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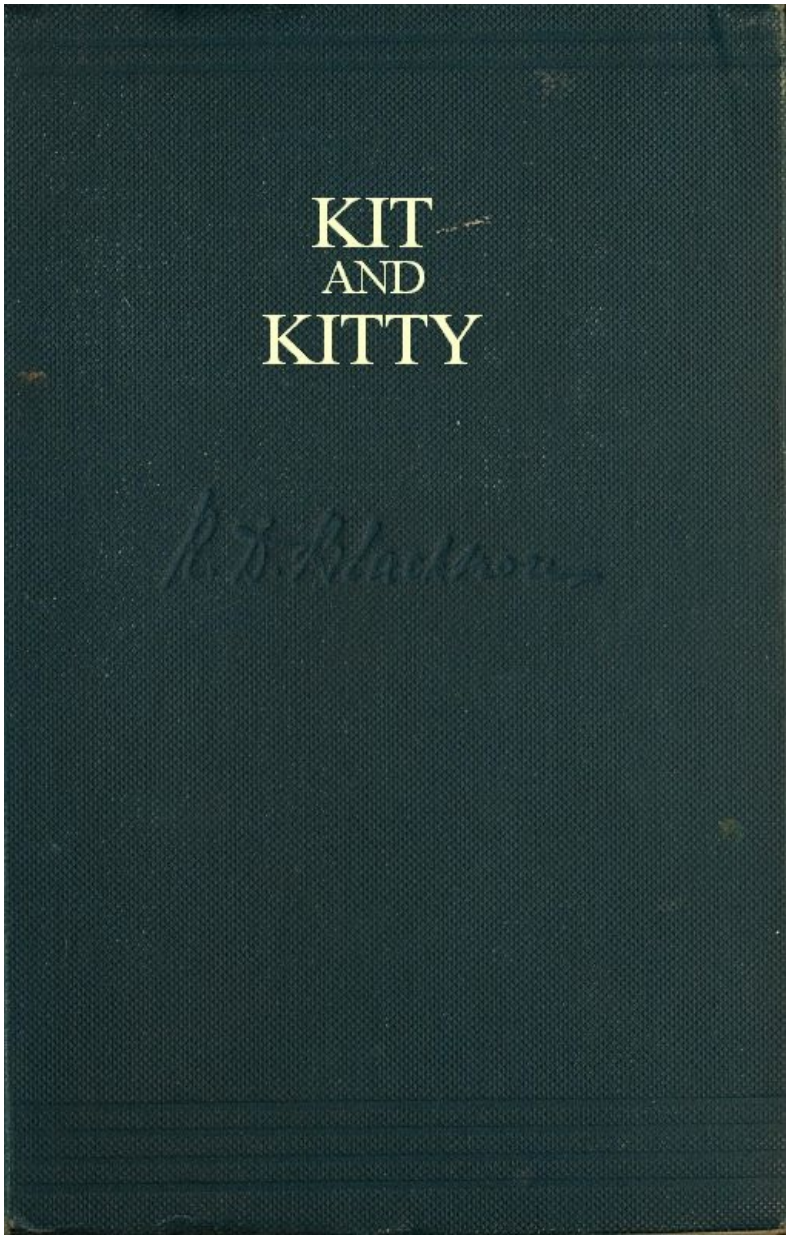

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KIT AND KITTY

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KIT AND KITTY

A Story of West Middlesex

BY

R. D. BLACKMORE
AUTHOR OF LORNA DOONE, SPRINGHAVEN, CHRISTOWELL, ETC.

"Si tu Caia, ego Caius."

NEW AND CHEAPER EDITION

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KIT AND KITTY.

CHAPTER I.
UNCLE CORNY.

My name is Christopher Orchardson, of Sunbury in Middlesex; and I have passed through a bitter trouble, which I will try to describe somehow, both for my wife's sake and my own, as well as to set us straight again in the opinion of our neighbours, which I have always valued highly, though sometimes unable to show it. It has not been in my power always to do the thing that was wisest, and whenever this is brought up against me, I can make no answer, only to beg those who love blame to look at themselves, which will make their eyes grow kinder, before they begin to be turned on me.

For five and twenty years of life I went on very happily, being of an unambitious sort, and knowing neither plague nor pain, through the strength of my constitution and the easiness of my nature. Most of my neighbours seemed to live in perpetual lack of something, and if ever they got it they soon contrived to find something more to hanker for. There were times when I felt that I must be a fool, or to say the least a dullard, for slackness of perception, which kept me satisfied with the life I had to live. But two things may be pleaded well in my excuse on this account; in the first place, all my time was spent among creatures of no ambition—trees, and flowers, and horses, and the like, that have no worry; and what was even to the purpose more, I had no money to enlarge its love.

For my Uncle Cornelius—better known to all who had dealings with him as "Corny, the topper"—took care of me, and his main care was to make me useful, as an orphan should be. My father had been his elder brother, and had married rashly a lady of birth and education far above his own, but gifted with little else to help her, unless it were sweetness of disposition, and warmth of heart, and loveliness. These in a world like ours are not of much account for wearing; and she had no chance to wear them out, being taken away quite suddenly. My life was given at the cost of hers, and my father, after lingering for a few months, took his departure to look for her.

Old people said that my Uncle Corny had been very fond of my mother, looking up to her in his youthful days, as a wonder of grace and goodness. And even now when he spoke about her, as I have known him to do after a tumbler of grog, his hard grey eyes would glisten softly, like the vinery glass of an afternoon, when a spring cloud passes over it. But none the more for that did he ever plant a shilling in my youthful hand. This proves his due estimate of money as a disadvantage to the young.

