, a writer of little imagination, permits that much. It is not such a very impossible supposition. Have you never heard of a man of genius with a turn for the bottle?'

As he looked very hard at the tragedian, that gentleman felt called upon to reply. 'I have no personal experience of anything of that kind,' he said loftily.

'Well, of course not; how should you?' returned Sheridan blandly, but with a curve of the lip that seemed to say, 'We are talking of men of genius.' Perhaps his reference to his own weakness made him bitter. If it was so, the feeling was very transitory; it was with his most winning smile that he presently addressed his friend, 'Come, Prester John, we can do nothing without you in this affair; surely you will not fail us.'

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'I will have no responsibility in the matter,' was the haughty reply. 'I will not append my name to yonder list; I will not have it go forth to the world that I admit the genuineness of this production; I will not stamp it with my warranty; I will not—'

'Tut, tut, man,' broke in the manager impatiently; 'but you'll act, you'll act.'

'Well, yes, I will play Vortigern.'

'And Mrs. Siddons will play Edmunda?'

'Nay, sir, that is a question for herself. I cannot answer for Sarah; she always takes her own way.'

'To hear you talk one would think she was your wife instead of your sister,' said the manager laughing. 'Then the Country Girl' (so Mrs. Jordan was called from her first success, which had been made in that piece) 'shall be Flavia, who has to appear in man's clothes; she loves to wear the breeches, as the poor Duke has long discovered. Well, we'll take your friend Shakespeare's play, Mr. Erin.' And the manager rose from his chair with a yawn, like one who has concluded a distasteful business.

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'But, ahem! nothing has been said about terms,' suggested the antiquary.

'Terms? Does he mean money?' said the manager, looking towards the tragedian with an air of extreme astonishment, as though he would say, 'Can I believe my ears?'

'I am almost inclined to believe he does,' replied the other, smiling for the first time.

'But surely not money down; not ready money, he can't mean that.'

The antiquary's face unmistakably implied that he did.

'Good heavens, Mr. Erin, who *has* any ready money? I was just talking of the Duke of Clarence, has *he* any ready money? Not a guinea—though you should threaten to drown him, like his namesake, in a butt of malmsey—to save his life.'

'The money might be paid out of the profits of the first night, and then half profits,' suggested Mr. Erin.

'Mere details—business,' cried the manager disdainfully. 'You must see Albany Wallis about all that. That's a pretty face,' he added, stopping abruptly beneath a picture on the wall and pointing to it—'a charming face.'

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'It is the portrait of my niece, Margaret.'

'Aye, aye; love, faith, a pure soul in a fair body; a true heart, I am sure of it.'

His voice, freighted with genuine feeling, seemed to melt away in music.

'She is in truth a good girl, Mr. Sheridan: the light of my poor house.'

'Take care of her, sir; be kind to her, lest, when it is too late, you rue it.'

He was gone in a flash, and the door closed behind him.

Mr. Erin looked at the tragedian in amazement.

'Some likeness to his late wife, I fancy,' observed that gentleman in grave explanation. 'Her death was a matter of much regret to him.' He seemed to be about to hold out his hand, but something restrained him; his eye had lit by chance on the certificate. 'Good morning, Mr. Erin,' he said with a stiff bow.

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'Good morning, Mr. Kemble.'

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CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO ACTRESSES.

THE arrangements made between Mr. Samuel Erin, on behalf of his son William Henry, 'an infant,' with Mr. Albany Wallis, for the production of the play were eminently satisfactory. Mr. Erin was to receive three hundred pounds on the morning after the first night of representation, and half profits for the next sixty nights. Shakespeare himself had probably never made so good a bargain.

The news of the acceptance of the 'Vortigern' by the management of Drury Lane Theatre immensely increased the public excitement concerning it. In those days 'Old Drury' (though indeed it was then far from old) was the national theatre; and the fact of a play being played upon its boards (independently of Sheridan having chosen it) gave it a certain imprimatur. It was not unreasonable, therefore, in William Henry that he already saw himself half way to fortune, while his success in love might be said to be assured; there are but few of us in truth who, at his age, are in a position so enviable. For, as when we grow old, prosperity, if it does come, comes but too often too late for its enjoyment, so the sunshine of youth is marred by the uncertainty of its duration, and by the clouds that overhang its future. Of the reception of the 'Vortigern' the young fellow had but little doubt; he believed it would run a long and successful course, as most people do believe in the case of the hare of their own finding. And yet the manifestation of his joy was by no means extravagant. The gravity and coolness of his demeanour, which had characterised him throughout the discoveries, did not now desert him. At times, indeed, even when Margaret's arms were about his neck, he looked anxious and distraught; but when she rallied him about it he had always an explanation, natural enough and not unwelcome to her.

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'I feel,' he said, 'as you once told me you felt in looking at that fair scene near Stratford, that it seemed almost too beautiful to be real, and that you had a vague fear that it would all melt. When I look on you, dear, I feel the same: such happiness is far too high for me; I have not deserved it, and I fear lest it should never be mine.'

'But you *have* deserved it, Willie,' she would lovingly reply. 'Not even my uncle questions that. He spoke of you in the highest terms, he told me, to the Regent himself.'

For Mr. Erin had been sent for to Carlton House, and had shown the precious Shakespearean manuscripts to the future ruler of the realm, who had expressed himself as 'greatly interested.' He had been unable, he said, to resist the weight of evidence which had been adduced in favour of their authenticity, and had especially admired the 'Vortigern.' The old man's head was almost turned with the royal praises; and it was not to be wondered at that he had expressed his satisfaction with the youth by whose means he had been introduced into so serene an atmosphere.

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'I do not think I am without desert, Madge, though there was a time when you used to think so [an allusion, of course, to her old scepticism as to his genius]; but I do not deserve *you*,' was William Henry's grave reply.

A modest rejoinder, which, we may be sure, secured its reward.

Margaret thought that there never had been, and never would be, so deserving a youth as her Willie, or one who, having received his deserts, bore his honours so unassumingly.

Nevertheless—for, in spite of the proverb, 'It never rains but it pours,' good fortune seldom befalls us mortals without alloy—there were drops of bitterness in his full cup. The Poet Laureate Pye had been reminded of his promise to write a prologue for the 'Vortigern,' and had performed it, but by no means in a satisfactory manner.

It had come to them one morning at breakfast, and had been received with rapture by Mr. Erin—till he came to read it. It commenced as follows:—

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If in our scenes your eyes, delighted, find,
Marks that denote the mighty master's mind;
If at his words the tears of pity flow,
Your hearts with horror fill, with rapture glow,
Demand no other proof;

But if these proofs should fail, if in the strain
Ye seek the drama's awful sire in vain,
Should critics, heralds, antiquaries, join
To give their fiat to each doubtful line,
Believe them *not*.

'Curse the fellow!' cried the antiquary, throwing down the manuscript in disgust; 'why, this is worse than useless. What the devil does he mean by his "ifs" and "nots"?'

'I fancy Mr. Malone could tell us,' observed William Henry quietly.

'No doubt, lad, no doubt,' said Mr. Erin, eagerly catching at this solution of the Laureate's change of front. 'That man would drop his poison into the ear of an archangel. Not that Pye is an archangel, nor anything like it.'

'Archangels must write very indifferent poetry if he is,' remarked William Henry smiling.

'Just so—a deuced bad poet!' rejoined Mr. Erin. 'His prologue, even without an "if" in it, would damn any play; I'll write to Burgess—Sir James will do it, I'll warrant.'

And Sir James did it accordingly, and in a fashion much more agreeable to 'Vortigern's' sponsors.

No common cause your verdict now demands,
Before the court immortal Shakespeare stands;

Stamp it your own, assert your poet's fame,
And add fresh wreaths to Shakespeare's honoured name.

There was no doubt in Mr. Erin's mind as to Sir James Bland Burgess being a better poet than Mr. Pye.

There were other hitches—nay, absolute breaks-down—which could not be so easily mended. Mrs. Siddons, who it was hoped would play the chief female character, Edmunda, had a severe cold, which was suspected by many people, and known by her friends, to be a stage cold—a malady which actors and actresses assume at pleasure as a pretext for declining any objectionable part. When a barrister refuses a brief, it is naturally concluded that his client's cause is precarious—a lawyer, it is argued, would never send money away from his doors except for the gravest reasons; and similarly the 'Vortigern' suffered in public estimation when the news of Mrs. Siddons's indisposition got abroad. Her reason, as Malone and Company averred, was that 'the whole play was an audacious imposition.' In this case that flattering unction of 'There are as good fish in the sea,' &c., could hardly be laid to Mr. Erin's soul; it was unquestionably a bitter disappointment; the part had to be given to Mrs. Powell, a much prettier and younger woman, but not the queen of the stage. His sister's conduct, too, seemed to have an unfavourable effect on Kemble, whose interest in the play was already at the best but lukewarm, and it was felt absolutely necessary to conciliate him.

Mr. Erin wrote to him to say that, notwithstanding the circumstance of 'Vortigern and Rowena' being the production of the immortal bard, the great tragedian was at liberty to use his own excellent judgment in preparing it for the stage.

A cold reply was received, to the effect that it should be acted faithfully from the copy sent to the theatre.

These were bitter drops; but where is the cup of human prosperity without them? In reading the record of even the most fortunate man's career, we may be sure that, though it appears to run with such unbroken smoothness, there is many a hitch. We hear the triumphant pæans, but not the deep low notes of chagrin and disappointment that to the hero's own ear accompany them and turn his blood to gall. The shining shield, bossed with victories, appears to be of solid gold, but there is but a thin coating of it, and underneath lies rusted and corroding iron. It is something, however, to show gold at all; and Margaret was prompt with her comfort.

'When, my dear Willie, was good fortune without its drawbacks? These are but spots in the sun of our prosperity, and we should have only room in our hearts for gratitude. Think how much sunshine we have had of late, and how far beyond our expectations. When you first chanced upon these wonderful discoveries, how great a thing it would have seemed to you to light on such a treasure trove as the "Vortigern," and then to have it accepted by Sheridan for Drury

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Lane! Think of that!’

‘Quite true, my darling; and yet you have not mentioned the highest gift that Fortune has vouchsafed me, compared with which all her other favours are mere gilt and tinsel—your dear self.’

‘Tut, tut; you are a born actor, sir, and should offer your services to Mr. Kemble.’

He looked at her with troubled eyes, gravely, almost sorrowfully, then folded her to his breast without a word.

It was clear, she thought, that Mrs. Siddons’s refusal to play her part had disappointed him cruelly.

One day two ladies called to see Mr. Erin. The antiquary, as it happened, was out: upon hearing which, they expressed a wish to see his son. William Henry, who no more went to the office in the New Inn, but transacted his father’s business for him at home (not so much that he was necessary to it as because the old gentleman preferred to keep the lad about him), was neither mounting drawings nor cataloguing prints, but exchanging pretty nothings with Margaret, when the servant came with her message.

‘Ladies to see *you*, Willie,’ said she, laughing. ‘I am almost inclined to be jealous; I wonder what can be their business?’

‘They want to see the MSS., I suppose,’ he said indifferently. ‘Well, at all events I can’t get at them; your uncle has taken the key of the chest with him.’

Margaret shook her head.

‘They have come about the play,’ she said; ‘they are actresses.’

This was a conclusion to which William Henry had already arrived, though he had not thought it worth while to mention it. His heart, indeed, had leapt up within him at the news in question, not that he was the least inclined to play the gay Lothario, but that everything connected with the representation of the ‘Vortigern’ immensely interested him. Hitherto he had been kept out of it; the whole affair had been carried on up to this point without his interference, as indeed was natural enough; it was not as if the ‘Vortigern’ had been *his* play.

‘It is very unlikely,’ said William Henry diplomatically; ‘but it is possible they want Mr. Erin’s opinion about some reading, and since I know his views I had perhaps better see them.’

His tone was interrogative, but he did not wait to hear her opinion on the subject, but at once repaired to the parlour. That apartment, hallowed by so many antiquarian associations, was now tenanted by two persons of a very different stamp from those who generally visited it. ‘If critics and commentators indeed were beings like these,’ was the young rogue’s reflection, “‘cherished folios” would be things to be envied.’

Both ladies were young, though an expert in such matters, which William Henry was not, might have come to the conclusion that they were not quite so young as they looked. It is true they were neither painted nor powdered; but besides being very fashionably and becomingly dressed, there was that brightness of expression in their lively faces which makes more head against time than all the cosmetics in the world. It is always a matter of surprise among dull people that actresses, even of a high type, should be so popular, and often make such good matches with men of culture and good breeding. The reason is, I think, that if they are not natural, they at least do their best to appear so; they do not stifle nature, as is the habit of some of their sex who are much more highly placed. Languor and studied indifference are not of themselves attractive, and they are suspected, and with reason, of being very convenient cloaks for stupidity.

The intelligence of these ladies shone in their eyes, which also twinkled with amusement. They had both had a very hard time of it during one portion of their lives, but it had extinguished neither their good-nature nor their sense of humour. The appearance of William Henry, who looked all youth and simplicity, instead of the snuffy old antiquary whom they had expected to see, tickled them excessively. The fact that he was very good-looking also aroused their interest. If they had come upon business, in short, they remained for pleasure; and the sense of this (for it was unmistakable) embarrassed not a little their involuntary host.

By sight he knew both the ladies; the younger was Mrs. Powell, a handsome woman, very tall and elegant, who had of late stepped into a much higher rank of her profession, as, indeed, was clear

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enough from her having been made the substitute of Mrs. Siddons in the forthcoming tragedy. Just now, however, she was undertaking comedy, and her melodious tones and speaking face made a harmony like 'the voice and the instrument.'

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The other lady was Mrs. Jordan, who, without enjoying so high a dramatic reputation, was a still greater favourite with the public. She, too, was tall and comely, but her beauty was of a simpler type—it would be better described as loveliness. The charms which had carried all before them when she made her fame as 'The Country Girl' were more mature, but not less attractive. The world of play-goers was at her feet, the knowledge that an eminent personage had gained her affections, and even, it was said, contracted a private marriage with her, aroused the envy of many a gilded flutterer, and had driven at least one of them to despair. Her tenderness of disposition and generosity to the distressed were notorious, and could be read in her smile.

'We have ventured to call upon you, Mr. Erin, as you may perhaps guess, with reference to "Vortigern and Rowena,"' said Mrs. Powell.

'I am so sorry, but my father is not at home,' stammered William Henry.

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'Well, really!' returned the lady reproachfully.

'At all events, *we* are not sorry,' said Mrs. Jordan slyly.

'I did not mean—you know what I mean,' pleaded William Henry with a blush that they probably envied. 'I am so sorry to be so awkward, but I am very young.'

'Does he mean to say that we are *not*?' ejaculated Mrs. Powell with a majestic air. 'Great heavens!'

'I think, sister, since he has thrown himself upon the mercy of the court,' interposed Mrs. Jordan good-naturedly, 'that we should not be hard upon him.'

'Youth and inexperience,' exclaimed Mrs. Powell judicially, 'are no excuses for crime; but since my learned sister— You have seen her as Portia, no doubt, young man, and a very pretty lawyer she makes—don't you think so?'

It was like two people speaking from the same mouth—the one all gaiety, the other all merriment.

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'Of course I have seen her, who has not?' said William Henry, plucking up his courage, though with such desperation that it almost came away by the roots.

'That's much better,' smiled Mrs. Jordan approvingly.

'I am not sure,' returned her companion. 'Do you not also remember *me*, sir?'

'Who could forget you who remembers "Juliet," madam?' returned the young gentleman, with his hand (as he thought) upon his heart.

'Left side, sir, the next time,' observed his tormentor encouragingly; 'anatomy has not been a special study with you, but you improve in manners. We are here to test your gallantry, to sue for favours.'

'Whatever lies within my humble power to do for you, madam, may be considered as done.'

'Did I say "improves"? Why, he's perfect,' said Mrs. Powell, with a laughing glance at her companion. 'But it's all for love of Portia,' she added with a sigh.



'THAT'S MUCH BETTER,' SMILED MRS. JORDAN, APPROVINGLY.