My uncle possessed an ancient garden, which had once belonged to a monastery; and the times being better than now they are, he was enabled to work it so that he made fair living out of it. We lived in an ancient cottage in the fine old village of Sunbury, or rather to the westward of that village, and higher up the river. Our window looked upon the Thames, with nothing more than the Shepperton Road, and the slope of the bank to look over. What with water-works, grand villas, the railway, and other changes, the place is now so different that a native may scarcely know it. But all was thoroughly simple, quiet, and even dull to lazy folk, in the days of which I am speaking.

My parents had managed to leave me so, or had it so managed by a higher power, that from my very infancy I was thrown upon Uncle Corny. He was a masterful man indeed, being of a resolute disposition, strong body, and stout sentiments. There was no mistaking his meaning when he spoke, and he spoke no more than a man is bound to do, for his own uses. Those who did not understand his nature said a great deal against him, and he let them say it to the width of their mouths. For he felt that he was good inside, and would be none the better for their meddling.

He was now about threescore years of age, and wished himself no younger, having seen enough of the world to know that to pass through it once is quite enough. Few things vexed him much, except to find his things sold below their value; and that far less for the love of money than from the sense of justice. But when he was wronged—as all producers, being one to a thousand, must be—he was not the man to make a to-do, and write to the papers about it. All he did was to drive his stick into the floor, and look up at the ceiling. For his own part he was quite ready to be proved in the wrong, whenever he could see it; and whatever may be said, I can answer for it,

there are more men now than can be counted in a year, who are under Uncle Corny's mark; while an hour would be ample for the names of those who would dare to look over my uncle's head, when he comes to be judged finally.

All this is too much of a preface for him. His manner was always to speak for himself, and he must become somebody else, ere ever he would let his young nephew do it for him.

CHAPTER II.
MY KITTY.

THE shape of a tree is not decided by the pruner only. When the leader is stopped, with an eye towards the wind, and the branches clipped to a nicety of experience and of forethought, and the happy owner has said to it—"Now I defy you to go amiss this season"—before he is up in the morning perhaps, his lecture is flown, and his labour lost.

My wise Uncle Corny had said to me, more times than I can remember—"Kit, you are a good boy, a very good boy, and likely to be useful in my business by-and-by. But of one thing beware—never say a word to women. They never know what they want themselves; and they like to bring a man into the same condition. What wonderful things I have seen among the women! And the only way out of it is never to get into it."

In answer to this I never said a word, being unable to contradict, though doubtful how far he was right. But it made me more shy than I was already, while at the same time it seemed to fill me with interest in the matter. But the only woman I had much to do with went a long way to confirm my Uncle's words. This was no other than Tabitha Tapscott, a widow from the West of [4] England, who did all our cleaning and cooking for us, coming into the house at six o'clock in the summer, and seven in the winter time. A strange little creature she appeared to me, so different from us in all her ways, making mountains of things that we never noticed, and not at all given to silence.

Once or twice my Uncle Corny, after a glass of hot rum and water (which he usually had on a Saturday night, to restore him after paying wages) had spoken, in a strange mysterious style, of having "had his time," or as he sometimes put it—"paid his footing." It was not easy to make out his drift, or the hint at the bottom of it; and if any one tried to follow him home, sometimes he would fly off into rudeness, or if in a better vein, convey that he held his tongue for the good of younger people. Such words used to stir me sadly, because I could get no more of them.

However, I began to feel more and more, as youth perhaps is sure to do when it listens to dark experience, as if I should like almost to go through some of it on my own behalf. Not expecting at all to leave it as a lesson for those who come after me, but simply desiring to enter into some knowledge of the thing forbidden. For I knew not as yet that there is no pleasure rich enough to satisfy the interest of pain.

It was on the first Sunday of September in the year 1860, that I first left all my peaceful ways, and fell into joy and misery. And strangely enough, as some may think, it was in the quiet evening service that the sudden change befell me. That summer had been the wettest ever known, or at any rate for four and forty years; as the old men said, who recalled the time when the loaves served out to their fathers and mothers stuck fast, like clay, upon the churchyard wall. Now the river was up to the mark of the road, and the meadows on the other side were lakes, and even a young man was well pleased to feel a flint under his foot as he walked. For the road was washed with torrents, and all the hedges reeking, and the solid trunks of ancient elms seemed to be channelled with perpetual drip.

But the sun began to shine out of the clouds, at his very last opportunity; and weak and watery though he looked, with a bank of haze beneath him, a soft relief of hope and comfort filled the flooded valley. And into our old western porch a pleasant light came quivering, and showed us who our neighbours were, and made us smile at one another.

As it happened now, my mind was full of a certain bed of onions, which had grown so rank and [5] sappy, that we had not dared to harvest them. And instead of right thoughts upon entering church, I was saying to myself—"We shall have a dry week, I do believe. I will pull them to-morrow, and chance it." This will show that what now befell me came without any fault of mine.

For just as the last bell struck its stroke, and the ringer swang down on the heel of it, and the murmur went floating among the trees, I drew back a little to let the women pass, having sense of their feeling about their dresses, which is to be respected by every man. And in those days they wore lovely flounces, like a bee-hive trimmed with Venetian blinds. They had learned a fine manner of twitching up these, whenever they came to steps and stairs; and while they were at it, they always looked round, to make sure of no disarrangement. My respect for them made me gaze over their heads, as if without knowledge of their being there at all. Yet they whispered freely to one another, desiring to know if their ribands were right for the worship of the Almighty.

Now as I gazed in a general style, being timid about looking especially, there came into my eyes, without any sense of moment, but stealing unawares as in a vision, the fairest and purest and sweetest picture that ever went yet from the eyes to the heart. To those who have never known the like, it is hopeless to try to explain it; and even to myself I cannot render, by word or

by thought, a mere jot of it. And many would say, that to let things so happen, the wits for the time must be out of their duty.

It may have been only a glance, or a turn of the head, or the toss of a love-lock—whatever it was, for me the world was a different place thereafter. It was a lovely and gentle face, making light in the gloom of the tower arch, and touched with no thought of its own appearance, as other pretty faces were. I had never dreamed that any maiden could have said so much to me, as now came to me without a word.

Wondering only about her, and feeling abashed at my own footsteps, I followed softly up the church, and scarcely knew the button of our own pew door. For Uncle Corny owned a pew, and insisted upon having it, and would allow no one to sit there, without his own grace and written order. He never found it needful to go to church on his own account, being a most upright man; but if ever he heard of any other Christian being shown into his pew, he put on his best clothes [6] the next Sunday morning, and repaired to the sacred building, with a black-thorn staff which had a knob of obsidian. Such a thing would now be considered out of date; but the church was the church, in those more established times. Here I sat down in my usual manner, to the best of my power, because I knew how my neighbours would be watching me; and saying my prayers into the bottom of my hat, I resolved to remember where I was, and nothing else. But this was much easier said than done; for the first face I met, upon looking round, was that of Sam Henderson the racer, the owner of the paddocks at Halliford, a young man who thought a great deal of himself, and tried to bring others to a like opinion. He was not altogether a favourite of mine, although I knew nothing against him; for he loved showy colours, and indulged in large fancies that all the young women were in love with him. Now he gave me a nod, although the clergyman was speaking, and following the turn of his eyes I was vexed yet more with his behaviour. He was gazing, as though with a lofty approval, and no sort of fear in his bright black eyes, at the face which had made me feel just now so lowly and so worthless.

In the Manor pew, which had been empty nearly all the summer—for the weather had driven our ladies abroad—there she sat, and it made me feel as if hope was almost gone from me. For I could not help knowing that Mrs. Sheppard, who arranged all the worshippers according to their rank, would never have shown the young lady in there, unless she had been of high standing. And almost before I was out of that thought my wits being quicker than usual, it became quite clear to me, who she was—or at any rate who was with her. From the corner of the pew there came and stood before her, as if to take general attention off, a highly esteemed and very well dressed lady, Mrs. Jenny Marker. This was the “lady housekeeper,” as everybody was bound to call her who hoped to get orders, at Coldpepper Hall, herself a very well bred and most kind-hearted woman, to all who considered her dignity. Having always done this, I felt sure of her good word, and hoping much too hastily that the young lady was her niece, I made it feel perhaps less presumptuous on my part, to try to steal a glance at her, whenever luck afforded.

Herein I found tumultuous bliss, until my heart fell heavily. I was heeding very scantily the reading of the minister, and voices of the clerk and faithful of the congregation, when suddenly [7] there came the words,—“the dignity of Princes.” And then I knew, without thinking twice, that this young lady could never have won the dignity of the Manor-pew, unless she had been a great deal more than the niece of Jenny Marker. In a moment, too, my senses came to back up this perception, and I began to revile myself for thinking such a thought of her. Not that Mrs. Marker was of any low condition, for she wore two rings and a gold watch-chain, and was highly respected by every one; but she cheapened all the goods she bought, even down to an old red herring, and she had been known to make people take garden-stuff in exchange for goods, or else forego her custom. The memory of these things grieved me with my own imagination.

I was very loth to go—as you will see was natural—without so much as one good look at the sweet face which had blessed me; but everything seemed to turn against me, and the light grew worse and worse. Moreover Sam Henderson stared so boldly, having none of my diffidence, that Mrs. Marker came forward sharply, and jerked the rings of the red baize curtain, so that he could see only that. At this he turned red, and pulled up his collar, and I felt within myself a glow of good-will for the punching of his head. And perhaps he had grounds for some warm feeling toward me, for the reason that I being more to the left could still get a glimpse round the corner of the curtain, which acted as a total drop of scenery for him.

When the sermon was finished in its natural course, the sky was getting very dark outside, and the young men and women were on best behaviour to take no advantage of the gloom in going out. For as yet we had no great gas-works, such as impair in the present generation the romance and enlargement of an evening service. So that when we came forth, we were in a frame of mind for thinking the best of one another.

CHAPTER III
THE TIMBER BRIDGE.

By this time it had become clear to me, that whatever my thoughts were and my longings—such as those who are free from them call romantic—there was nothing proper for me to do, except to [8] turn in at our own little gate, and be satisfied with my own duty inside. And this I was truly at the point of doing, although with very little satisfaction, when the glancing of the twilight down the road convinced me of a different duty. To the westward there happened just here to be a long stretch of lane without much turn in it, only guided and overhung partly with trees, and tufts of wild hops which were barren this year. And throughout this long course, which was wavering with gloom, a watery gleam from the west set in, partly perhaps from the flooded river, and partly from the last glance of sunset.

My hand was just laid upon our wicket-latch, and my mind made up for no thinking, when the figure of some one in the distance, like a call-back signal, stopped me. I had not returned, you must understand, by the shortest possible way from church, which would have taken me to Uncle Corny's door opposite the river; but being a little disturbed, perhaps, and desiring to walk it off quietly, had turned up to the right towards the Halliford lane, to escape any gossip, and come back through our garden. And where I stood now, there was a view by daylight of nearly half a mile of lane, and the timber bridge across the brook.

The lane was not quite straight, but still it bent in such an obliging manner, first to the left and then back to the right, that anything happening upon its course would be likely to come into view from our gate. And I saw as plainly as could be, although beyond shouting distance, a man with his arms spread forth, as if to stop or catch anybody going further, and nearer to me the forms of women desirous to go on, but frightened. It is not true that I stopped to think for one moment who those women were; but feeling that they must be in the right, and the man in the wrong as usual, without two endeavours I was running at full speed—and in those days that was something —merely to help the right, and stop the wrong. And in less time than it takes to tell it, I was one of the party. Then I saw that the ladies were Mrs. Marker, and the lovely young maiden, who had been with her in church.

"Oh, Master Orchardson, you will take our part," Mrs. Marker cried, as she ran up to me; "you will take our part, as every good man must. That bad man says that we shall not cross the bridge, without—without—oh, it is too dreadful!"