'No, of Juliet,' returned Mrs. Jordan, with another shake of her pretty head.

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There was a gentle tap at the door; a face, a very charming one, looked in, and with a murmured apology withdrew as suddenly as it had come.

'Curiosity,' said Mrs. Jordan softly, her eyes twinkling like two stars.

'Jealousy,' answered Mrs. Powell derisively. 'I do not ask *which* was it, but *who* was it, sir?'

'I don't know,' said William Henry boldly; 'I had my back to the door.'

At this both ladies burst out laughing, if an expression so coarse can be applied to as musical mirth as ever rippled from the lips of woman.

'He *doesn't know*,' cried Mrs. Powell; 'and this is the young gentleman we took for all simplicity. How dare you, sir? As if her fairy footfall was not evidence enough to your throbbing ears, as if her coming here at all to see how you were getting on with two wicked young women from Drury Lane, was not sufficient proof of her identity?' Then turning to her companion, 'How dreadful to contemplate is his depravity! So young in years, and yet so versed in duplicity.'

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'You are engaged to be married to her, of course,' said Mrs. Jordan softly.

'Well, yes, madam,' admitted William Henry; he could not help thinking how charming she would look as the page, Flavia.

'Don't be ashamed of it, young gentleman,' said Mrs. Jordan gravely.

'It is to your credit, remember, if not to hers,' interpolated Mrs. Powell ambiguously.

'And does this pretty creature live in the house?' continued Mrs. Jordan with tender interest.

'Yes, madam; she is my cousin, Margaret Slade.'

'How nice! I never had a cousin when I was so young as that. How I envy her!'

'"This shall to the Duke,"' quoted Mrs. Powell menacingly. Then they both laughed again.

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William Henry was dazzled, delighted, and a little uncomfortable.

'We must not take up his time,' said Mrs. Jordan rising and consulting her watch.

'Now that we know that he is so very much *engaged*,' assented Mrs. Powell slyly.

'But you have not told me your business ladies,' observed William Henry naïvely.

Then they both laughed again, as they well might, for the truth was that, having something so very much more pleasant in hand, they had forgotten all about it; they were not bees, but butterflies.

'The fact is—only your company is so delightful it put our business out of our heads—we want to go over the play with you.'

'There is but one copy in the house, ladies, in yonder safe, and I am sorry to say my father has the key.'

'Then you must bring it to the theatre to-morrow morning, sir,' said Mrs. Powell imperiously.

William Henry shook his head. 'That is the original Shakespeare MS., madam; I could not venture on such a step.'

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'What ridiculous scruples!' cried Mrs. Powell impatiently, beating her pretty foot upon the floor.

'But we can use the acting copy,' suggested Mrs. Jordan, 'and—if this young gentleman will be so good as to come himself.' Anything sweeter or more seductive than her tone it was impossible to imagine; even the very pause and break in the sentence had literally an unspeakable charm.

'I will come with the greatest pleasure,' said William Henry.

There was indeed no reason why he should not do so, but if there had been it would have been all the same. He was fascinated.

'To-morrow, then, at eleven o'clock,' she said, and held out her hand; he pressed it, and she returned the pressure, but with mirthful eyes.

Mrs. Powell shook hands with him too, and shook her head as she did so. 'Poor young man!' she said; 'poor Margaret!'

Then they both laughed again: they laughed in the parlour, they laughed in the passage, they laughed on the very doorstep. As Margaret said of them after their departure, somewhat severely, 'They seemed to be a pair of very frivolous young women.'

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CHAPTER XXVII.

A ROYAL PATRON.



WILLIAM HENRY performed his promise punctually, and presented himself next morning at Drury Lane. He had never been inside a theatre by daylight before, and the contrast of the scene to that to which he had been accustomed struck him very forcibly. If any young gentleman belonging to me were stage-struck, I should ask the permission of the lessee of one of our National Theatres to allow me to introduce him into its auditorium some dullish morning. If his enthusiasm survived, I will believe that the passion for the sea will still remain in a boy's breast after a visit to a ship's cockpit. The spectacle of those draped galleries, those empty seats and ill-lit space, where all was wont to be light and laughter, is little short of ghastly. William Henry indeed only caught glimpses of it here and there, through the

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eye-holes over the doors, as he was led through the echoing passages to the back of the stage; but they were sufficient. He in vain attempted to picture to himself the very different appearance the place would bear when probably he should see it next, at the representation of 'Vortigern and Rowena.'

His imagination was chilled. The object of his visit, even though it might well have done so, since it was to be interviewed by two of the most charming women on the English stage, did not fill him with the pleasurable anticipation which he had experienced when he had received their invitation. There was no harm in it, of course, but he had come without Margaret's knowledge, and his conscience reproached him for so doing. It was, no doubt, her own fault; she had shown such unmistakable feelings of jealousy on the previous day, and had expressed such uncharitable views on the character of actresses in general, that he had shrunk from telling her of the appointment he had made for to-morrow. It was a pity that the dear girl was so unreasonable; for, though she had entirely agreed with him that Mrs. Powell's conduct, of which he had given her an amusing version, had been pert, she had failed to understand what a contrast that of Mrs. Jordan afforded, or how distinctly it bespoke a simple and ingenuous nature. He had never dreamt, of course, of repeating Mrs. Powell's parting remark about 'poor Margaret;' but if such a notion had entered his mind, the manner in which the dear girl had received other details of the little interview would have forbidden it. He felt quite certain that she was capable of believing that Mrs. Jordan was ready to fall in love with him, or even had already done it. The very idea of such a thing, when she knew he was engaged to somebody else, was, of course, ridiculous. He thought that it would have set Margaret's mind at ease to tell her that he had given that piece of information to the ladies, whereas it had aroused her indignation, not indeed against him but against them. 'What right had they to ask such questions? It was impertinent, forward, and indelicate; and she did hope that those young women would never commit the impropriety of calling in Norfolk Street and asking to see a young gentleman, with whom they could have no earthly business, again.'

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And now, unknown to Margaret, he was going to see *them*. The conscience at seventeen is tender, and it was no wonder William Henry's smote him. At that age, however, the memory (for some things) is unfortunately short, and when a door suddenly opened from a labyrinthine passage, into a prettily furnished room, where Mrs. Jordan, reclining in an arm-chair, was reading with rapt attention a certain manuscript he recognised, he thought he had never seen anyone so beautiful before.

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She arose with a pleasant smile, and a natural coquettish air which became her charmingly, and bade him welcome.

'Pray come in,' said she, for he stood at the door entranced; 'it is not everyone that is admitted into my dressing-room, but I shan't

bite you.'

It was not the least like a dressing-room except that it had a multiplicity of mirrors, but her calling it so discomposed him (he could not help thinking to himself how very much more, if she had but known it, it would have discomposed Margaret); his knees had a tendency to knock together, and he felt that he looked like a fool.

'You need not be afraid,' continued the lady smiling, not displeased perhaps to see the effect she had produced in him, the symptoms of which were not unfamiliar to her; 'Mrs. Powell will be here directly—she is not so punctual as you are.'

'She has not so much reason to be, madam,' said William Henry. The words had occurred to him as if by inspiration, but directly they were uttered he repented of them. He had intended them to be very gallant, but they now struck him as exceedingly foolish.

'He is certainly a very amusing young man,' said the lady, as if addressing a third person. 'Pray sit down, sir. I saw your father after I had the pleasure of seeing you yesterday. You are not in the least alike. You should have seen Kemble and him together; it was as good as any play. They don't hit it off together so well as you and I do. Perhaps you will say again they have not so much reason.'

'It was a very unfortunate remark of mine,' said William Henry penitently.

'I don't know that; you needn't be so hard upon yourself. I think you had an idea that you were somehow paying me a compliment. For my part, however, I have enough of compliments, and prefer a little honesty for a change.'

William Henry bethought him of saying something about the genuineness of some compliments, but by the expression of her face, which had suddenly become grave, he judged that she had had enough of the subject, and remained silent.

'And how is Margaret?'

The young man blushed to the roots of his hair, and blushed the more because he felt himself blushing.

'I have heard of the young lady from your father, and nothing but good of her. I hope'—this with great severity—'that you are not ashamed of her, sir.'

'No, madam.'

'And I hope, sir'—this with an angry flash of her bright eyes—'that you are not ashamed of *me*.'

'Madam!'

'Then why did you not tell her that you were coming here?'

William Henry bit his lip, and was about to stammer something he knew not what, when fortunately there was a knock at the door.

'Come in,' said Mrs. Jordan.

The knocking was continued very loudly, but the permission was not repeated. Mrs. Jordan began to laugh, and at every recurrence of the summons laughed more and more. Then the door was opened a very little way. 'Are you sure that I may come in, Dorothy? Are you sure I don't intrude?' inquired a musical voice in accents of pretended anxiety.

And then Mrs. Powell entered.

'You are late,' observed Mrs. Jordan reprovingly; 'that is not like your usual habits.'

'I thought you might like to have a little time to yourselves, my dear,' replied the other with great simplicity. 'I am quite sorry to trouble you with business matters, Mr. Erin, but the fact is it's pressing. I must have Edmunda altered; she is heavy in hand.'

'But, my dear madam, what has that to do with *me*?'

'With you? Why, everything; to whom else can I come? Kemble won't listen to me; your father, a most respectable man no doubt, is quite impracticable, and only raves about the Immortal Bard.'

'But I cannot alter Shakespeare's play, madam.'

'Why not? He's dead, isn't he? Besides, his plays have been often enough altered before. Garrick did it for one.'

'Perhaps, madam; but then I am not Garrick. I can no more alter a play than write one.'

'Upon my word, my dear,' interposed Mrs. Jordan, 'there is a good deal in what Mr. Erin says. I want to have things altered in my own part, but if, as he tells us—'

'Pooh! nonsense,' broke in the other; 'you have nothing to

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complain of in Flavia. She is in man's clothes, which fit you to a nicety, and that is all you need care about.'

'If he takes my advice he won't touch the play,' said Mrs. Jordan, fairly trembling with rage.

'There you see the Country Girl,' said Mrs. Powell, pointing to her friend with a little hand that trembled too. 'Her temper is only so long' (she indicated the twentieth part of an inch). 'Nobody can say that she has not a natural manner, or does not know how to blush.'

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'Nobody can say of Mrs. Powell,' retorted the other, 'when she tries to blush, that her beauty is only skin deep.'

It was certainly a most terrible scene, and most heartily did William Henry wish himself back in Norfolk Street. At that very moment, however, when he expected to see them dig their nails into one another, both ladies burst out laughing. He began to think that either their rage or their laughter must needs be artificial, whereas, in fact, while they lasted they were both real enough. Mirth with them was the natural safety valve of all their passions, and a very excellent mechanical contrivance too.

'But won't you just lighten my Edmunda a little, Mr. Erin,' persisted Mrs. Powell; 'a touch here and a touch there?'

'My dear madam, supposing even I were capable of doing such a thing (which I am not), just consider what people would say if I touched the play. Even now our enemies attack its authenticity, and what a handle must such a proceeding needs afford them.'

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'That is surely reasonable,' observed Mrs. Jordan for the second time.

'I don't know about reasonable,' returned Mrs. Powell with a most bewitching pout; 'but I know if you were not here I could persuade him.'

'Shall I leave you?' said Mrs. Jordan, making a feint of retiring from the room.

'Oh no,' pleaded William Henry involuntarily.

'Well, upon my life,' cried Mrs. Powell, 'you are a most complimentary young man! However, I'll leave *you*, which considering the company you are in, will be quite revenge enough.' She stood at the door, drawn up to her full height like a tragedy queen; then suddenly altering her tone, her air, her voice, and becoming as if by magic the very picture of pity, she added 'Poor Margaret!' and was gone.

'She is a queer mad creature, but means no harm,' said Mrs. Jordan consolingly. 'She was angry at your refusal to alter her part for her, and when she is angry she will say anything. You must not mind her. Now, I've taken a fancy to you, Master—-. By the bye, what is your name?'

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'Erin.'

'Chut! I mean your Christian name?'

'William Henry.'

'And what does Margaret call you?'

'Willie.'

'Very good; then since I have no wish to poach on Margaret's preserves, I shall call you "Henry." I have taken a fancy to you, Master Henry, and mean to do you a service; a gentleman of influence, with whom I have some interest, wants to look at these Shakespeare manuscripts, and has directed them to be at his house this morning.'

'I am afraid they will not be there,' said William Henry. 'My father has never permitted them to leave Norfolk Street except once, at the personal request of the Prince Regent.'

'Nevertheless, I think the gentleman I speak of will have his way,' said the actress, smiling. 'Now I wish him, in case he sees the manuscripts, to see their discoverer also. Perhaps he may give him a helping hand.'

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'You are very kind,' said William Henry gently: it was not gratitude for the favour to come that moved him, for he had no suspicion how it was to be realised, but her evident warmth of feeling towards him. Her manner had not only an exquisite grace, but an unmistakable tenderness; and then she was so exceedingly handsome. A young man's heart is like the tinder, which in those days, with flint and steel, was the substitute for our lucifer matches; away from its box it is liable to danger from every spark. 'You are

very good and kind,' repeated William Henry mechanically; he felt an impulse, hard to be withstood, to add 'and very beautiful.'

'I am not good,' said his companion, gravely, 'but I suppose I am kind enough. It is much easier, my young friend, to be kind than good. Well, now I am going to take you to this gentleman.'

She put on her cloak and bonnet, and led the way to the stage door of the theatre. A closed carriage, well appointed, was at the door, in waiting for her, and they took their seats. In a few minutes they were whirled to their destination—a huge red house set in a courtyard, with which William Henry was unacquainted, or which in the perturbation of his mind he failed to recognise. They passed through certain corridors into a large room looking on a garden. It was handsomely furnished; a harp stood in one corner, a piano in the other; the walls were hung with beautiful pictures. But what aroused William Henry's amazement, and prevented him from giving his attention elsewhere, was the circumstance that on a table by the window were arranged the whole collection of the Shakespeare papers.

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'You are looking for your father's blood upon them,' said Mrs. Jordan, smiling; 'you are thinking to yourself that he must surely have been cut to pieces ere he would have permitted them to leave his hands. But the fact is—— Hush, here comes your future patron.'

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William Henry was used to a patron, and for that matter to a sufficiently mysterious one; but for the moment he was devoured by curiosity, mingled with a certain awe. The appearance of the new-comer, if he had expected to see anyone very magnificent, must have been a disappointment to him, for it certainly was not of an imposing kind. There entered the room, so rapidly that he almost seemed to run, a young man of thirty, somewhat inclined to corpulence, with a cheery good-natured face, but decidedly commonplace in its expression.

'Well, well, Dorothy, you see I'm here,' he said, without taking the least notice of the stranger's presence. 'Now let us see these manuscripts—wonderful manuscripts—and get it over.' He spoke with great volubility, and plumped down on a chair by the table as if in a great hurry. 'What funny writing, and what queer ink and paper! and what great seals! Shakespeare was never Lord Chancellor, was he?'

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'I don't think he was, sir,' said Mrs. Jordan, laughing. 'It was the fashion in those days for deeds to wear fob and watch and chain.'

'Fobs, fobs? I see no fobs. So this is "Lear;" I've seen "Lear." The play where everybody has their eyes put out. So he wrote it like this, did he? I wonder how anybody could read it. Hambllett, Hambllett; I never heard of him. Notes of hand. Gad! I know *them* pretty well.'

'This is the young gentleman, sir, to whom we owe the discovery of all these manuscripts,' said Mrs. Jordan, drawing his attention to William Henry.

'Aye, aye,' said the new comer, wheeling his chair round to get a good view of William Henry's face. 'You found them, did you; those that hide can find; that's what people tell me, you know.'

The speech was such a rude one, that it might have been uttered by the first Gentleman in Europe, nor indeed was William Henry by any means certain that he was not standing in his august presence; but there was a good-natured twinkle in the stranger's eye which mitigated the harshness of his words. Never, indeed, before had the doubts concerning the genuineness of the manuscripts been expressed in a manner so personally offensive to the young fellow, and notwithstanding his conviction that the speaker was a man of very high rank, he might not have hesitated to resent it, but for a certain appealing look which Mrs.[.] Jordan cast at him. He remembered that it was for his own sake that she had asked him to meet this man, and that if he offended him she herself might be the sufferer. He therefore only answered with a forced smile, 'I should think no one but Mr. Malone could have told you that.'