"Without paying toll to me—this is kissing-bridge, and the wood is now kissing the water. 'Tis a [9] dangerous job to take ladies across. Kit, you are come just in time to help. Let us have toll at the outset, and double toll upon landing, my boy. You take my lady Marker, Kit, because she is getting heavy; and I will take Miss Fairthorn."

Sam Henderson spoke these words as if we had nothing to do but obey him. Perhaps as a man who was instructing horses, he had imbibed too much of the upper part. At any rate, I did not find it my duty to fall beneath his ordering. And as if to make me stand to my own thoughts, the sweetest and most pitiful glance that had ever come to meet me, came straight to my heart from a shadowy nook, where the beautiful maid was shrinking.

"Sam Henderson, none of this rubbish!" I shouted, for the roar of the water would have drowned soft words. "It is a coward's job to frighten women. A man should see first what the danger is."

Before he could come up to strike me, as his first intention seemed to be, I ran across the timbers, which were bowing and trembling with the strain upon the upright posts, as well as the wash upon their nether sides. And I saw that the risk was increasing with each moment, for the dam at the bottom of Tim Osborne's meadow, not more than a gunshot above us, was beginning to yield, and the flood checked by it was trembling like a trodden hay-rick. Upon this I ran back, and said, "Now, ladies, if cross you must, you must do it at once."

"Kit, you are a fool. There is no danger," Sam Henderson shouted wrathfully. "Who is the coward that frightens ladies now? But if you must poke in your oar without leave, you go first with Mother Marker, and I will come after you, with the young lady."

The maiden shrank back from his hand, and I saw that good Mrs. Marker was pained by his words. "Mother Marker will go first," she said, "but with no thanks to you, Mr. Henderson."

Her spirit was up, but her hands were trembling, as I took her Prayer-book from them.

"I may be a fool, but I am not a cub," I answered with a gaze that made Henderson scowl; "I would rather frighten ladies than insult them. Now, Mrs. Marker, give me one of your nice little hands, and have no fear."

The house-keeping lady put forth one hand, with a tender look at it, because it had been praised, and then she put forth one brave foot, and I was only afraid of her going too fast. The [10] water splashed up between the three-inch planks, for the lady was of some substance; but she landed very well, and back I ran to see about her young companion.

"I will not go with you sir; I will go alone. You do not behave like a gentleman," she was crying in great distress, as I came up, and Sam Henderson had hold of both her hands. This enraged me

so that I forgot good manners, for I should not have done what I did before a lady. I struck Sam heavily between the eyes, and if I had not caught him by the collar, nothing could have saved him from falling through the bush, into the deep eddy under the planks. As soon as I had done it, I was angry with myself, for Sam was not a bad fellow at all, when in his best condition. But now there was no time to dwell upon that, for the flood was arising and rolling in loops, like the back of a cat who has descried a dog.

“Now or never, Miss,” I cried; “the dam has given; in a minute, this bridge will be swept clean away.”

She showed such bright sense as I never saw before, and never can hope to see in anybody else, however they may laugh through want of it. Without a word, or even a glance at me, she railed up her dress into a wondrous little circle, and gave me a hand which I had not the strength to think of, for fear of forgetting all the world outside. Taking it gently in my coarse hard palm, I said, “Come,” and she came like an angel.

As I led her across, all my gaze was upon her; and this was a good thing for both of us. For a scream from Mrs. Marker and a dreadful shout from Sam—who came staggering up to the brink and caught the handrail, just as we were shaking upon the middle dip—these, and a great roar coming down the meadows, would probably have taken all my wits away, if they had been within me, as at ordinary times. But heeding only that which I was holding, I went in a leisurely and steady manner which often makes the best of danger, and set the maiden safe upon the high stone at the end, and turned round to see what was coming.

Before I had time to do this, it was upon me, whirling me back with a blow of heavy timber, and washing me with all my best clothes on into the hedge behind the lane. Then a rush of brown water, like a drove of wild cattle leaping on one another’s backs, went by, and the bridge was gone with it, like a straw hat in the wind. But the stone upon which the young lady stood was unmoved although surrounded, and I made signs to her—for to speak was useless—to lay hold of [11]
a branch which hung over her head. As she did so, she smiled at me, even in that terror; and I felt that I would go through a thousandfold the peril for the chance of being so rewarded.

Suddenly, as suddenly as it had mounted, the bulk of the roaring flood fell again, and the wreck of the handrail and some lighter spars of the bridge hung dangling by their chains. And soon as the peril was passed, it was hard to believe that there had been much of it. But any one listening to Mrs. Marker, as she came down the hill when it was over, must have believed that I had done something very gallant and almost heroic. But I had done nothing more than I have told; and it is not very likely that I would make too little of it.

“Brave young man!” cried Mrs. Marker, panting, and ready to embrace me, if I had only been dry; “you have saved our lives, and I would say it, if it were my last moment. Miss Kitty, I never saw such valour. Did you ever, in all your life, dear?”

“Never, dear, never! Though I had not the least idea what this gentleman was doing, till he had done it. Oh, he must be sadly knocked about. Let me come down, and help him.”

“He put you up there, and he shall fetch you down. Nobody else has the right to do it. Mr. Orchardson, don’t be afraid; assist her.”

Now this shows how women have their wits about them, even at moments most critical. The housekeeper had fled with no small alacrity, when the flood came roaring; and now with equal promptitude she had returned, and discovered how best to reward me.

“I think you might give me a hand,” said the young lady, still mounted on the high stone with our parish-mark, upon which by some instinct I had placed her.

“I cannot; I am trembling like an aspen-leaf,” Mrs. Marker replied, though she looked firm enough; “but our gallant preserver is as strong as he is brave. Don’t be afraid of his touching you, because he is a little damp, Miss Kitty.”

This was truly clever of her, and it stopped all reasoning. With a glance of reproach, the maiden gathered her loosened cloak more tightly, and then gave me both her hands and sprang; and I managed it so that she slid down into my arms. This was not what she intended, but there was no help for it, the ground being very slippery after such a flood. She seemed lighter than a feather, and more buoyant than a cork; though some of that conclusion perhaps was due to my [12]
impressions. Be that either way, I could never have believed that anything so lovely would be ever in my hold; and the power of it drove away my presence of mind so badly, that I was very near forgetting the proper time for letting go.

And this was no wonder, when I come to think about it; the only wonder was that I could show such self-command. For the breath of her lips was almost on mine, and her blushes so near that I seemed to feel their glow, and the deep rich blue of her eyes so close that they were like an opening into heaven. My entire gift of words was gone, and I knew not what I did or thought.

But suddenly a shout—or a speech if one could take it so—of vulgar insolence and jealousy most contemptible, broke on my lofty condition. Sam Henderson had been left in black dudgeon on the other side of the water, and the bridge being swept away, he could not get at us. We had forgotten all about him; however, he had managed to run away, when the great billow came from the bursting of the sluice; and now he showed his manners and his thankfulness to God, by coming to the bank and shouting, while he grinned, and clapped his hands in mockery,—

“Kit and Kitty! Kit and Kitty! That’s what I call coming it strong; and upon a Sunday evening! Mother Marker, do you mean to put up with that? See if I don’t tell your Missus. Kit and Kitty! O Lord, oh Lord! ’Tis as good as a play, and we don’t get much of that sort of fun in Sunbury. Holloa! What the deuce—”

His speech was ended, for I had caught up a big dollop of clod from the relics of the flood, and delivered it into his throat so truly that his red satin fall and mock-diamond pin—which were tenfold more sacred to him than the Sabbath—were mashed up into one big lump of mud, together with the beard he cherished. Labouring to utter some foul words, he shook his fist at me and departed.

CHAPTER IV.
PEACHES, AND PEACHING

THERE seem to be many ways of taking the very simplest fact we meet and if any man was sure to take things by his own light, it was my good Uncle. When a friend, or even a useful neighbour, [13] offered a free opinion, my Uncle Cornelius would look at him, say never a word, but be almost certain to go downright against that particular view. One of his favourite sayings was, “Every man has a right to his own opinion,” although he was a strict Conservative—and of that right he was so jealous, that he hated to have his opinions shared. And this was a very lucky thing for me, as I cannot help seeing and saying.

For the very next morning, a neighbour came in (when I was gone prowling, I need not say where), and having some business, he told Tabby Tapscott to show him where her master was most likely to be found. This gentleman was Mr. Rasp, the baker, who kept two women, a man, and a boy, and did the finest trade in Sunbury. And what he wanted now was to accept my Uncle’s offer, at which he had hum’d and hawed a week ago, of ten sacks of chat potatoes at fifteen pence a bushel, for the purpose of mixing with his best white bread. By the post of that morning Mr. Rasp had heard from the great flour-mills at Uxbridge, that good grindings were gone up six shillings a quarter, and sure to be quoted still higher next week, by reason of the cold, wet harvest. But he did not intend to tell Uncle Corny this.

That excellent gardener was under his big wall, which had formed part of the monastic enclosure, and was therefore the best piece of brickwork in the parish, as well as a warm home and sure fortress to the peach and nectarine. This wall had its aspect about S.S.E., the best that can be for fruit-trees, and was flanked with return walls at either end; and the sunshine, whenever there seemed to be any, was dwelling and blushing in this kind embrace. The summers might be bitter—as they generally are—but if ever a peach donned crimson velvet in the South of England out of doors, it was sure to be sitting upon this old red wall and looking out for Uncle Corny.

Mr. Cornelius Orchardson, as most people called him when they tried to get his money, glanced over his shoulder when he heard the baker coming, and then began to drive a nail with more than usual care. Not that he ever drove any nail rashly, such an act was forbidden by his constitution; but that he now was in his deepest calm, as every man ought to be in the neighbourhood of a bargain. His manner was always collected and dry, and his words quite as few as were needful; and he never showed any desire to get the better of any one, only a sense of contentment, whenever he was not robbed. This is often the case with broad-shouldered people, [14] if they only move quietly and are not flurried; and my good Uncle Corny possessed in his way every one of these elements of honesty.

“Good morning, Mr. Orchardson!” said Rasp the baker. “What a pleasure it is to see a glimpse of sun at last! And what a fine colour these red bricks do give you!”

“As good as the bakehouse,” said my Uncle shortly. “But look out where you are treading, Rasp. I want every one of them strawberry-runners. What brings you here? I am rather busy now.”

“Well, I happened to see as your door was open, so I thought I’d just jog your memory, to have them potatoes put up in the dry, while I’ve got my copper lighted.”

“Potatoes! Why, you would not have them, Rasp. You said fifteen pence a bushel was a deal too much, and potatoes were all water such a year as this. And now I’ve got a better customer.”

“Well, it don’t matter much either way,” said the baker; “but I always took you, Mr. Orchardson, to be a man of your word, sir—a man of your word.”

“So I am. But I know what my words are; and we came to no agreement. Your very last words were—‘A shilling, and no more.’ Can you deny that, Rasp?”

“Well, I didn’t put it down, sir, and my memory plays tricks. But I told my wife that it was all settled; and she said, ‘Oh, I do like to deal with Mr. Orchardson, he gives such good measure.’ So I brought round the money in this little bag, thirty-seven shillings and sixpence. Never mind for a receipt, sir; everybody knows what you are.”

“Yes, so they do,” answered Uncle Corny; “they’d rather believe me than you, Master baker. Now how much is flour gone up this morning, and floury potatoes to follow it? Never a chat goes out of my gate, under one and sixpence a bushel.”