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'And who the deuce is Mr. Malone?' was the contemptuous rejoinder; a question that put the coping-stone on the young fellow's embarrassment and, indeed, utterly discomfited him. He felt transported into strange regions, with a new atmosphere; a world that had never heard of Mr. Malone the commentator was unintelligible to him. It is one of the lessons that can only be taught by years, and of which the 'Montys' and 'Algys' of high life are as ignorant as the 'Jacks' and 'Harrys' of low, that our respective horizons are limited.

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As William Henry stood tongue-tied, a sudden burst of melody filled the room. Mrs. Jordan had sat down to the piano, and was singing with exquisite pathos a song that was very familiar to him.

Detraction strove to turn her heart
And sour her gentle mind;
But Charity still kept her part,
And meekness to her soul did bind.

'Very nice, and very true,' murmured the strange gentleman approvingly, keeping time with head and hand to the tune. His irritation had departed like an evil spirit exorcised; into his coarse countenance had stolen an expression of pure enjoyment; his eyes were full of gentleness and even affection. Such power have the voice and the instrument (when accompanied by a pretty face) even on the most commonplace natures.

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'Now what is that, what is that?' he exclaimed excitedly, when the song was done. 'And why have I never heard it before, my dear?'

'Because it is brand-new, sir,' said Mrs. Jordan, with a bewitching curtsey. 'I sing it as Flavia in this new play of "Vortigern and Rowena," which is to be performed next month at Drury Lane, and which I hope you will come to see.'

'Certainly, certainly. Why shouldn't I?'

Detraction strove to turn her heart
And sour her gentle mind.

But it didn't succeed, did it, Dorothy?'

'I hope not, sir,' returned the lady modestly. 'Then I may take it as a promise, sir, that you will honour this performance with your presence; it will be on the second of April.'

'Yes, yes; tell Sherry to keep a box—a box. And now I'm off to the Privy Council. Sorry I can't take you with me, Dorothy, but you're not sworn in yet—not sworn in.'

And off he shambled; his walk and talk were very like one another—rapid, irregular, and fitful.

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'There,' cried Mrs. Jordan triumphantly, 'I have got what I wanted for you, Master Harry; the play will now have the Royal patronage.'

'Then that gentleman is——'

'His Royal Highness the Duke of Clarence, *my husband*.'

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

A DROLL rogue of my acquaintance, whom (one tried to think) the force of circumstance, rather than any natural disposition, had driven from the pavement of integrity into the gutter, used to maintain that it was better to confess one's peccadilloes, with such colourable excuses as might suggest themselves, than to conceal them. In the former case you might, with a struggle, get out of the scrape and have done with it; in the latter case you were never safe from discovery, and when it came there was sure to be a catastrophe.

There was, it is true, no peccadillo in William Henry's keeping that appointment we wot of with those two charming ornaments of Drury Lane Theatre, but since he had an impression that Margaret might not like it, he ought, according to my friend's philosophy, to have told her all about it. After his interview with his Royal Highness (which could not be concealed) he felt that this straightforward course was the right one, and as he returned home in the hackney carriage with the precious manuscripts, amused himself with the thoughts of the pleasure Margaret would exhibit on hearing of the greatness that had been thrust upon him. When her mind had been dazzled by visions of Royalty, he had intended it to slip out in a casual way that he had been indebted for his introduction to his Royal Highness to one of those professional persons who had called in Norfolk Street the previous day on business, and whom he had been compelled to receive in place of his father—a Mrs. Jordan. The whole thing ran as smoothly and naturally in his own mind as could be. It was like some well-oiled mechanical machine, which the inventor (though of course it was no invention, only an adaptation) feels confident will do all he expects of it, only somehow in practice it doesn't act. He found Margaret not in the least interested about his Royal Highness, and very much excited about the lady who had been the mere medium of his introduction, and whose part in the matter he had taken, it must be confessed, some pains to minimise.

'You have not been frank with me, William Henry,' she said with some severity.

He had it upon his lips to say that since he was William Henry he could hardly be Frank, but he felt she was in no mood for banter; and, moreover, with that name there naturally occurred to him the thought of Frank Dennis, which made his heart stand still. It was not her anger that he feared, nor even the diminution of her love, which had been indicated very significantly by the mention of his double name (which she had not used for months) instead of 'Willie,' but the possible diversion of her love to another object. Perhaps she was already making a comparison in her mind between himself and a certain other person who, whatever his faults, would, she knew, never have deceived her.

It was not impossible that love could stray, for had it not done so but a few hours ago, within his own experience, and with no such provocation? It was very different, of course, in his case; there is a certain latitude given to men, and the handsomest man on the stage, or off it, would, he was well aware, not have caused Margaret to forget her Willie even for an instant. But then women, when they are jealous, are capable of anything, and from pique will not only 'be off' with those they love, but sometimes 'be on' with another.

'I am very sorry, Margaret,' he stammered, 'but I really don't know what you mean.'

'Then your face belies your words,' was the cold reply. 'Why did you not tell me yesterday that you were going to meet that woman at Drury Lane this morning?'

'There were two of them,' said William Henry eagerly, urged, as he felt, by some fortunate inspiration to tell the whole truth.

'Oh, there were two, were there?' Though she strove to keep her tone the same, there was a relaxation in her severity that did not escape him; the reflection that there was safety in numbers had no doubt occurred to her. 'You omitted that circumstance, sir, in your previous narrative, with, no doubt, many others.'

'Indeed, Margaret, I have told you all; that is, all that I thought

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could have any interest for you. I ought to have said, of course, that the invitation to the theatre came from both the ladies; they wanted to have some alteration made in the play for them (which of course was out of the question). Mrs. Powell was very angry about it; I should think that she had a temper of her own.'

'I don't want to hear about Mrs. Powell.'

There was once a young gentleman who was endeavouring to make himself agreeable as a *raconteur* in the presence of Royalty. When he had done his story the Royal lips let fall these terrible words: 'We are not amused.' Poor William Henry found himself in much the same position. His reminiscences of Mrs. Powell were, as it were, cut off at the main. Margaret's instinct had eliminated that factor from the sum of the matter as insignificant; there was another person to talk about, it was true, but he was averse to enter upon that subject. Unhappily it was suggested to him as a topic.

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'Who, may I ask, is this Mrs. Jordan?'

'Well, she was the other lady, of course, who called here,' said William Henry (he felt that he was turning a lively red, and it was so important to him that he should keep his colour). 'She is to perform Flavia in the play.'

'The person in man's clothes?' observed Margaret icily.

'Well, she plays the Page; you can hardly expect her to play him in petticoats. It was not a dress rehearsal,' stammered the young man, 'if you mean that. They simply asked me—both of them—to step round to the theatre this morning and render them some professional assistance, which, as it happened, I am unable to do. I cannot for the life of me see what harm there was in that.'

'Then why did you not tell me you were going?'

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It was the same dreadful question over again. Of course he ought to have told her, and if he had had any idea that she would have come to know of it he certainly would have done so. He looked so sorry (not to say silly) that Margaret's heart melted a little.

'You know how I hate anything clandestine and underhand, William Henry.'

'I know it,' he answered, with a deep sigh. His face was one of such abject misery, that one would have said, whatever he had done, he was sufficiently punished for it. Her heart melted more and more; he went on penitently:

'Of course I ought to have told you, Margaret, but I did not conceal it because there was anything to be ashamed of. Only I knew you would not like it, that you would think there was harm in it—as you do, it seems—where there is no harm. It was surely a great piece of goodnature on their part, after I had disappointed them about the play, to offer to do their best for it, and to get the Duke——'

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'Did they both go with you to St. James's Palace?' she put in drily.

He was on the point of saying that there had been only room for two in the coach, but fortunately he was a young gentleman who thought before he spoke. It would certainly not have been a satisfactory explanation, and the very idea that he had been about to make it turned him scarlet.

'No wonder you are ashamed of yourself, sir,' said she, perceiving his confusion. 'Why do you talk to me about "they" and "them," when you know that only one of these women had anything to do with the matter?'

'Well, naturally, my dear, Mrs. Jordan was the person to introduce me to his Royal Highness, since she has been privately married to him.'

'I don't believe one word of it.'

'I can only say she told me so,' said William Henry simply.

Margaret did not give much credit to the assertion of this lady, but she believed what William Henry said. After all, the poor young fellow had probably meant no harm, nor even dreamt of the meshes into which this designing female would have drawn him. He had only been indiscreet and a little surreptitious, and had been rated enough.

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'You don't know what these actresses are, Willie,' she said gravely, 'nor what pleasure they take in making misery and estrangements between honest people. Nothing this woman would like better, I'm sure of it, than to come between you and me.'

'My dear Margaret, how can you say such things? If you had only

seen her!’

‘I don’t want to see her,’ interpolated Margaret quickly.

‘A person entirely devoted to her profession, in which she is justly held in the highest esteem.’

‘I don’t deny that she is a good actress,’ returned Margaret significantly; ‘indeed I have no doubt of it.’

‘And she spoke of you so kindly.’

‘Of me? How dared she speak of me?’ cried Margaret with flashing eye. ‘What does she know of me?’

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‘Well, she saw you just for a moment when you looked in by accident yesterday, and she said how beautiful and kind you looked, and congratulated me——’

‘It was shameful of you to tell those women of our engagement,’ she put in.

‘Why not? What was there to be ashamed of? Am I not proud of it? Why should I not have told them?’

His simplicity was very touching. If there had been such a thing as a male *ingénue* upon the stage, the speaker would have been the very man to play it.

‘How they must have laughed at you in their sleeves, my poor Willie!’ she answered pityingly.

He did not think it necessary to state that they *had* laughed at him, and by no means in their sleeves.

‘I will never see them again if you don’t wish it,’ said William Henry, still sticking to the plural number. ‘Only I suppose when the “Vortigern” comes to be acted it will be necessary to do so just for a night or two.’

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‘Oh, I don’t mind your seeing them at the play, Willie. We shall, of course, be there together.’

He had meant that his assistance would probably be required behind the scenes. Indeed Mrs. Jordan had taken it for granted that he would be a constant visitor at the theatre while the play was in preparation, and he had very willingly acquiesced in that arrangement, but he had not the courage to say so. He was only too thankful that Margaret’s suspicions were at last set at rest. He knew that she was of a jealous disposition, and also that she abhorred deceit, and he loved her none the less on either account, but there were reasons why her manifestation of such excessive displeasure on so small a matter alarmed him, and made his heart heavy within him. However, in a month or two they would be married. He would then be her very own, and she would have no misgivings about him; and as to deceit, there would be no further cause for it, and what was past and gone would surely be forgiven. But still his heart was heavy.

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Considering Margaret’s youth and her middle-class position in life, the irritation and annoyance she had exhibited may seem unnatural as well as uncalled for. Young women of her age and rank are not nowadays supposed to know so much about the temptations of the stage, but in her time matters were different. The charms of this and that popular actress, and even their mode of life, were topics of common talk, and there was none of them more talked about than Mrs. Jordan. It is not, therefore, to be wondered at that Margaret regarded her as a syren attracted by the notoriety (not to mention the innocence and beauty) of her Willie, who designed to wile him from the quiet harbour of domestic love into the stormy seas of passion. Moreover, it must be said for Margaret that her jealousy was not like that of some people who, while resenting the interference of others with their private property, do not lavish on it any especial kindness of their own. She had always been the friend and defender of William Henry, even before he became her lover, and had long-established claims on his fidelity, and it galled her that one glimpse of a pretty face should have so worked with him as to induce him to renew acquaintance with it, under what seemed to her such suspicious circumstances, and especially in so secret and clandestine a fashion. It had always been a complaint of hers in the old days that William Henry was inclined to deception. It was in relation, however, to Mr. Erin only that she had observed it, and in that case there had been, certainly, excuses for the young man; but that he should have deceived *her*—if, at least, concealment could be called deception—she justly considered to be less pardonable. However, she had now said her say, and with a vigour that the circumstances scarcely called for; indeed, she felt that she had been

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somewhat hard upon him. However wrong he had been to try to hoodwink her, that had been the extent of his offending. He could hardly have declined to go to the theatre; and, indeed, she confessed to herself that while the play was in progress it was not reasonable to expect him to hold no communication with those who were to perform in it. The matter interested him very much, nor did she forget that it was mainly on her own account, for did not her uncle's consent to their union depend upon the play's success?

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When Mr. Erin presently announced the first rehearsal at the theatre, and suggested that William Henry should be present to witness it, Margaret made no opposition; her objections, in short, to the young man's renewing his acquaintance with the fair Flavia were tacitly withdrawn. She acknowledged to herself that things could scarcely be otherwise, and that, after all, there could be no possible harm in the matter; and from that moment, whenever her Willie was out of her sight, she was more tormented with the fires of jealousy than ever.

She knew that he saw Mrs. Jordan constantly, and was yet compelled to ignore it; she burned to know what passed between them, yet scorned to inquire. The news William Henry brought back with him of the prospects of the play seemed hardly of any consequence to her compared with matters on which he never spoke at all. What was it to her that Kemble was unsympathetic, dogged, and studiously apathetic in his rendering of Vortigern; that Phillimore as Horsus was more like a buffoon than a hero? What was it to her, on the other hand, that Mrs. Powell as Edmunda surpassed Mrs. Siddons herself? What she wished to know, and could not ask, was how that hussey Mrs. Jordan was behaving herself, not as Flavia in tights (though that idea was far from consolatory), but in her own proper person. Of one thing she felt convinced, that not content with seeing her Willie every day, this woman corresponded with him; that he received letters from her under that very roof. Else how was it that when the post now brought him missives in a hand that was strange to her, he would slip them into his pocket without a word of comment, and with an air of indifference that did not impose upon her for an instant? William Henry had now a little sitting-room of his own, and she noticed that when these letters arrived he remained in it longer alone than usual; reading them, no doubt, over and over, perhaps replying to them in the same fervid style in which (she felt sure) they were written, and possibly (for Margaret, though no poet like her Willie, had a lively imagination of her own) even kissing them.

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One morning the Epilogue to 'Vortigern and Rowena' arrived from Mr. Merry, and was discussed at breakfast-time word by word, as befitted so important a document. An hour afterwards, when William Henry had gone out, as Margaret was only too well convinced, to Drury Lane, Mr. Erin returned to the subject.

'I don't much like those concluding lines in the first part,' he said

—

The scattered flowers he left, benignly save,
Posthumous flowers; the garland of the grave.

'It ran "benignly save," did it not, Madge?'

'I am not sure, uncle.'

'Then just go and get the thing out of Samuel's room.'

Margaret went and looked about her for the manuscript in question. It was nowhere to be found. But in her researches she came upon another document spread out in the half-opened drawer of the writing-table; it was written in a delicate hand on large letter-paper, and it was almost impossible that she could avoid reading the commencement of it.

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'My dear W. H.,' it began, and then followed a mass of heterogeneous words without sense or meaning, as if they had been taken at random out of some dictionary. It is probable that Margaret had never heard of a cryptogram, but she had heard of communications written in cypher, and it flashed upon her mind at once that she was looking at some letter of that nature. It was bad enough that this abandoned hussey of Drury Lane, who dwelt but a mile away from them, and saw her Willie five days out of six, should nevertheless have the audacity to correspond with him; but that she should write such things as could not bear the light and had to be concealed in cypher was indeed intolerable. Granting her premises, there was certainly ample cause for the indignation that mantled to

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her very forehead, and the bitterness that took possession of her very soul.

As she stood with one hand on the table, for her limbs trembled with the agitation that shook her mind, she heard the front door softly closed, and a hurried footstep in the passage. It was William Henry, who had remembered no doubt—too late—that he had left the letter exposed to view, and had returned to place it in some safer receptacle. The next moment he was face to face with her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CYPHER.

'I KNOW what you are come for,' said Margaret in a broken voice, which had yet no touch of tenderness in it. 'You are come for this letter.' She snatched it from the drawer and held it before him. 'It is no use to lie to me; your face tells me the truth.'

William Henry's face was indeed white to the lips; his eyes returned her gaze with a confused and frightened stare. He stammered out something, he knew not what, and sank into a chair.

'What,' continued the girl, in harsh, pitiless tones, 'have you nothing to say for yourself? Has your ready tongue no excuse to offer for this new duplicity?'

'Have you read the letter?' he inquired hoarsely.



'I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE COME FOR. YOU ARE COME FOR THIS LETTER.'

'No; how could I?'

The colour rushed back to his cheeks, and into his eyes there came a gleam of hope.

'No,' she went on, 'it is you who shall read it to me. If you decline to do so, I shall conclude that this vile creature has written you what is not fit for anyone, save women like herself, to hear, and your refusal will be the last words that you will ever address to me with my consent, so help me Heaven.'

Mrs. Powell herself, when personating some heroine of the stage, never looked or spoke with greater earnestness of purpose than on this occasion did simple Margaret Slade out of the simplicity of her nature.

'I will read you the letter, Margaret,' was William Henry's quiet reply.

His words, and still more his tone, staggered Margaret not a little. The change in his face and manner within the last few minutes had indeed been most remarkable. At first he had seemed so struck with the consciousness of guilt, and so hopeless of forgiveness, that he had not dared to throw himself upon her mercy. Then he had appeared to recover himself a little; and now he was quite calm and composed as though all apprehension had passed away from him.

His voice as he said 'I will read you the letter, Margaret,' had even a tender reproach in it, as though he, and not she, were the injured party.

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'Read it,' she said; but her tone was no longer stubborn and imperious. It was plain that this woman's letter was not a love-letter, or he would not have consented to read it; and if it was not a love-letter, what cause had she for anger? And yet, if it was not so, why had he exhibited such confusion—nay despair?

'I will read it, since you wish it,' he went on, 'though it is a breach of confidence. It is better to break one's word than to break one's heart.'

The morality of this aphorism was somewhat questionable, but Margaret nodded assent. She took it, no doubt, in a particular sense. It was certainly better that she should know the worst than that any proviso of a designing woman, made for her own wicked convenience, should be respected. [175]

'It is well to begin at the beginning,' continued William Henry. 'Be so good as to look at the address of that letter.'

She did so with an indifferent air. She could almost have said that she had seen it before, for she recognised it at once as one of those missives of which he had received so many of late.

'Let me draw your attention to the postmark.'

It was 'Mallow: Ireland.'

The letter fell from her hand. Self-humiliation mastered for the moment the happiness of discovering that he had not been false to her after all. It was certainly not with Mrs. Jordan that he was secretly corresponding, and probably with no one of her sex. If Margaret had been an older woman, with a larger experience of the ways of men, she might have regretted her misplaced indignation as 'waste;' it might have even struck her that the present mistake might weaken her position if on some future occasion she should have better reason for her reproaches, but she had no thought except for the injustice she had done her lover. She stood before him with downcast head, stupefied and penitent. [176]

'Oh, Willie, I am so sorry.'

'So am I, dear; sorry that you should have so little confidence in me; sorry that you should have thought me capable of carrying on, under the roof that shelters you, an intrigue with another woman. This letter—and I have received others like it—is from Reginald Talbot.'

'But, Willie, what *could* I think?' she pleaded humbly, 'and why should you write to Mr. Talbot in cypher? And why when I charged you falsely—with—what—you have mentioned—did you look so—so guilty?'

'Say rather so hurt and shocked, Margaret,' he answered gravely. 'It was surely only natural that I should be shocked at finding the girl I loved so distrustful of me.'

'I was wrong, oh, very, very wrong; and yet,' she pleaded, 'I erred through love of you, Willie. If I had not cared for you so much—so very much—I should not have been so unreasonable.' [177]

'You mean so wild with jealousy,' he replied smiling. 'However, it's all over now,' and he held out his hand for the letter which she still retained.

'Please to read it to me,' she said; 'a few words will do.'

His face grew pale again, as she thought with anger.

'Why so?' he replied. 'Are you not satisfied even now?'

'Yes, yes; it was foolish of me, I know, but I said "So help me Heaven."'

'Oh, I see. For your oath's sake. That is what Herod said to the daughter of Herodias. It is not a good example to follow.'

He spoke stiffly, but she shook her head.

'I only ask for a few words, Willie.'

'But Talbot writes to me in confidence; about matters that only affect him and me. There is not a word that concerns you in it.'

Still she shook her head. The girl was truth itself, not only in the spirit but in the letter. She had sworn not to speak with him unless he did a certain thing, and though the reason for his doing so no longer existed, her oath remained. Her stubbornness evidently annoyed him. Their parts in the little drama had as it were become reversed. The wrongdoer had become the injured person, and *vice versa*. [178]

'The facts are these,' he said slowly. 'Talbot and I, as you know, have a secret in common. He is the only person save myself, who has seen my patron. What he writes of him and his concerns—that is

of the manuscripts—we do not wish others to see. We have therefore hit upon a device to keep our communications secret.'

He took out of the drawer a piece of cardboard exactly the shape and size of ordinary letter-paper, full of large holes neatly cut at unequal distances. He placed it on blank paper, and through the interstices wrote these words:

'Margaret has done you the honour to take your finnikin handwriting for that of Mrs. Jordan.'

Then he took off the cardboard and filled in the spaces with a number of inconsequent words, so that the whole communication became meaningless.

'Talbot has another piece of cardboard exactly similar to this,' he continued, 'and has only to place it over this rubbish for my meaning to become apparent.'

'It is very ingenious,' said Margaret. It was the highest praise she could afford. Such arts were distasteful to her. They seemed to suggest a natural turn for deception, and she secretly hoped that the invention lay at Talbot's door.

'Yes, I think the plan does me some credit,' said William Henry complacently. 'Well, I have only to lay the cardboard over this letter that so excited your indignation, to get at the writer's meaning.'

Her eyes were turned towards him, but with no fixity of expression, she was bound to listen and to look, but her interest was gone.

"'Why do you not send me a copy of the play?'" he rapidly read. "One would think it was you only who had any stake in it;" and so on, and so on. I suppose you have no wish to pry further into our little secret?' he added, folding up the letter at the same time.

'I did not wish to pry into it at all, Willie,' she answered sorrowfully; 'I again repeat I am sorry to have mistrusted you.'

'Well, well, let us say no more about it. Let us forgive and forget.'

'It is you who have to forgive, Willie, not I.'

'I don't say that,' he answered gravely; 'but if you think so, keep your forgiveness, Maggie, for next time. Be sure I shall have need of it.'

Here the voice of Mr. Erin was heard calling for Margaret.

'Why do you not bring me the play?'

William Henry held up his finger in sign that she should not reveal his presence in the house to Mr. Erin, and taking the manuscript from a cupboard placed it in her hand.

'Take it him,' he whispered, with a tender kiss.

She kissed him again without a word; the tears stood in her eyes, as, the very image of penitence and self-reproach, she made her mute adieu.

It was certainly an occasion on which some men, not unconscious of errors, might have congratulated themselves.

The expression on William Henry's face, however, was very far from one of triumph; it was white and worn and weary.

'Another such a victory,' he murmured with a haggard smile, 'and I shall be undone.'

He locked the door and threw himself into a chair with an exhausted air, like an actor who, having played his part successfully, is conscious of having done so with great effort, and also that he owed more to good luck than to good guidance. 'Great heaven!' he muttered, 'what an escape! Suppose she had found the key for herself and read the letter, or even if she had compelled me to do so. She must have heard it all. I could not have invented a syllable to save my life—-. What a millstone is this fellow about my neck,' he presently continued, as he tore the letter along and across, and threw the fragments under his feet. 'A copy of the play! No, that he shall never see till the time is past for harm to come of it. A few days more, and all will be safe. I will be pestered no longer with his cursed importunities.'

Then he took the perforated cardboard and tore that likewise into small pieces. 'Now I have burnt my boats with a vengeance,' he added grimly.

Then he rose and paced up and down the room, first rapidly, then slower and slower.

'I am afraid I have been hasty, after all,' he murmured; 'this Talbot is ill to deal with, and suspicious as the devil. If I tell him in what peril his communications have placed me, and that therefore I

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have destroyed his cypher, he will not believe me, though it is the truth. I must tell him that it has been destroyed by accident, and that therefore I dare not write him what he wishes, and that he will not believe either. If incredulity were genius, then indeed he would be a very clever fellow, but not otherwise. Great heavens! what rubbish he writes and calls it poetry. No, no, no,' he muttered with knitted brows, 'not *that*, Master Reginald, at any price. And yet how mad it will make him to find it is not so. He will do me a mischief if he can, no doubt. However, he will know nothing till it is too late. Next Saturday will put me out of the reach of harm. Would it were Saturday, and all were well. That's Shakespeare, by the bye, save that he says supper time. A bad augury—a bad augury. The Ides of March are come, but they have not yet gone.' Here he took another turn up and down the room. 'I wonder whether, with all his knowledge of humanity, Shakespeare ever knew a man who suffered like me. I wonder whether he sees me now, and knows about it. A strange thought indeed, and yet it may be so. Perhaps his great soul, which understands it all, has pity on me. Will *she* pity me? A still more momentous question. Pity is akin to love, he says, when love comes last. If love comes first, will pity follow it? What thoughts could I set down this moment were I in the mood for it; and yet they say I am no more a poet than this Talbot. He a poet! The vain drivelling fool; curse his false heart and prying eyes! I hate him.'

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CHAPTER XXX.

THE PLAY.

THE first night of one new play is much the same as that of another, I suppose, all the world over. The opening and shutting of doors, the rustling of silks and satins, the murmur of expectancy, cannot hush the beating of the young author's breast, as he sits at the back of the box and longs, like the sick man, for the morning. Everybody who is anybody (a charming phrase indicating about one billionth of the human race) is there. Men of fashion and women of wit: gossips and critics; playwrights who have been damned and hope for company in their Inferno; playwrights who have succeeded, with no love for a new rival; the fast and the loose. Lights everywhere, but as much difficulty in finding places as though it were dark; mute recognitions, whispered information ('A dead failure, they tell me.' 'The best thing since the "School for Scandal"'); fashionable titters; consumption with her ill-bred cough. These are things peculiar to all first nights, but the first night of 'a newly discovered play by William Shakespeare' was, as one may imagine, something exceptional.

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Malone, of course, had been at work. The public had been warned against 'an impudent imposture' in 'a Letter to Lord Charlemont' (surely the longest ever written) of which Edmund Burke had been so good as to say 'that he had got to the seventy-third page before he went to sleep.' It had been necessary to issue a counter-handbill and to distribute it at the doors.

VORTIGERN.

'A malevolent and impudent attack on the Shakespeare Manuscript having appeared on the eve of representation of this play, evidently intended to injure the proprietor of the Manuscript, Mr. Erin feels it impossible, within the short space of time between the publishing and the representation, to produce an answer to Mr. Malone's most ill-founded assertions in his "Inquiry." He is therefore induced to request that "Vortigern and Rowena" may be heard with that candour which has ever distinguished a British audience.'

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Opposition handbills were also in circulation, headed 'A Forgery.' The public interest in the play was unprecedented. The doors of Drury Lane were besieged. Within, the excitement was even more tremendous. The house was crammed to the very roof. Many paid box prices though they knew no seats were to be obtained there, for the purpose of getting down into the pit. 'The air was charged with the murmurs of the contending factions.' Nothing was ever heard or seen like it within the walls of a playhouse. In a centre box sat Samuel Erin and Margaret. The antiquary had thought it right that they should occupy a conspicuous position and show a bold front to the world, and she had consented to this arrangement without a murmur, for was it not for her Willie's sake? She looked very pale, however, and when addressed had hardly voice to answer. The vast assemblage in such commotion, the shouts and cries from the gallery, the satirical cries of 'Author! Author!'—though the overture had not commenced—appalled her.

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In a small box on the opposite side of the house, sat alone a tall handsome man, as pale as she. He had drawn the little curtain forward, so as to conceal himself from the occupants of the house, and kept his face, which wore a look of great distress, turned towards the stage. Through the folds of the curtain he had stolen one glance at her as she took her seat; but afterwards he had looked no more at her. In the next compartment was another and younger man, who also seemed to have a personal interest in Margaret Slade. His box was full of spectators, but he sat at the back of them, and unseen by her, fixed his eyes upon her from time to time with a searching expression. When the play began, however, he listened to it with the most rapt attention—not a word escaped him—and with every word his face grew darker and more malevolent.

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Behind the curtain opinion was almost as much divided as before it. Kemble was in his grimmest humour; disinclined, as many said, both then and afterwards, to give his Vortigern fair play. Some of the inferior actors, taking their tune from him, certainly abstained from exerting themselves, and even made no secret beforehand of their design to abstain. It was a play cumbrous in construction, and

even in the very names of the dramatis personæ, such as Wortimerus and Catagrinus; but it had been accepted by the management, and the company, as it was afterwards urged, and with justice, should have done their best for it. Mrs. Powell and Mrs. Jordan vied with one another in encouraging William Henry, who remained all the evening behind the scenes. The former made a magnificent Edmunda; the latter, of whom the greatest of our dramatic critics writes, 'Delightful Mrs. Jordan, whose voice did away with the cares of the whole house before they saw her come in,' surpassed herself. If beauty and vivacity could have saved the piece she would have saved it, single-handed. There was a great deal of opposition, but at first the play went fairly well. The swell and roll of its sonorous lines hid their lack of ideas, and in a fashion supported themselves unaided.

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'We are safe now, the "Vortigern" will succeed, Henry,' said Mrs. Jordan cheerfully, as she left the stage at the close of the second act.

William Henry did not answer; his face, pale and haggard as it had been throughout the evening, had suddenly assumed a look of horror.

'What is the matter with you, lad?' exclaimed Mrs. Powell. 'You would make a good actor, but a very bad author; you could not look more desponding if the play was your own. It is going all right; you must not mind a hiss or two.'

'I fear him,' whispered William Henry, hoarsely. 'That is his hateful voice; it is all over.'

The two ladies looked at one another significantly; they had seen young fathers of promising plays on first nights before, but here was a mere godfather worse than any of them. They thought that the young fellow had taken leave of his wits.

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'I tell you it is all over,' continued the wretched youth; 'he has come here to damn me.'

'If you mean the Devil, that is nothing new,' said Mrs. Powell; 'he is always, so we are told, in the play-house.'

She spoke very sharply; she thought it the right remedy to apply under the circumstances, just as she might have recommended bending back the fingers in an extreme case of hysterics.

'Come here,' said Mrs. Jordan, leading the young man to a spot where, through a chink in the curtain, they could get a view of the box where his father and cousin sat. 'Look at your Margaret yonder; she is not a coward like you.' Indeed, the more the people hissed, the calmer and the more indifferent Margaret seemed to be, though under that unmoved exterior she suffered agonies. She was thinking of her Willie, though she could not see him, and love enhanced her beauty.

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It was a frightful scene of turmoil, though up till now a good-natured one. The actor who had last left the stage (or rather who was left upon it, for he had been killed in combat) had had, by some mismanagement, the curtain dropped upon his legs, and had jumped up and rubbed them before the audience in a manner very unbecoming a corpse. At this they screamed with laughter, to which his Highness the Duke of Clarence, in the royal box, contributed his full share. Their good humour was, therefore, for the present, assured, though such mirth was hardly conducive to the success of a tragedy. But at the commencement of the next act there were signs of ill-nature. There were cries set agoing from a box on the upper tier, of 'Forgery! forgery!' and even of 'Thief Erin! Thief Erin! look at Thief Erin!'