“This sort of thing is too much for me. There is something altogether wrong with the times. There is no living to be made out of them.” Mr. Rasp shook his head at the peaches on the wall, as if they were dainties he must not dare to look at.

“Rasp, you shall have a peach,” declared my Uncle Corny, for he was a man who had come to a good deal of wisdom; “you shall have the best peach on the whole of this wall, and that means about the best in England. I will not be put out with you, Rasp, for making a fine effort to cheat [15] me. You are a baker; and you cannot help it.”

If any other man in Sunbury was proud of his honesty, so was Rasp; and taking this speech as a compliment to it, he smiled and pulled a paper-bag from his pocket, to receive the best peach on

the wall for his wife.

“What a difference one day’s sun has made! At one time I doubted if they would colour, for it is the worst summer I have known for many years. But they were all ready, as a maiden is to blush, when she expects her sweetheart’s name. With all my experience, I could scarcely have believed it; what a change since Saturday! But ‘live and learn’ is the gardener’s rule. *Galande*, the best peach of all, in my opinion, is not yet ripe; but *Grosse Mignonne* is, and though rather woolly in a year like ’57, it is first-rate in a cool season. Observe the red spots near the caudal cavity—why bless my heart, Rasp, I meant that for your wife!”

“My wife has a very sad toothache to-day, and she would never forgive me if I made it worse. But what wonderful things they are to run!”

This baker had a gentle streak of juice in either runnel of his chin, which was shaped like a well-fed *fleur-de-lis*; and he wiped it all dry with the face of the bag, upon which his own name was printed.

“I knows a good thing, when I sees it; and that’s more than a woman in a hundred does. Don’t believe they can taste, or at least very few of them. Why, they’d sooner have tea than a glass of good beer! Howsoever, that’s nought to do with business. Mr. Orchardson, what’s your lowest figure? With a wall of fruit coming on like them, sixpence apiece and some thousands of them, you mustn’t be hard on a neighbour.”

My Uncle sat down on his four-legged stool (which had bars across the feet, for fear of sinking, when the ground was spongy), and he pulled his bag of vamp-leather to the middle of his waistcoat, and felt for a shred and a nail. He had learned that it never ends in satisfaction, if a man grows excited in view of a bargain, or even shows any desire to deal. Then he put up his elbow, and tapped the nail in, without hitting it hard, as the ignorant do.

“Come, I’ll make a fair offer,” the baker exclaimed, for he never let business do justice to itself; “an offer that you might call handsome, if you was looking at it in a large point of view. I’ll take [16]
fifty bushels at fifteen pence, pick ’em over myself, for the pigs and the men; and if any crusty people turn up, why here I am!”

“Rasp, you make a very great mistake,” said my Uncle, turning round upon his stool, and confronting him with strong honesty, “if you suppose that I have anything to do with the use you make of my potatoes. I sell you my goods for the utmost I can get, and you take good care that it is very little. What you do with them afterwards is no concern of mine. I owe you no thanks, and you know me not from Adam the moment you have paid me. This is the doctrine of free-trade—you recognize everything, except men.”

“Tell you what it is,” replied the baker; “sooner than vex you, Mr. Orchardson, I’ll give sixteen pence all round, just as they come out of the row. Who could say fairer than that now?”

“Eighteen is the money. Not a farthing under. From all that I can hear, it will be twenty pence to-morrow. Why, here’s another fine peach fit to come! I shall send it to your wife, and tell her you ate hers.”

The gardener merrily nailed away, while the baker was working his hands for nothing. “You would never do such a thing as that,” he said; “a single man have no call to understand a woman; but he knows what their nature is, or why did he avoid them? My wife is as good a woman as can be; but none of them was ever known to be quite perfect. If it must be eighteen, it must—and I’ll take fifty.”

“Ah, couldn’t I tell you a bit of news?” said the baker, as he counted out the money. “You are such a silent man, Mr. Orchardson, that a man of the world is afraid of you. And the young fellow, your own nevvy—well, he may take after you in speech, but not about the ladies—ah, you never would believe it!”

“Well, then, keep it to yourself, that’s all. I don’t want to hear a word against young Kit. And what’s more—if I heard fifty, I wouldn’t believe one of them.”

“No more wouldn’t I. He’s as steady a young fellow as ever drove a tax-cart. And so quiet in his manners, why, you wouldn’t think that butter—”

“His mother was a lady of birth and breeding. That’s where he gets his manners from; though there’s plenty in our family for folk that deserve them. Out with your news, man, whatever it is.”

“Well, it don’t go again him much,” the baker replied, with some fear—for my Uncle’s face was [17]
stern, and the wall-hammer swung in his brown right hand; “and indeed you might take it the other way, if he had done it all on his road home from church. You know the bridge over the Halliford brook, or at least where it was, for it’s all washed away, as you heard very likely this morning. What right had your nevvy there, going on for dark?”

My Uncle was a rather large-minded man; but without being loose, or superior. “Rasp, if it comes to that,” he said, “what right have you and I to be anywhere?”

“That’s neither here nor there,” answered the baker, having always been a man of business; “but wherever I go, I pay my way. However, your Kit was down there, and no mistake. What you think he done? He punched Sam Henderson’s head to begin with, for fear of him giving any help, and then he jumped into the water, that was coming like a house on fire from Tim Osborne’s dam,

and out of it he pulled Mother Marker, and the pretty young lady as had been in church.”

“Kit can swim,” said my Uncle shortly. “It is a very dangerous trick to learn, being bound to jump in, whenever any one is drowning. Did the women go in, for him to pull them out?”

“Ah, you never did think much of them, Mr. Corny; but you never had no inskin experience. Take ’em all round, they are pretty nigh as good as we are. But they never jumped in—no, you mustn’t say that. They were bound to go home, and they were doing of it, till the flood took their legs from under them. Mrs. Marker have been, this very morning, conversing along of my good missus, and was likely to stop when I was forced to come away, and you should hear her go on about your Kit! And nobody knows if she has any friends. I am told when her time comes to go to heaven, she will have the disposal of four hundred pounds.”

“You be off to your wife!” cried Uncle Corny; “Mrs. Marker is quite a young woman yet, but old enough to have discovered what men are. Go to your work, Rasp. I hate all gossip. But I am glad that Kit thrashed Sam Henderson.”

CHAPTER V.
A LITTLE TIFF.

[18]

EVERYBODY knows, as he reads his newspaper, that nothing has ever yet happened in the world with enough of precision and accuracy to get itself described, by those who saw it, in the same, or in even a similar manner. No wonder then that my little adventure—if I have any right to call it mine—presented itself in many different lights, not only to the people among whom it spread, but even to the few who were present there and then. Mrs. Jenny Marker's account of what had happened was already very grand that Sunday eve; but as soon as she had slept and dreamed upon it, her great command of words proved unequal to the call made at the same moment by the mind and heart. Everybody listened, for her practice was to pay every little bill upon a Monday morning; and almost everybody was convinced that she was right.

"Miraculous is the only word that I can think of," she said to Mrs. Cutthumb, who sold tin-tacks and cabbages; "not a miracle only of the sandy desert, but of the places where the trees and waters grow."

"The Jordan perhaps you means, Mrs. Marker, ma'am? Or did you please to have in your mind the Red Sea?"

"They were both in my mind, and both come uppermost at the same moment, Mrs. Cutthumb. But the best authorities inform us now that we must not look for more than we can understand. Yet I cannot understand how Kit Orchardson contrived after pulling me out to pull out our Miss Kitty. But look, here he comes! Why, he is everywhere almost. He seems to swing along so. His uncle ought to work him harder. Not that he is impudent. No one can say that of him. Too bashful for a man, in my opinion. But he seems to have taken such a liking to me; and I must be his senior by a considerable time. I will go into your parlour, my dear Mrs. Cutthumb, and then I can look out for our poor Miss Kitty—ah, she is so very young, and no one to stand up for her!"

"Excuse me, Miss Marker, if you please," said Mrs. Cutthumb; "but if I may make so bold to say, you are very young yourself, Miss, in years, though not in worship. And to be run away with from school is a thing that may occur to any girl when bootiful. But concerning of Miss Kitty—bless her innocent young face!—what you was pleased to say, ma'am, is most surprising." [19]

"No, Mrs. Cutthumb, very far from that, when you come to consider what human nature is. I never could do such things myself; I never could sleep easy in my bed if I thought that they ever could be imputed to me. But when we look at things it is our duty to remember that the world is made up of different people from what we are."

"What experience you have had, ma'am, and yet keeping your complexion so! Ah, if my poor Cutthumb could have kept away from the imperial! But he said it were the duty of a Briton, and he done it. Sally, get away into the back yard with your dolly. I beg your pardon, ma'am, for interrupting you of your words so."

"Well, one thing I make a point of is," Mrs. Marker continued with a gentle frown, "never to enter into any domestic affairs, though without any bias of any sort, out of doors. We all have enough, as you know, Mrs. Cutthumb, and sometimes more than we can manage, to regulate our own histories. Miss Coldpepper is a remarkable lady, so very, so highly superior; but her niece, our Miss Kitty, does not seem as yet to take after her in that particular; and scarcely to be wondered at, when you remember that she is not her niece at all of rights. But this is not a question to interest you much, nor any one outside of what I might call the Coldpepper domesticity."

"What superior words you always do have, as it were, in your muff, Mrs. Marker! But if you please to mean, Miss—being still so young I slips into it naturally—the Coldpepper Manor, why I was born upon it, and so was my parents before me. And that makes it natural, as you might say, and proper for me to have a word to say about them. I remember all the Coldpeppers since I was that high; and it shall never go no further."

"There is nothing to conceal. You must never fancy that of them. The Coldpeppers always were a haughty race, and headstrong; but bold, and outspoken, and defying of their neighbours. It was bad for any one who crossed them: you know that, if you remember old Squire Nicholas. But Miss Kitty Fairthorn is not a Coldpepper. You see you don't know everything about them, Mrs. Cutthumb. The captain had been married before he ever saw Miss Monica."

"Lor', Mrs. Marker, you quite take my breath away! And yet I might have known it, I was bound almost to know it, the moment one comes to reflection. 'Kitty's' not a name at all becoming [20] to the rank of the Manor of Coldpepper. I've been wondering about it many's the time; Arabella and Monica sounds something like; but Kitty isn't fit, except for women that has to get their own livelihood. Well, it eases my mind that she is not a Coldpepper."

"No, Mrs. Cutthumb; but she is a Fairthorn; and from all I hear the Fairthorns are much better known, in the great world of London, than our Coldpeppers. Captain Fairthorn is a man who has discovered more than the whole world knew in our fathers' days. He can make a bell ring in John o' Groat's house, he can blow up a cliff at the Land's End from London, he knows every wrinkle at the bottom of the sea, he can make a ghost stand at eight corners of the room."

"Can he save his own soul, ma'am?" the greengrocer asked in a solemn voice, being a strict

Wesleyan. “Them vanities, falsely called Science nowadays, is the depth of the snare of the Evil One. A learned man knows all the bottom of the sea, and leaves his own child to be drowned in a brook, without it was for young Kit Orchardson. Can he save his own soul, Mrs. Marker, ma’am?”

“Well, if I was to go by guesswork, I should say that he has not got very much of that to call his own. You know what Miss Monica was; although she has been such a time away from Sunbury. She took her first husband in spite of her father, and the second without a word to anybody. She had a son and two daughters by the Honourable Tom Bulwrag, and within a year after him she carried off poor Captain, who is now called Professor Fairthorn. But there, I am told, though I never set eyes on him, being made up of telegraphs and batteries, and magnesia, and a thing they call hiderography, he is hardly ever at home for a week together, and knows more about the ocean’s bed than about his own. And a lucky thing for him; for wouldn’t she be a nagger, if ever she could get the opportunity?”