Kemble's magnificent voice alone could make itself heard above these sounds of displeasure. He was apostrophising the King of Terrors:—

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Oh sovereign Death,
Who hast for thy domain this world immense.
Churchyards and charnelhouses are thy haunts,
And hospitals thy sumptuous palaces;
And when thou wouldst be merry thou dost choose
The gaudy chamber of a dying king.
And then thou dost ope wide thy monstrous jaws,
And with rude laughter and fantastic tricks
Thou clapp'st thy rattling fingers to thy side;
And when this solemn mockery is o'er—

Here he was suffered to proceed no further; that unfortunate line,

uttered in the most sepulchral tone, was the signal for the most discordant howl that was ever heard within the walls of a theatre. He repeated the line with his own peculiar emphasis, and even, as a spectator tells us, 'with a solemn grimace.' It was the death-blow of the piece. A scene of confusion ensued which beggars description. Suddenly, and as the newspapers of the day said, 'without any premonition,' a rush was made for the box occupied by the Erins. Fortunately, however, one man at least had premonition of it. He was the one who has been mentioned as occupying a box by himself. He had been silent all the evening, taking no part either with the partisans or the opponents of the play, but with eyes ever attentive to what was going on. The voice of the young fellow in the next compartment had attracted him above all others; it had malevolence in it which was wanting in the other cases, and, though he did not recognise it, sounded not unfamiliar to him. It had been the first to raise the cry of 'Forger!' and the only one which had mentioned the name of Erin. As he repeated the words for the third or fourth time, some drunken fellow hiccuped 'Where are they?' To which the malevolent voice replied, 'I'll show you. The young scoundrel is hiding behind the curtain, but we'll have him out.'

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THE NEXT MOMENT THE CORRIDOR WAS FULL OF AN EXCITED RABBLE.

The next moment the corridor was full of an excited rabble, led by Reginald Talbot. They ran in their stupid fury at full speed, but not so fast as Frank Dennis would have run could he have got free of them. He had dashed from his box the instant he had heard Talbot's vengeful cry, but it had already raised the wilder spirits of the house, and they had rushed out from this door and that, and interposed themselves between him and their leader. He beheld already Margaret surrounded by this wild and wanton crew, the old man maltreated, and William Henry, evidently the object of this fellow's hatred, torn to pieces. He ran with the impetuous crowd, parting them like water left and right with his broad shoulders, till he gained a place among the foremost. Talbot, leading by a few paces, had reached a spot where two staircases met; the one a narrow one, leading straight down to a few boxes, in one of which Margaret was seated, the other a broader flight, which led to one of

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the exits of the house. Talbot, wild with haste and rage, cast a glance behind him to point out to his followers the right direction to take, when he met Dennis' eye, and strove to turn and speak. But ere he could do so, Frank's strong fingers were on his neck, and impelled him forward, like the wind, to the top of the broader stair. The others, who knew not what had happened, thought that they were still following their leader to their destination, and ran on full pelt behind them. Ere the third step was reached, half a dozen had fallen headlong, and half a score came toppling over these. Oaths and groans mingled with the cries of those who still pushed on behind, but Reginald Talbot neither spoke nor fell. The fingers that had closed about his neck clutched his throat also, while at the same time they kept him up, though his legs used a speed which they had never before attained to; they took their four and even five steps at a time. Fortunately for him, and perhaps for his custodian also, the great door at the foot of the staircase was open to the street, and when they reached it Frank simply let his companion go, who, bereft of sense, though by no means of motion, fell face foremost, with the most frightful violence, into a mud heap. A friendly pillar brought Dennis himself to anchorage, who then quietly turned and entered the theatre by another way.

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Thanks to his presence of mind and strength of body, the house was now freed of its more dangerous elements, and an attempt was being made to finish the play, though almost in dumb show. Mrs. Jordan, though greatly agitated, had even the courage to speak the epilogue, and for the first time found her graces and witcheries of no avail. Margaret would have stayed to say a few words of love and confidence to William Henry, but Mr. Erin hurried her away.

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'It was a planned thing,' he kept murmuring on the way home in the hackney-coach. 'There was a plot to damn the play; that devil Malone was at the bottom of it.'

But Margaret was not thinking of Malone, nor even of the play, concerning which, though she heard them not, there were reports, besides its failure, of misadventure and even death. She was thinking of Willie, and why he did not come home to be comforted. The two sat down alone to supper, of which neither could touch a mouthful; the antiquary full of woeful thoughts, the girl with only one question in her mind, 'Why does he not come?'

The maid thought she had seen him at the door when her mistress got out of the carriage; there was certainly some young man with his hat pulled over his eyes, who had watched her into the house, and having, as it seemed, assured himself of her safety, had walked away. It was possible of course that this might have been Willie, but whither had he gone?

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'It is no use your waiting for William Henry,' said the antiquary roughly; 'why don't you eat?'

She noticed that her uncle no longer spoke of 'Samuel,' and the change jarred upon her feelings, already strained and tried. It was no fault of Willie's that the play had not succeeded, and it was cruel to visit such a misfortune upon his innocent head.

'It is only natural that I should be anxious about him,' she returned with some touch of resentment.

'Pooh, pooh! why should you be anxious? He is no doubt supping with one of the players.'

His indifferent words struck her like a blow at random. Was it conceivable, after what had happened that evening, that Willie should prefer the society of another to her own? Above all, was it possible that that one should be Mrs. Jordan? She could not but notice how Flavia had fought for the play, and had hardly known whether to admire or detest her for it. If she had been in her place, and could have done it, she would have fought for it too, but then she would have an adequate motive. Why should that woman have dared so much for it when the others had performed their parts in so sluggish and perfunctory a manner? It must have been because she had her heart in it. And who could have their heart in a mere stage-play, a thing at the best full of fictitious woes and imaginary heroes? There must have been human love—or what such creatures took for love—to have enlisted her in its cause. Oh, why did not Willie come?

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As the night wore on apprehensions for her lover's personal safety took the place of these jealous fears. What might not despair and disappointment have induced him to do? In her wretchedness and need of sympathy and consolation, she ventured to hint at this

to Mr. Erin.

'It is surely very odd, uncle. Willie ought to be home by this time at all events. Should we not send somewhere?'

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'What nonsense! Whither should we send, and why? The lad is old enough to take care of himself.'

'But perhaps in his dejection and—and—misery, uncle, he might not have any care of himself.'

'Tush! he is not of that sort. He has much too high an opinion of his own value to throw himself away—into the river, for instance. That such an idea should have entered your mind, however, shows what an unstable fellow you think him; and in some ways—though not in that way—he *is* unstable. He is but a boy, after all, and a spoilt boy. I take blame to myself that I suffered him to entertain the delusion that he was fit to take to himself a wife. It was conditional indeed upon certain contingencies which have not taken place, so that the whole affair is null and void.'

'Uncle!' Margaret rose from her chair, and with white face and flashing eyes confronted the old man.

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'Of course it's null and void,' he went on, flattening the tobacco in his pipe with its stopper, and affecting an indifferent air. 'A bargain's a bargain, though indeed, as I have said, it is one that I should never have entered into in any case, but the mere vulgar question of ways and means now puts an end to the matter. Of course he looked for material results from the "Vortigern." It will now not keep the stage another night, while the publication of the play is rendered worthless. It is not his fault, of course; I don't blame him. It is not in mortals to command success. There is nothing for him now but to return to the conveyancing business; and in ten years or so there is no knowing but that he may step into old Bingley's shoes.'

'And I?' cried Margaret bitterly. 'What am I to do? To wait for him?'

'Certainly not; that would be hopeless indeed. The best thing you can possibly do just at present is to—I shall make arrangements for his lodging elsewhere out of harm's way—is to begin to forget all about him.'

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'Forget him—forget Willie? How can I?'

'By thinking of somebody else,' returned the antiquary coolly: 'that I have heard is the best way. At all events it will have to be done.'

'Do you think then a woman's heart is like a seal, uncle, on which an image is impressed, and which, held to some fierce flame—as mine seems to be, Heaven help me, this moment—it straightway becomes a blank ready for the reception of another image? Oh, no, no, I will wait ten years for Willie, if it be necessary, but I will never forget him.'

'He'll forget *you* in half the time,' was the dry rejoinder.

'You speak falsely as well as cruelly, uncle,' said Margaret passionately.

There had been a time when even passion could not have nerved her to speak so boldly to the antiquary; and there had been a time when if she had dared to do so the old man would have put down his foot upon such passion and crunched the sparks out. But just now Margaret was too full of her misery and the sense of wrong to care what she said, while her uncle on his part, though he was fully resolved to put an end to his niece's engagement with William Henry, could not at once resume the relative position to her he had occupied before it was mooted.

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'As to my speaking falsely concerning William Henry's fidelity,' he answered quietly, 'time alone can prove that: and there will be certainly plenty of time; while as to cruelty I really cannot accuse myself of having been cruel.'

'What! when you have allowed the mutual love between your son and me for months to ripen without censure? When you have heard him call me his own ten times a day, and never reproved him for it. When you have thrown us together and left us together? And now because something has not succeeded, of the success of which you made sure, do you wish to tear us asunder and bid us forget one another. And then, oh shame, do you dare to say you are not cruel?'

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The old man made her no reply, perhaps his conscience pricked him in the matter, or perhaps he perceived that it was useless to argue with her in her present excited state.

'Have you any fault to find with Willie?' she continued reproachfully. 'Has he not done all he could do in this unfortunate affair? What has happened to the "Vortigern" that he could help or hinder? Do you suppose he has deceived you because it has not succeeded?'

'Of course not,' put in the antiquary testily; 'the boy is honest enough, no doubt; but one must look at things from a reasonable point of view. Come, come, we can talk of these things to-morrow. It is getting late. Let us to bed.'

She answered not a word, but sat with her face bowed down on the table and hidden in her hands, while he took up his candle and left her. She remained in the same position for many minutes, when suddenly there came a gentle knock, a mere tap, at the front door. She was on her feet in a moment, with her long hair loose behind her ears, listening. It was not Willie's knock, she knew, but it might be news of Willie. The clock on the mantelpiece had just struck two. Then came the tap again; this time a little more distinct. It was evident that her uncle had not heard it, and the servant had long gone to bed. There were many bad characters abroad in the street in those times, restrained by a very inefficient constabulary, but Margaret did not hesitate to obey this second summons. She went to the door and undid the fastenings without making the least noise.

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A woman stood on the step, to judge by her figure a young one, but her face was hidden in her hood.

'You are Margaret?' she said, in clear sweet tones mingled with an ineffable pity.

'I am,' she answered, with a dreadful fear at her heart. She felt that some messenger of evil tidings stood before her.

'I thought so; I felt sure that you would be sitting up for him,' murmured the other softly.

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'Where is he? Is he ill? Why does he not come home?' gasped Margaret.

'He is not ill, but he cannot come home. Let me in, and I will tell you all.'

With a gentle pressure, for Margaret's instinct was to oppose her, the visitor made her way into the house. 'Let me see you quite alone,' she said; 'somewhere where we cannot be interrupted. I have news for your private ear—I am sorry to say, bad news.'

'And who are you?' Margaret's voice was antagonistic, almost defiant. She resented this woman's coming beyond all measure, but the fear within her compelled her to listen to what she might have to say.

'I am Mrs. Jordan,' was the quiet reply.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MESSENGER OF DISGRACE.



HOSE words, 'I am Mrs. Jordan,' were not unexpected by Margaret. There was no need for her visitor to speak them or to throw back her hood; she had known her from the first. Whatever evil news there was to tell, it was made ten times worse by the messenger that brought it. She felt like Antony's wife in the presence of Cleopatra. 'You have been his ruin,' were the words that trembled on her lips. But there was something in the other's tone that prevented their utterance. That it was a beautiful face was nothing; she detested and abhorred its beauty. That it was full of sympathy and compassion was nothing; she resented its compassion as an insult. But there was also sorrow in it, genuine and unmistakable sorrow. Whatever wrong this woman had done her—so Margaret reasoned—she had repented of; perhaps

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had come to confess, when it was too late, but still to confess. There were tears in her eyes; she was an actress it is true, but they were real tears.

'Well, what is it you want, madam?'

'Nothing. I am here on your account, not on my own.'

'And Willie sent you?'

She uttered this with great bitterness, experiencing the same sort of satisfaction in the humiliation it cost her, as some persons in physical pain derive from the self-infliction of another pain.

'He did not send me: he does not even know that I am here.'

'But you come from him. You have been with him after he left the theatre?'

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'Yes, for hours; two long miserable hours.'

'And you dare to tell me that?'

'Yes. Oh, Margaret—for that is the only name I know you by—put away from you, I beseech you, all thoughts that wrong him. He has sinned enough—Heaven help him—to answer for, but not such as you would impute to him. He is faithful to you and despairing.'

'What do you mean? Why should he despair?' The other's words had somewhat disarmed her, the gentleness and pity in her companion's looks had won upon her in spite of herself. The woman was certainly not there to exult over her. It was a bitter reflection that her lover had not come straight to her; that he had sought a go-between (and such a go-between!) to speak for him. But that sad word 'despairing' altered matters in other respects. What Willie in his modesty and self-denunciation doubtless feared, was not only that Mr. Erin would stick to the letter of his agreement respecting his consent to his son's marriage (which, indeed, he had just announced his intention to do), but that she herself would assent to his change of views; that the idea of waiting, probably for years, until William Henry should have made sufficient means upon which to marry, would be abhorrent to her; that, in a word, her love for him did not comprehend hope and patience. It was possible indeed that his omission to come in person arose from delicacy of mind, and the disinclination to embarrass her by a personal appeal; and as for his choice of an intermediary he had perhaps but poured out his woes into the ears of the first person who had professed to sympathise with them, and who, it must be confessed, had shown him kindness. And yet how mistaken the dear lad had been in supposing for a moment that mere misfortune—the ill success of the play—could cut the bonds that bound her heart to his! It had had an effect indeed, but it was only to strengthen them, for when the object of a woman's love is in adversity, he becomes the more dear to her in proportion to the difficulties by which he is surrounded. Since his love was as genuine as her own, he ought indeed to have known as much. And that he should despair of her! Well, indeed, might she ask with much amazement, 'What do you mean? Why

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should he despair?’

But Mrs. Jordan’s pretty face only grew more grave and sad.

‘I wish to heaven, my dear girl,’ she said, ‘that I could use another word. If you knew the pain it costs me to come here and see you face to face, and tell you what I have to tell, you would pity me—if you shall presently have any pity to spare, save for your unhappy self and your still more wretched Willie.’ The earnestness and fervour of her tone, and its solemnity, which seemed to prepare the way for the revelation of some overwhelming misfortune, made Margaret’s blood run cold.

‘You said that he was not ill,’ she murmured hoarsely, ‘and yet he has not come home. He is not dead? Oh, tell me that my Willie is not dead?’

‘He is not dead, Margaret, but there are worse things that happen to those we love than death. Worse things than even when you thought the worst of your Willie and of me.’

‘Great heaven, how you terrify me! Tell me what has happened in one word.’

‘That is impossible, or, if it were possible, you would never, without proof, believe it. I must begin at the beginning. You know what happened to-night—the failure of the play; the peril only just averted, that threatened your uncle and yourself.’

Margaret shook her head, not so much in denial as in indifference. ‘What mattered anything that had threatened herself, even though the menace had been carried out?’

‘Is it possible that you are unaware of your escape to-night? How the rioters, led by an enemy of you and yours, were rushing to your box, when some young fellow threw himself between it and them; how he seized their leader by the throat, at risk of his own life, and threw him down the stairs, and how all the rest of them came tumbling after him?’

If the actress hoped to lead her companion’s mind into other channels, to interest her for one instant in any subject save that supreme one in which her whole soul was wrapped, her endeavour failed.

‘But Willie?’ murmured Margaret impatiently. ‘Why do you speak of anything save Willie?’

‘That will come soon enough. Too soon, dear girl. I must needs tell you it as it all happened. He was behind the scenes, you know, throughout the evening. At first, things seemed to be going pretty well in spite of the opposition; but he was never very hopeful, even then, as he afterwards told me. The greatness of the reward which would be his in case of the success of the play—that is, his claiming you for his own—oppressed him; it seemed too high a fortune even though he had felt himself to be deserving of it.’

‘He *is* deserving of it, and of better fortune,’ put in Margaret quietly.

Mrs. Jordan took no notice of the interruption. ‘He seemed depressed and downhearted from the first,’ she continued, ‘though Mrs. Powell and myself said all we could to encourage him. Presently, amid the tempest of disapprobation, he recognised a particular voice—the voice of an enemy; of the same person, I have no doubt, who urged on the mob to your box. From that moment he seemed to give up all hope. “That man is come to ruin me!” he said; and he spoke the truth.’

‘It was Reginald Talbot,’ exclaimed Margaret suddenly. ‘Frank always warned Willie against him. The vile, treacherous wretch!’

‘Yes, it was Reginald Talbot—a base creature enough, no doubt; but honest people, Margaret, are not ruined by anything the base can say or shout. We must be base ourselves to enable them to ruin us.’

Margaret rose from her chair. ‘I do not understand you, Mrs. Jordan. I thought that you were speaking of my Willie.’

‘Listen, Margaret. Keep calm and listen; I would give half of what I have in the world to spare you, but it must be told.’

‘I will hear no evil of Willie.’

‘You shall hear, at least, nothing that has not fallen from his own lips. When he showed such fear of his enemy, I reproached him for his lack of courage, and through a gap in the stage curtain pointed you out to him as you sat in your box, exposed to all those shouts and jeers, and apparently unmoved by them. But the sight of you

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only seemed to depress him still more.'

"That is the last I shall see of my Margaret," he said; "I have lost her for ever." And again he spoke the truth.'

'He did not,' cried Margaret vehemently; 'he only thought he spoke it. He imagined because the play had failed that I should give him back his troth. But what is the play to me? My heart is his; I can wait for him. We are still very young; what need is there for despair?'

'That is what I thought, that is what I said,' returned Mrs. Jordan pitifully, 'because I was in the dark, as you are. I said, "It will matter nothing to Margaret, if she really loves you; you will still be the same to her."

"No, I shall not," he answered; "I can never be the same to her. If not to-night, to-morrow, if not to-morrow, the next day, that villain yonder will unmask me; she will know me for what I am, and loathe me."

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'I had to leave him then, to speak the epilogue, and when I returned, he looked like one who had utterly lost heart and hope. No one troubled himself about him. Mrs. Powell had gone away, and the others departed, cursing the play and all who had had any hand in its production. I dared not leave him to himself, and besought him to go home at once. "I have no home," he said; then I took him to my own house.'

'That was good of you,' murmured Margaret, pale as death.

Then Mrs. Jordan knew that the worst was over; that what she had to tell, however sad and terrible, would fall upon ears prepared to hear it. And yet even now she could not tell her right out, 'Your Willie is a cheat and a liar.'

'In the carriage the poor fellow sat like a dead man, huddled in one corner, without speech and motion; but once within doors, I insisted on his taking some wine, which revived him a little. "You cannot stop here," I said, speaking to him as severely as I could, for kindness only seemed to unnerve him; "I will send out and get you a bed at some inn. But if it will be any comfort to you to relieve your mind, I am ready to hear whatever you have to say." He made a movement towards his breast-pocket which filled me with apprehensions. "If you have a pistol there," I said, "give it to me at once. Whatever you may have done, however you may have wronged Margaret, you will surely not add self-slaughter to your other sins? You will not break her heart by killing yourself?"

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"No, no," he murmured; "it is not that."

'I found it was impossible to get any connected narrative out of him, so I put a question or two.

"Who is this enemy of yours, and why should it be in his power to harm you?"

"Because he knows my secret—my shameful secret. His name is Reginald Talbot, and he was at one time my friend. We quarrelled about some poems of his, and from that moment he has done his best to ruin me. He tried to prove that I had forged one of the Shakespeare papers, and failed in it; he pretended to be satisfied at the time with the evidence in the matter, as the others were, but from that moment he dogged my footsteps. He is a sneaking, prying hound.

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"One day, when I was at work in my chambers, forging manuscripts, I saw his face at my window; he had climbed up to it by a ladder, and perceived what I was about. There was no hope of concealment any longer, so I unlocked the door and let him in. I told him all—it is a long story, but it is written here (again he touched his breast-pocket), and besought him to have mercy upon me. His heart was like the nether millstone, as I knew it would be. He asked me with a sneer what I should do now, and whether I had any new treasure of Shakespeare's with which to enrich the world. I told him of the 'Vortigern,' which I was then projecting, but which, of course, it was now in his power to put a stop to. Then he proposed a compromise. He was very vain of his verses, and he undertook, upon condition that he was allowed to write some portion of the play himself, to keep silence upon the matter. He had the same mad desire that I had, that the world should take his poetry to be from Shakespeare's pen. I consented of course, for I had no choice. All his wrath against me seemed to have evaporated at once. He was intensely pleased; and from that time we worked together. Moreover, when the committee appointed to decide upon the

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genuineness of the Shakespeare manuscripts hesitated to accept them because there was no other witness to their discovery save myself, Talbot came forward, as we had agreed that he should do, and deposed that he had seen my patron from the Temple, and the collection from which the paper had been taken. His evidence carried the day and assured me of my position. On the other hand, Talbot wrote so feebly that I felt convinced not a line of his would survive criticism, and, unknown to him, I composed the whole play independently of his assistance.

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“He had to leave London for Ireland, so I had no difficulty in deceiving him in this matter. We corresponded in cipher about it, and I led him to imagine that the ‘Vortigern,’ as accepted in Drury Lane, was the play that we had composed together. I thought if it were successful that I should be in a position to defy him, and that only those who were already my enemies would believe his story. He had told me that it was impossible for him to be in London the first night of its performance, and I flattered myself that I was quite safe. The instant I recognised his voice in the theatre, I felt that all was over with me. He would find out the absence of his own rhapsodies from the drama; and that I had deceived him, as indeed I had—whom have I not deceived? From that moment my fate was sealed.”

“Unhappy boy!” cried I; “is it possible, then, that you acknowledge yourself to be a forger and a cheat?”

“I do,” he answered; “here is the record of my transgression.”

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‘He took from his breast-pocket this paper, his confession, which, it appears, he always carried about with him; an imprudence which would have been unintelligible in any one else, but to him who had trodden, as it were, every day on the crust of a volcano, it mattered little. I felt sure at once that this was written for your eye, Margaret, in case of discovery; thus, to the very last, some will say, the straightforward course was the one he was disinclined to take. But let us rather believe that to tell you of his own unworthiness to your face was an ordeal beyond his strength. In vain I represented to him the anxiety and apprehensions which his absence must be exciting at home.

“I have no home,” was his reply. “But think of your father!” “I have no father,” was his miserable rejoinder. “But Margaret; have you no pity for Margaret?” “I cannot see her. I dare not see her,” was his pitiful cry. So I have come to you instead of him.’

Margaret answered nothing. She sat with the confession in her hand, without sign or word, looking straight before her.

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‘I must go now,’ continued her companion tenderly. ‘If I can be of any use, if I can say anything for you; a word of forgiveness with your farewell—he is but seventeen, remember—well, another time, perhaps.’ She had reached the door when Margaret called her back with a pitiful cry.

‘Kiss me! kiss me!’

As their lips met, the touch of sympathy, like Moses’ wand, drew the tears from that face of marble, whereby, even though she left no hope and the bitter conviction of a wasted love behind her, the messenger of pity knew that she had not come altogether in vain.

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CHAPTER XXXII.

THE FEET OF CLAY.

It is a terrible thing to be left alone with one's dead, and this might in some sort be said to have been Margaret's case when Mrs. Jordan had departed. Her Willie had become as dead to her; all that was left of him was the shameful record that lay upon the table before her. Never more—save once—was she to see his face again in this life, nor did she desire to do so. She would have shrunk from his hand had he offered it to her, and the touch of his lips would have been contamination. He had obtained her kisses as it were under false pretences, and she flushed with shame when she thought of them. She did not conceal from herself that his behaviour up to the very last had been in keeping with his whole career. He should have come in person, whatever it had cost him, and confessed his guilt, and not have left her a prey to unfounded terrors. It was cowardly and base and selfish. Miserable as she had been on his account an hour ago, she was now infinitely more wretched. It was better to have thought him dead—and honest, than to know he was alive and a cheat. 'He is only seventeen, remember,' had been Mrs. Jordan's words in appeal to her charity and pity, but they found no response in Margaret's bosom. 'One can forgive anything at seventeen,' was her reflection, 'save hypocrisy and deceit.' She forgave him as a very charitable person might forgive a cardsharp; there was no malice nor hatred in her heart against him, but she could never take him to her heart again.

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Was it possible, she wondered, that he could have been always base? When he had made that passionate protestation in Anne Hathaway's garden, for example, and besought her only to keep her heart free for him for a little time, to give him a chance of proving himself worthy of her; had he had this hateful plan of fraud and falsehood in his mind even then? If he was not to be believed *then*, if what he said then was not the utterance of genuine love and honesty, what word of man was to be credited? And if he was honest then, when did he begin to lie?

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It had been her intention not to read this hateful paper; to commit it to the flames; but a sort of terrible curiosity now urged her to peruse it. She had no expectation of finding in it any mitigation of her lost lover's conduct; any plea for pardon or even for pity. She had no wish to hear what he had to say for himself; only a certain morbid interest in it.

Yet as she opened the manuscript and her eyes fell on the well-known handwriting, they filled with unbidden tears. Great heavens! how she had believed in him, how she had loved him! Nay, how she had sympathised unwittingly with his very frauds, and longed and prayed for their success. *Prayed* for it—the thought of this especially appalled her. She found herself, for the first time, face to face with the mystery of life; with the difficulties of spiritual things. It is strange enough (what happens often enough), that we should fall on our knees and implore the divine assistance to avert misfortunes from our dear ones that (if we did but know) have already happened; but that we should implore it (if we did but know) on behalf of falsehood, fraud—with the intent to prosper wickedness! This man, among his other villainies, almost made her doubt of the goodness of God!

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The manuscript was voluminous. It was written in the form of a diary, but interspersed with reflections and protestations.

'I protest,' it began, 'that I had no premeditated design or the idea of any continued course of duplicity when my first error—the production of the Hemynge note of hand—was committed.'

'He calls it "an error,"' thought Margaret with a moan, and indeed the opening remark was the keynote of the whole composition, significant of all that was to come. He had been weak, it avowed, but never wicked; the victim not so much of temptation, but of overwhelming circumstances. 'You know, Margaret—'

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This unexpected personal appeal came upon her like a thunderclap; it was as though in that solitary room and in that solemn hour when night and morning were about to meet, his very voice had addressed her. 'You know, Margaret, what sort of relations existed at that time between Mr. Erin and myself: how,

though he permitted me to pass as his son, he was far from having any paternal feelings towards me; that he had no sympathy with my tastes, no interest in my doings, and that he grudged me the cost of my very maintenance. Was it so very reprehensible that, having attempted in vain to gain his affection by the usual road to a father's heart, by diligence and duty, that I looked about me for some other way? Knowing his passion for any reliques of Shakespeare, it struck me that I might conciliate him by affecting to discover that of which he was always in search. I do not seek to justify what I did, but there was surely some extenuation for it.

'To show you how little of settled purpose there was in the matter, I took that note of hand, before presentation to your uncle, to Mr. Lavine, the bookseller, in New Inn Passage, and showed him the document for his opinion. He said it seemed to him to have been written a good many years ago (taking for granted that it was an imitation), but that the ink was not what it should be. He told me that he could give me a mixture much more like old ink if it was my humour to produce the semblance of antiquity, and immediately mixed together in a bottle three different liquids used by book-binders in marbling covers, and this I always henceforth used. I have applied to him again and again for more ink: a circumstance I mention not only to show the simplicity of the means employed in these so-called forgeries of mine, but also the everyday risks I ran of discovery. Do you think I could have endured such a position, had I been merely actuated by the motive I have mentioned? Could human nature have borne it? No, Margaret, I was sustained by a far higher ambition, for a man may strive for a reward unworthily, and even though he is aware that he does not deserve it.'

The calmness of this reasoning appalled Margaret even more by its speciousness than by its falseness. Her instinct, though she knew nothing of these abstract matters, told her that such philosophy was rotten at the core.

'The imitation of that note of hand was a false step I admit,' continued the writer, 'but it succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations. It altered my relations with Mr. Erin entirely, which of itself encouraged me to new deceptions; but above all it became a basis on which to build my hopes of your becoming my wife. Hitherto I had loved you, Margaret, passionately, devotedly indeed, but with little hopes of ever winning you. When I obtained that promise from your dear lips in the garden at Shottery, it was not merely with the selfish intention of excluding for a few months from your heart the rival whom I feared; I believed, as I still believe, that my talents were of a high order, and I thought that at no distant date they would meet with public recognition; that some of that praise, in short, which I have gained under false pretences would have been accorded to my own legitimate efforts. The time during which you promised to keep yourself free for me, however, was now drawing to a close, and I felt that I had not advanced a single step on the road to either fame or fortune. I was madly in love with you. I felt that you were slipping out of the reach of my arms, and the terrible temptation suggested itself to secure you by the means that had already gained me so much in so unlooked-for a manner. If I could only make myself necessary to your uncle by ministering to his ruling passion, perhaps he would give his consent (which otherwise I well knew could never be obtained) to our immediate union. Not greed, I swear it, no, nor even the desire of recognition (though only as it were by proxy) for my genius, were my inducements to persevere in my course—

Love only was my call,
And if I lost thy love, I lost my all.'

It was terrible to Margaret to read such words; they almost made her feel as though she had been a confederate in the delinquencies of this unhappy boy. Terrible, too, was the appearance, under dates, of his particular acts of forgery, each set down in a matter-of-fact and methodical manner, and concerning which the total absence of penitence and self-reprobatation was less painful to her than the fallacious self-justification in which he had indulged elsewhere.

'Nov. 2nd.—Love-letter and verses to Anne Hathaway. Five stanzas and a braid of hair. Hair a *gage d'amour* from a young playmate; the silk that bound it had attached the seals to some old deed. It was thickly woven and twisted in some peculiar manner, which I judged would suggest antiquity.

'Nov. 7th.—Playhouse receipts. String for them, some worsted thread taken out of some old tapestry in the waiting-room of the House of Lords, where I went to hear his Majesty's speech with Mr. Erin.

'Dec. 2nd.—The Profession of Faith. My most ambitious performance (except the play). I solemnly affirm that but for the praises bestowed upon my good fortune (as it was held) on the previous occasions, I should have hesitated to compose this document. On the other hand, you know, Margaret, how earnestly desirous Mr. Erin always was that Shakespeare should be proved to have been a Protestant; if I could please him in this I thought that my way to his heart would be made easy indeed. Moreover, I had myself the most rooted objection to anything like bigotry or superstition. In penning the Profession I formed the twelve letters contained in the Christian and surname of Shakespeare as much as possible to resemble those in his original autographs, but as for the rest I was only careful to produce as many doubleyous and esses as possible. It was a most simple performance, and executed with so little prudence that (as you remember) the word "leffee" was introduced instead of "leafless." Nor did I take much more trouble with the composition itself. When, therefore, I heard Dr. Warton pronounce such an eulogium upon it—"Sir, we have many fine things in our Church Service, and our Litany abounds with beauties; but here, sir, is a man who has distanced us all"—it is hardly to be wondered at that I was intoxicated with so unexpected a success. It corroborated very strongly the high estimation in which I had always held my talents, and I resolved, since the world would not recognise them in my proper person, to compel it to acknowledge them under another name. If I was not so great as Shakespeare—and indeed I have sometimes believed myself to be so—I had at all events a soul akin to him.'

The inordinate and monstrous vanity of this remark did not escape Margaret's notice, but it did not give her the pain that his other reflections had done; it even afforded some palliation of his deplorable conduct. The approbation of so many learned men, deceived by a great name, had been evidently taken by him as an involuntary recognition of his own genius, and in a manner turned his head. She tried to persuade herself that he henceforth at least became in some degree irresponsible for his own actions.

'It was about this time,' the confession continued, 'that I was almost ruined by the treachery and malignity of Reginald Talbot, for it was he, you remember, who induced Mr. Albany Wallis to confront me with a genuine signature of John Hemynge. I look upon that as the most dangerous peril I had yet encountered, and, at the same time, the cause of my greatest triumph. It seemed incredible, and no wonder, that I should have produced within the space of one hour and a quarter (including the time spent in going and coming, as was supposed, to the Temple, but in reality to my own rooms at the New Inn), a facsimile of the other John Hemynge's handwriting, unless it had been a genuine document. By that time I had become an adept in imitation, and could also retain in my recollection the form of letters in any autograph which I had once beheld. I brought back a deed sufficiently similar to the original to set all Mr. Wallis's doubts at rest. It did not, however, satisfy my own mind, and that very evening I executed another deed more carefully, which I substituted for the former one, and which stood the test of all future examinations. From that moment indeed, save those who had been my enemies from the first, and who probably never would have believed in the Shakespeare manuscripts, even though they had been really genuine, I had no serious opponent, with one exception, and for some reason or another of his own, he has never shown himself antagonistic to me.'

There was much more of it; the whole composition of the 'Vortigern' was described, with Talbot's connection with it, just as it had been narrated by Mrs. Jordan. But what chiefly engaged Margaret's thoughts, and caused her to refer to it again and again, was that allusion of William Henry's to that one person who, not belonging to the Malone faction, had all along discredited his statements, though, 'for some reason or another of his own, he had not shown himself antagonistic.' This was certainly not Talbot, who had shown himself antagonistic enough, nor was it evidently any confidant of the unhappy boy's. It could, therefore, only have been Frank Dennis; he had, she well remembered, always kept silence when the question of the manuscripts was mentioned, and had even

incurred Mr. Erin's indignation by doing so. But his nature was so frank and open that she could not understand how he could have tacitly countenanced such a fraud had he been really convinced that it was being enacted. It was curious, considering the great distress and perturbation of her mind, that a matter so comparatively small should have thus intruded itself; but it did so.

Otherwise, as may well be imagined, her thoughts had bitter food enough provided for them. That whole night long Margaret never sought her couch. The revelation of the worthlessness of her lover, made by his own hand, and, what was worse, made in no spirit of penitence or remorse, put sleep far from her eyes, and filled her soul with wretchedness. If the thought that things might have been worse can afford consolation, that indeed she had, for William Henry might have married her. If the play had been successful, and if Reginald Talbot had held his tongue, and indeed if he had not held it—for she would never have disbelieved in her Willie had he not torn the mask from his face with his own hand—she might have become William Henry's wife! The very idea of it chilled her blood. Bound to a liar, a cheat, a forger, by an indissoluble bond for life! Vowed to love, revere, and honour a man the baseness of whose nature she would have been certain to have discovered sooner or later, but in any case too late! She had been saved from that at least; and yet how terrible was the blow that had been inflicted upon her!

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Sad it is to be left alone with our dead, how much sadder to be left alone, after they have died, with the revelation of their baseness, to find our love has been wasted on an unworthy object, our reverence paid to a false god. In Margaret's case matters were still worse, for she could not even keep the revelation to herself; she had not the miserable satisfaction that some bereaved ones have when they chance upon the proof of a once loved one's shame, of concealing it. It was necessary that she should tell Mr. Erin, and in revealing the fraud of which he had been the victim, what misery was she about to inflict upon him! How the whole fabric of the old man's pride would be shattered to the dust, and how triumphantly would his enemies trample upon it.

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

BREAKING IT.

As Margaret and her uncle sat at breakfast the next morning—later than usual, as was their wont on Sundays—scarce a word was interchanged between them. Her pale face and haggard eyes evoked no remark from him, who, indeed, himself looked pale and worn enough. If he had spoken upon the subject of the play it might have been made easier to her to tell him her dreadful tidings. But as it was, she felt herself unequal to the task; she could not break in upon his gloomy thoughts with such black news. She almost hoped, from his set lips and knitted brow, that he suspected something of the truth; otherwise surely, surely, she thought, he would express some anxiety concerning the continued absence of William Henry.

She was, however, mistaken. Where affection is not concerned, even the catastrophes that happen to others (and much less the apprehensions of them) do not concern us so much as our own material interests. [240]

After a mere pretence of a meal, the antiquary produced pen and ink, and proceeded to make some calculations.

In the middle of them arrived Mr. Albany Wallis. His face was even graver than usual, which his host, however, thought natural enough. He took it for granted that he had come upon business connected with the play, the failure of which was sufficient to account for his depression; or his melancholy, perhaps, might have been put on with a view of cheapening the terms that had been agreed upon with his employers. But Margaret felt, the first instant she caught sight of the visitor's face, that he knew all, and did not need that dumb assurance of human sympathy, the close, lingering pressure of his hand, to convince her of it.

'This is a bad job,' said Mr. Erin, with a pretence of briskness. 'I suppose Sheridan will not give the play another chance?' [241]

'Certainly not,' said Mr. Wallis decisively. 'Almeyda is on the bill for to-morrow.'

'Then there is nothing for it but to settle, and have done with it. It is quite as great a disappointment to me as to the management, I do assure you, and eventually will be as great a loss. I have ordered the paper for the publication of the play, and must needs go on with it. I cannot break faith with the public.'

'You are a man of honour, I know,' said Mr. Wallis gently; 'but for that very reason you must not print this play.'

'And why not, sir?'

'Because it is spurious.'

'That was not your opinion yesterday, Mr. Wallis, nor is it mine to-day. What, because a few scoundrels have bespattered it, and done their best to make it a failure, and succeeded, you call it spurious!'

'Mr. Erin, I entreat you to be calm. I am as sorry for what has happened as you can be, though not, perhaps' (here he stole a tender look at Margaret), 'for the same reason.' [242]

'It needs no ghost from the grave to assure me of that much,' replied the antiquary derisively. 'You have your own interests, and those of your employers, to look to, and I have mine. You are here, as I conclude, to pay me the three hundred pounds agreed upon for the play and half the profits of the first night. The house was full enough, at all events.'

'Yes, it was a good house. Your share of the adventure is a hundred and five pounds exactly. I have therefore to pay you four hundred and five pounds.'

'Very good; I cannot permit any deductions. If it was worth while to discuss the matter, I might on my part reasonably make complaint of the manner in which the play was acted. Kemble never gave it a fair chance. At Covent Garden it would have had more justice done to it, and might have met with a better fate.'

'Then it would have met with a fate that it did not deserve, Mr. Erin.'

'I do not wish to discuss the subject,' said the antiquary curtly. His reply would probably have been much less courteous but for the production of the bills—Mr. Sheridan paid everything in bills—for [243]

the amount in question. Bills and banknotes are the best 'soft answers' for the turning away of wrath.

'You misunderstand me altogether, Mr. Erin,' continued the other with dignity. 'I had no intention, as you seem to have apprehended, of disturbing your business arrangements with Mr. Sheridan, which may be taken as concluded. I am sorry to say I am come here upon a much more unpleasant errand. I am here at the request of your son, William Henry.'

'Ah! I see,' broke in the antiquary with bitterness; 'his professional adviser. He shall not have one penny more than the share—one-third of the profits—that has been agreed upon.'

Then he turned to Margaret.

'So you have told him my determination of last night, have you, and he meets it by a declaration of war? Let him do as he pleases; but I warn you, hussey, that if once you throw in your lot with his, I have done with you. The money that is his by rights is not much, as you will find, to keep house upon.'

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Margaret strove to speak, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. It was shocking to see the old man's rage, and none the less so because it was so misdirected. If his passion was so aroused by the mere opposition (as he supposed it to be) to his will, how would he take the destruction of his hopes, and the knowledge that he had been made a public laughing-stock? Whatever he had been to others, he had been kind to her; and, abhorrent to her as was the crime of ingratitude, she would have been willing to rest under its imputation if by so doing she could have spared him the revelation of the truth.

'Dear uncle,' she presently murmured, with faltering voice, and laying her little hand upon the old man's arm, 'you wrong me in your thoughts; but that is nothing as compared with the wrong which has been done to *you*. All between William Henry and me is over; for the rest of my life I will endeavour to supply his place with you, and to remedy, as far as in me lies, the evil that he has committed against you.'

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'What is it? What is she saying? I do not understand,' inquired the antiquary in trembling tones.

'She is telling you the truth, sir,' said Mr. Wallis impressively. 'Heaven send you the strength to bear it!'

'Dear uncle, you have been deceived,' said Margaret with tender gravity. 'From first to last you have been deceived, as we all have been. The Shakespeare manuscripts, of which you thought so much, are forgeries—every one of them. William Henry has confessed it.'

'You lie, you baggage, you lie!' he cried with fury.

'I wish I did,' sighed Margaret bitterly.

He did not hear her; there was a singing in his ears that shut out all other sounds.

'So this is the last card you have to play, you two, is it? I am to be frightened into compliance with your wishes; frightened into annihilating common sense, and making two beggars happy! And you, *you*, sir!' he added, turning to Mr. Wallis; 'you are not ashamed to be a confederate in such a scheme as this? These two young fools think it is for their sake, but I know better. You are one of Malone's creatures. Having already failed by fair means to disprove the genuineness of these manuscripts, you have bought over this ungrateful lad to your side. "If you will perjure yourself," you have said to him, "and admit yourself to be a forger, we will see that you do not lose by it; we will give you money—since the old man will not—upon which you and yours can subsist together." Oh, liars and villains!'

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It was pitiful to see and hear him. King Lear himself, deserted by his own flesh and blood and invoking heaven's vengeance on them, could hardly have been a more dreadful spectacle.

'Mr. Erin,' said Mr. Wallis gravely, 'if you see me in no way moved by the infamous accusation you have made against me, and even restraining a still more natural indignation at the dishonour your words have cast upon that innocent girl, it is not because I do not feel it; it is because I pity you from the bottom of my heart. That you have been duped and fooled by the falsehood of this unhappy young man is only what has happened to others, myself amongst them; but in your own case the reflection must be infinitely more bitter, since he who wrought the wrong was your own flesh and blood—one who has taken your bread, and bitten the hand that fed

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him. If you do not believe us, Miss Margaret has his own words for it in black and white.'

Here Margaret drew the confession from her bosom, and laid it on the table beside her uncle; his fingers were grasping the arms of his chair, and his face was fixed full upon his visitor in hate and rage.

'If you will read it at your leisure,' continued the lawyer gently, 'you will at least have the satisfaction of knowing that, with one exception, no one has had any hand in this shameful fraud save the miserable lad himself; that your niece was as innocent of any knowledge in it, from first to last, as you were; so much even those who have been inclined to suspect you of any connivance in it must needs acknowledge when they read that paper——'

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Mr. Erin leaped from his chair, with an inarticulate cry of fury, and seizing the confession before him, tore it from left to right, and from right to left, into a hundred pieces.

'Begone,' he cried, 'begone, both of you! Take her with you, I say, lest I do her a mischief; take her to the Perjurer, send her to the devil for all I care; but never let me see her false face again!'

With that he threw himself out of the room like one demented, and after the door had clanged behind him they heard his heavy step at first at a speed beyond his years, but presently with the tread of exhaustion and old age, creep up to his own room.

'Is it safe to leave him, think you?' inquired Mr. Wallis in a hushed voice. 'Once convinced of the truth, his reflections must be terrible. To be deceived by one's own flesh and blood!'

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'William Henry is not his son,' said Margaret quietly; in a time of anguish and distress it is easy to speak of matters which under ordinary circumstances we should shrink from mentioning.

'Thank heaven for that!' ejaculated the lawyer; 'there is no fear, then, that he will not get over it. What I took for paternal resentment is partly, no doubt, exasperation at the exposure of his own credulity. The only reason for your remaining here after his express commandment to the contrary no longer therefore exists. Your doing so for the present at least will only remind him of his misfortune and aggravate its bitterness. I have a sister who keeps my house for me, and who will welcome you as a mother; I entreat you to accept of her hospitality, not only for your own sake, but for that of your uncle. Indeed, after the threat he has made use of, I must insist upon your accompanying me.'

'I am not afraid for myself; I am sure he will never harm me. Indeed, Mr. Wallis, I cannot leave him in his solitude and wretchedness.'

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'He will not be solitary, Miss Margaret. I will drop a hint to Mr. Dennis, whose intention I know it is to call upon him this afternoon, to take up his quarters with him for a while.'

At the mention of Frank Dennis's name Margaret changed colour; the idea of meeting him had suddenly become intolerable.

'If your sister will give me an asylum for a few days,' she hurriedly replied, 'I think I will take advantage of your most kind offer.'

In a few minutes she had made her preparations for departure; she trembled lest there should come a knock at the front door while she was yet in the house. She glanced apprehensively up the little street, as she sallied forth on Mr. Wallis's arm, lest some one with eyes that spoke reproof, without intending it, should come across her before she had gained the shelter of another roof. Some one whom she had never estimated at his true worth, or treated as he deserved; some one she had blamed for his coldness and incredulity, but who had suspected all along—she was as convinced of it as of the fraud itself—the deception which had been practised upon her, but whom the nobleness of a nature that shrank from the exposure of a rival had kept silent.

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

A COMFORTER.

THERE is nothing more astonishing in the history of mankind than the high estimation in which credulity—under the form of belief—has been held by all nations who have had the least claim to be civilised. Yet the vast majority of the human race, mere slaves as they are to custom and convention, imbibing their faith with their mother's milk, and as disinclined to change as a wheel that has found its rut, are absolutely unable to be sceptical. This is probably why persecution has been so lightly permitted—even among Christians, whose connivance at it is otherwise unintelligible; those who suffered for their scepticism were comparatively so few that their martyrdom was disregarded. It is an immense recommendation to a creed, that the mere fact of accepting it is accounted the highest virtue, since ninety-nine persons out of a hundred who have been brought up in it, find no sort of difficulty in fulfilling its chief obligation. With the same ease with which the doctrines of Mahomet or of Buddha are embraced by their disciples, had the story of the discovery of the Shakespeare manuscripts been accepted by Mr. Samuel Erin. Nay, he had not been only a disciple but a devotee. He had been looking forward all his life to some revelation of a similar kind, and it had been manifested under circumstances that not only corroborated his views, but flattered his *amour propre*. A member of his own house had been the discoverer of the MSS., and he himself their apostle and exponent. To confess, even to himself, that he had been preaching a false faith, and been the dupe of a lying boy, seemed impossible. The very idea of it was wormwood to him. Even the discovery that Margaret had taken him at his word and left his roof did not at first shake him. It even strengthened his suspicion that the whole affair was a trick to catch his consent to her marriage with William Henry. It was only done to frighten him into submission.

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But as the solitary hours went by, this obstinate conviction began to slacken; as his indignation grew and grew against the author of his calamity, he began to admit that such a scoundrel might be capable of anything, even sacrilege. It was the affront to the Immortal Bard that he put first, and the offence to himself afterwards. Perhaps William Henry was aware that he was not his son, but he was also aware of the greatness of Shakespeare. And yet, what rankled more, was the consciousness that his own intelligence had been trifled with—that he had been made a fool of. It was a subject terrible to think about, and worse to talk about, and yet he longed for sympathy; the solitude of his own thoughts was intolerable to him.

In the afternoon, at the same time he had been wont to appear in the days that seemed to be long past, Frank Dennis arrived. The antiquary seized his hand with a warmth that he had never before exhibited, though he had loved him well, and bade him be seated. The only thing that had ever come between them was this man's disinclination to accept the very facts which he himself was beginning to doubt, and at first this rendered the meeting embarrassing; on the other hand, when once the ice was broken, it smoothed matters.

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'Have you heard the new story about William Henry?' he asked in hesitating tones.

'Yes; I wish I could think of it as I did of the old story. It is true, sir, every word of it.'

'You think so?' returned the antiquary with a forced smile of incredulity.

'I am sure of it,' was the quiet reply.

There was a long silence.

'What proof have you to substantiate your assertion?'

The irony of fate had caused this question to be asked in the very room where proof used to be so constantly in view, and on the wall of which the 'certificate' of the believers in the Shakespeare documents still hung suspended.

It was met by another question. 'Have you not seen his confession?'

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Mr. Erin pointed to the carpet on which the fragments of the

document still remained. 'It was placed in my hands,' said he in a hoarse dry voice, 'but I never read it.'

'No matter; it would only have given you pain. I have seen the unhappy lad and heard the truth from his own lips.'

'The truth!' echoed the old man bitterly.

'Yes, the truth at last. Here is a copy of an affidavit it is his intention to make to-morrow morning before a magistrate. There are things in it which one regrets; the tone of it is unsatisfactory. He does not seem so penetrated with the sense of his misconduct as would be becoming, but at all events he is careful to absolve everyone from complicity in his crime, and particularly yourself. "I solemnly declare," he says, "that my father was totally unacquainted with the whole affair, believing most firmly the papers to be productions of Shakespeare."' "

The antiquary's brow grew very dark. 'I will never see that young man's face if I can help it,' he said solemnly, 'or speak one word to him again, so help me Heaven!'

'He does not expect it,' answered the other quietly. 'Henceforward he will take his own way in the world. After "expressing regret for any offence he may have given the world or any individual, trusting at the same time they will deem the whole the act of a boy without any evil intention, but hurried on by vanity and the praise of others," he goes on to say, "Should I attempt any other play, or work of imagination, I shall hope the public will lay aside all prejudice my conduct may have deserved, and grant me their indulgence." I suppose, therefore, he intends to live by his pen.'

'You mean to starve by it,' answered the old man bitterly. The style of the composition he had just heard struck him as fustian: he had heard it before and expressed another opinion of it, but then the circumstances were different. In Art and Literature the views of most people are less affected by the work itself than by the name under which it is presented to their notice.

There was a long pause. As in a reservoir, when once its contents have begun to percolate drop by drop through the dam, the drops soon become a stream, and the stream a torrent, and the dam is swept away, so it was with Mr. Erin's obstinacy. The dam was gone by this time, and the bitter waters of conviction rolled in upon his mind like a flood. There was no longer a dry place on it to afford a perch for the mocking-bird of incredulity.

'When was it, Frank,' he inquired in an altered voice, 'when you yourself began to suspect this—this infamous deception?'

'From the very first. You remember giving me the document with the seals attached, that had the quintin upon them? It accidentally fell from my hands, when a portion of the back of one of the seals broke off, and disclosed the inside, which was made of new wax! The—the forger—though he had contrived to cut the old seal without breaking, found it had lost its moisture, so that the slip of parchment which he had introduced into it could only be held by new wax. The next day I perceived that the two parts had been bound together by black silk, which, if anyone had given himself the trouble to untwist, would have made him as wise as I.'

'And yet you held your peace, Dennis,' groaned the old man reproachfully.

'In the first place you would have disbelieved had the proofs of imposture been twice as strong; and secondly—well, there were other reasons into which it is not necessary now to enter. You are quite aware that I never lent my countenance to the deception, and believe me, Mr. Erin, if I could have saved you from your present humiliation—with honour—I would have done so. It was not possible. I am come here to-day to make what amends are in my power for the wrong my silence may have done you. William Henry's affidavit will acquit you of all blame in this matter in the eyes of unprejudiced persons, but you have your enemies, and many persons who were your friends,' he pointed to the certificate, 'will now join their ranks. For some time, at least, residence in London must needs be painful to you. I had taken a cottage near Bath, intending for the present to dwell there; but circumstances' (here the colour came into the young man's cheeks) 'have altered my intention. I shall now reside in town, and my little country home is at your service; there, out of the reach of malicious tongues, you may reside in peace and quiet as long as you think proper.'

For the first time throughout the interview something like

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satisfaction came into the old man's face. The notion of escaping from the flouts and jeers of his acquaintances, and from their equally galling silence, was very welcome to him.

'I thank you,' he said, 'with all my heart, Dennis.'

'There is only one condition, sir,' hesitated the other. 'I think the proposition would be more acceptable to—to Miss Margaret—if she did not know that she was accepting any hospitality of mine. You will be so good as to conceal from her that fact.'

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'Yes, yes,' assented the old man. He did not like to confess that Margaret was elsewhere; that she had been driven from his roof by his own insensate anger. His companion's offer had touched him and turned the current of his thoughts from their accustomed groove—himself and his own affairs—into other channels. He recognised the patience and forbearance of this young fellow, and the temptation to unmask a rival which he had resisted and left to other hands to do. He was curious to know the full extent to which this self-sacrifice would have extended.

'But suppose matters had gone still further, Dennis? If the play had been successful, and its genuineness acknowledged, and Margaret—?'

'It was not possible,' broke in the other, with a flush. 'No one could have read the "Vortigern"—I mean could have seen it acted,' he added, hurriedly, 'and believed it to be a play of William Shakespeare's. I felt confident of that.'

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'Still, some of us were deceived,' insisted the antiquary, with a melancholy smile, 'and why not more? Suppose the play had succeeded, the contingency on which, as you know, my niece's marriage with this scoundrel depended, what would you have done then?'

'I should have still kept silence. I only suspected, remember. I was not quite sure. Moreover, Margaret herself might have been spared the knowledge of the truth, and it was not for me to undeceive her.'

'You would have permitted her, then, for a delicate scruple, to entrust her happiness to a scoundrel?'

'You press me hard, sir, though I do not say you have not a right to do so,' replied Dennis, greatly agitated. 'I have thought of this a thousand times; it has cost me days and nights of misery, Heaven knows. But on the whole I have satisfied my conscience. When one has lost all hope in a matter that has once concerned one to the uttermost, one takes a clear view of it. The young man of whom you speak has, doubtless, many faults; he is weak and vain, and greedy of applause, however gained; he is to some extent unprincipled, he has even committed a serious crime; but he is not altogether what you have called him, a scoundrel. He is not unkind; under less adverse circumstances than those in which, from the very first, he has been placed, he would have shown himself a better man. An exceptional temptation assailed him, and he succumbed to it. He would not necessarily—or I have tried to think so—have made a bad husband.'

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This speech was uttered with grave deliberation, and the manner of it was most impressive; the speaker might have stood for some personification of Justice, weighing his words with equal hand. Indeed this man was more than just, he was magnanimous.

The antiquary could not withhold his admiration from his companion, though with his sentiments he was wholly unable to sympathise.

'You are throwing good feeling away, Frank Dennis,' he said, 'upon a thankless cur. If you think to move me to compassion for him, you are pleading to deaf ears. He is henceforth as a dead man to me and mine.'

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'You will act as you think right, no doubt,' said the young man quietly, 'and I am only doing the same.'

He felt that whatever his own wrongs had been, the wrongs of his companion were far greater. Cajoled, deceived, and stricken in years, his reputation smirched, if not destroyed; humiliated in his own eyes, degraded in those of others; if he did not do well to be angry, it could hardly be said, being human, that he did ill.

Dennis gave the antiquary the address of his cottage, and the necessary information for reaching the spot, and bade him adieu with much emotion.

'But you will not desert us?' said Mr. Erin imploringly. 'If you

stand apart from us——’ His voice trembled and he left the sentence unfinished. He not only, as the other guessed, meant to imply that in such a case they would be friendless indeed, but that Dennis’s withdrawal from his society would be construed as condemnation.

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‘If you write to me to come,’ he answered, ‘if you are quite sure that my presence will be acceptable to you and yours——’ and in his turn he hesitated.

‘I understand,’ said the antiquary gently. ‘I shall think of others for the future, as well as of myself, if only’ (here he gave a mournful smile) ‘to distract my thoughts from what is painful.’

‘There is sunshine still behind the clouds,’ said Dennis, as he shook hands.

‘True, true,’ replied the other; then added to himself with a deep sigh as he closed the door after his visitor, ‘for *you*, but not for me.’

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CHAPTER XXXV.

FAREWELL.

NOT a single night did Margaret sleep away from her uncle's roof. He went in person to Mr. Wallis's house and claimed her. The apology he had schooled himself to make to that gentleman was stayed upon the threshold of his lips.

'Your face, Mr. Erin, tells me all that I need and more than I wish to hear,' said the kindly lawyer. 'Pray spare yourself and me.'

One unfortunate remark, however, Mr. Wallis made, for which he bitterly blamed himself, though as it turned out, unnecessarily.

The antiquary paid him over that portion of money received from the Theatre which was due to William Henry, and requested him to place it in his hands.

'I will do so,' said the lawyer, 'though, were I in his place, I had rather starve than take it.'

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Directly the words were uttered, he perceived their application to the antiquary himself, who was quietly pocketing his own share of the wages of iniquity.

But though we have the same skin, it is of various degrees of thickness.

'He will take it,' said the other drily, 'and starve afterwards.'

Notwithstanding this deviation of Mr. Erin's from the straight path, it is well to state here that Mr. Albany Wallis never consented—although they were his friends and allies—with those who laid the sins of William Henry upon his father's shoulders. When Bishop Percy, on the authority of the commentator Steevens, observed that the whole house in Norfolk Street was 'an elaborate workshop,' Mr. Wallis contradicted the statement point-blank; and when another traducer went the length of including Margaret in the indictment by the assertion that a female relative of Mr. Erin's performed the more delicate work of the (forged) autographs, he gave him the lie direct.

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The storm, indeed, that burst upon the heads of the antiquary and his belongings was terrible, and fortunate it was for them that they had found an asylum afar off. Most of the 'hailstones and coals of fire' fell short of it; and those that reached them, through the malice of enemies or the officiousness of good-natured friends, were fended off from the old man by Margaret's watchful care. Upon the whole, indeed, it is doubtful whether those seemingly evil days were not good for her. Her solicitude upon her uncle's account prevented her from dwelling over much upon her private grief, just as the heartbreak of the widower is sometimes stayed by the cry of the children.

It was many a day, however, before she could look her own misfortune in the face, and scrutinise its lineaments, for when we come to gauge our sorrows it is a sign that the deep waters that have gone over our soul have begun to shallow. Notwithstanding her horror of her Willie's crime, she could not forget what he had once been to her, even though she was well aware, from a sure source, that matters were not so with him. Mrs. Jordan had written to her, out of the fulness of one of the kindest hearts that ever beat in woman's breast, to allay her apprehensions about him on material grounds. Though poor enough, he was not in want, nor likely to be so. Without a word of ill-nature, she had also contrived to make her understand that the boy was not inconsolable; he was busy with his pen, and if his genius did not soar, his conceit was upborne on lusty pinions. 'All is Vanity,' said the preacher in disparagement of that attribute; yet he was an author himself, and ought to have known the consolation of such a gift.

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One of Mrs. Jordan's letters enclosed a little note from William Henry, which for months Margaret could not bring herself to read. She knew that it required no reply, and must needs bruise the wound that had not yet healed within her; so it lay in her desk like some mystic jewel which its possessor keeps in her case because it brings ill-luck to the wearer. But when, after long waiting, and without importunity, Frank Dennis obtained permission to visit his own house, she felt it to be her duty to read or burn that note. It was not a case of being off with the old love before she was on with the new, so far as William Henry was concerned, for she had long done

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with him; but she was conscious of a certain tender curiosity, which, as circumstances were now turning out, might become disloyalty to another, and therefore she resolved to allay it.

She took the folded paper in her trembling hand, like one who takes up earth to scatter on the coffin lid; it was the very last sight she would ever have of aught belonging to him. There was a certain solemnity about those farewell words of his, even though they could not matter much. Perhaps they were not words of farewell; perhaps, in his wild, boyish fashion, they were about to tell her that in spite of his ruin and disgrace, he still loved her, and how, knowing that her heart had once been his, he defied her to cast him out of it. That would be cruel indeed, though it would not alter the course she had marked out for herself. Would it not be better after all to burn the letter?

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The next moment she had torn it open and read it. It was dated months ago, within a week, indeed, of the discovery of his shame. 'I have done you a grievous wrong, Margaret; let me now do you one good service. It is but a little word of advice, yet if you knew what it cost me to give it, you would hold it of some value. Frank Dennis is worth a thousand of me and loves you—I cannot bring myself to write with a truer love than mine, for that is impossible—but with a love more worthy of you. Marry him, Margaret, and forget me!'

It could not have mattered much, as has been said. The man was a bankrupt; but still he had given her all he had to give, aittance.

With Aunt Margaret's fortunes, as apart from the misguided youth who in so strange a manner had almost linked her lot with his, our story has little to do. My own impression is that she was a happy wife; and it is quite certain that Frank Dennis was the best of husbands. Mr. Erin did not long survive his day of humiliation, though it was not, I think, distress of mind that hastened his end so much (as often happens) as the relinquishment of his old pursuits and favourite studies. When we have ridden a hobby-horse all our lives, it is no wonder that when it is suddenly taken from us we find that we have lost the use of our legs.

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Some embers of his old taste for antiquities must still, indeed, have glowed within him, for in those last days he wrote a 'History of the Inns of Court,' with New Inn among them; but it is plain his heart was not in it. Henceforth his favourite volume was a sealed book to him; there were two names—once so frequent on his tongue—to which he never alluded, William Henry Erin and William Shakespeare.

With respect to the former, Frank Dennis maintained a similar reticence for no less than five-and-twenty years. At the expiration of that time, Aunt Margaret received a certain letter, which she placed in her husband's hands without a word.

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'Poor fellow!' was his remark when he had read it. 'Well! we must, of course, go up to town.'

William Henry had written from his sick bed to ask to see Margaret once more before he died.

They had lived in the country ever since their marriage, but they set out for London at once.

It was summer-time, the very month in which they had journeyed to Stratford-on-Avon more than a quarter of a century ago, and they talked of that time together without any reserve.

'I think if it had not been for that visit to Bristol,' said Frank thoughtfully, 'that none of this sad business would have happened; it was Chatterton's story that put it into his head.' Margaret nodded sorrowful assent. She remembered well how the unhappy lad had defended his prototype's conduct.

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'It was a miserable crime,' she said, 'and miserably has he suffered for it.'

'That is all we need think of now, Margaret; of that, and of his temptation,' he added tenderly, 'which, as I can witness, was excessive.'

Here was, indeed, a husband to thank heaven for, and she knew it. And yet—and yet—the tears were in her eyes upon another's account. How bright and handsome had her Willie looked as he took his seat by her side at the inn table, on that other journey. How eager had been his face when he had first pressed his suit in Anne Hathaway's garden. In the mist of memory the will-of-the-wisp looms large and twinkles like a very star.

When they reached London, Margaret went alone to the lodging

he had indicated; a poor place enough, but with no signs of want about it as she had feared, nor did the sick man lack due tendance. He was very near his end; but his eyes—all that was left of him that she recognised—flashed grateful recognition.



'SO GOOD OF YOU, SO LIKE YOU, MARGARET,' HE MURMURED.

'So good of you, so like you, Margaret,' he murmured.

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She sat by him a long time, overwhelmed with pity, but not seldom distressed by his worldly talk. The ruling passion was strong in death. He spoke of his works—of which he had written many in his own name, and of the recognition which he felt assured they would one day meet with; he even told her, with a smile of triumph, that Malone himself had bidden one hundred and thirty guineas for the forged Shakespeare documents. He seemed unable to take a just view of his own behaviour in that transaction, though as to others, he was not only just but generous.

'Dear Margaret,' were his last failing words to her: 'I once gave you a piece of advice, the only thing I had to give—which you did well to follow. I have nothing but the thanks of a dying man to offer you for your having come to bid me farewell, save what I have now to say—which I well know will be news to you. I have been an unfortunate, as well as a misguided, man; my talents have never been acknowledged, and if I had had to live by my wits alone, I should have starved—yes, starved!' His sharp face darkened, and he raised his feeble hands as if in protest against the judgment of the world. 'There was one man, Margaret, one among all these millions, and he the very last to whom I should have looked for aid, who caused me to be sought out and gave me help. I have lived more or less upon his bounty ever since. He has never told you of it, Margaret; and now there is no need to tell you; you who know him can guess who it is.'

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Margaret's tears fell fast; it was touching indeed to hear of her husband's goodness from the lips of his dying rival.

'Frank is very good to me, dear Willie,' she sobbed.

'Yes, yes, I knew it would be so,' he murmured; 'honest and true. What is the breath of the world to him who will not even let it know

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of his good deeds. Yes, yes—kiss me, kiss me for the last time—
worth a thousand of me, Margaret, though he was never the Talk of
the Town.'

THE END.

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