“That seems to be most unnatural, and against the will of the Almighty,” Mrs. Cutthumb replied after serious thought, “that a lady should wish to reprove her husband, and yet find no ear to put it into. With all his inventions for doing away distance, he ought to be able to manage it.”

“It would make no difference, if he did, and could she expect him to pay for it? His mind is so taken up when he is at home, that she might as well go on at the bedpost. And if he was to open [21] up his wires, it would be at his discretion to receive it all. This makes her rather harsh, as you can understand, with any one that has no help for it. And our poor Miss Kitty being always in the way, and a rival as it were to her own children, oh she does know what pepper is, hot and cold, and every colour!”

“Poor lamb! And she do look so innocent and sweet, and so deserving of a real mother. No father to look after her, by your own account, ma’am, and a step-mother doing it according to her liking. Why don’t she run away, such a booty as she is?”

“She is too sweet-tempered and well-principled for that. And she thinks all the world of her father; all the more, no doubt, because he cannot attend to her. His time is too precious for him to mind his daughter. Not that he is money-making—far the other way. Those great discoverers, as I have heard say, are the last to discover the holes in their pockets. Money, Mrs. Cutthumb has been too long discovered for him to take any heed of it. And that makes another source of trouble in the household. To think of our sending the big carriage and two footmen, to find a young lady in the third class at Feltham! I took care to keep it from Miss Coldpepper.”

“Oh, it would have been shocking,” cried the widow with her hands up. “Why, the third class ain’t good enough for a dead pig to drain in, any ways on the South-Western line. Well, ma’am, and how did Miss Coldpepper take it?”

“Of these things I never speak out of the house. We are liable to err, the very best of us, I believe, and I know it from my own feelings. Those last twenty boxes of Star matches we had from you, Mrs. Cutthumb, were stars, and no mistake. Shooting stars they should be labelled. They go off like a cannon, I have had to pay for three new aprons, and it was a mercy they didn’t set the house afire.”

“Oh, they hussies—they never know how to strike them; and your Miss Coldpepper, she does change so often. Never so much as a month, ma’am, without some of them giving warning.”

“That is no concern of yours, Mrs. Cutthumb. If you speak in this low style of Coldpepper Manor, it will have to withdraw its custom, ma’am, from your—your little establishment.”

Mrs. Jenny Marker, as she spoke thus, gathered in her jacket, which was plaited with blue [22] velvet,—because she was proud of her figure, or at least so some people said who could not well get at her pockets—and although she meant no more by this than to assert her own dignity, Mrs. Cutthumb, with all the fine feelings of a widow, was naturally hurt, and showed it. And strange enough to say, though it seems such a trifle, what ensued made a very great difference to me.

“I am truly grieved, madam,” she said with a curtsey, “that my little house, which is the best I can afford, and my little shop, which was set up for me by very kind neighbours as owned no manors, when it pleased the Almighty to afflict me lo, and deprive me of a good man who could always pay his sent, and never would allow me to be put upon—”

“A model husband, no doubt, Mrs. Cutthumb; except as I fancy you observed just now, for his devotion to the imperial pint,—or perhaps I should say gallon.”

“May you never have a worse, if you ever catches any! And high time in life, ma’am, for you, Miss Jenny Marker, or Mrs. whichever you may be, and nobody in Sunbury knows the bottom of it, to be thinking a little now of your soul, ma’am, and less of your body, and the other things that perish. You draw in your cloak, ma’am, or it isn’t a cloak, nothing so suitable and sensible as that, just as if my poor goods wasn’t good enough to touch it! Perhaps that’s the reason why you beats them down so. I beg you to remember, Jenny Marker, that I consider myself as good as you are, madam, though I am not tricked out with gew-gaws and fal-lals. And what I eats, I earns, ma’am, and not the bread of servitude.”

“That will do, my good woman. I never lose my temper; though I have never been insulted before like this, even by the lowest people. Send in your little bill, this very afternoon, if one of your wonderful neighbours will be good enough to make it out for you, as you have never been

taught to write, poor thing! But whoever does it must not forget to deduct the price of three rotten French eggs.”

CHAPTER VI.
THE BEAUTIES OF NATURE.

WHILE that bitter war was raging, I enjoyed a peaceful and gentle season. It happened that I had come up our village, on a matter of strict business, at a time of day not at all unlikely to be the [23] very time of day mentioned over-night, as the one that would suit Mrs. Marker and Miss Fairthorn for doing a little business in our village. This might be explained, without any imputation on any one I have the pleasure of knowing, for all of them will admit at once that it needs no explanation. It is enough to say, that when I had the honour of seeing two ladies safe home last night, after pulling them out of the flood—as they both maintained, though never in it—no little gratitude had been expressed, and much good-will had been felt all round. And it would have been hard upon that state of things, if any "Good-bye" had been said for ever.

For my part, although I had no great fear of being knocked on the head by Sam Henderson, it might have seemed haughty and even unfeeling, if I had insisted too strongly upon my ability to take care of myself. Therefore I allowed them to consider me in peril; and to this I was partly indebted perhaps for the opportunity of meeting them on Monday. It is true that I had not learned half as much, about matters of the deepest interest to me, as Mrs. Cutthumb, without any claim to such knowledge, was now possessed of; but this might fairly be expected, for women have always been convinced that men have no right to know half as much as themselves. "Let him find it out, I am not going to tell him," is their too frequent attitude, while they feel it a duty to their own sex to pour out almost everything.

However, I have no desire to complain, and perhaps it is better thus; for if we knew all of their affairs, we might think less about them. And I was in a very deep condition of interest and wonder, not only from the hints I had received, but also from the manifold additions of my fancy. In fact, it was far more than I could do, to confine my heart to its proper work when I saw those two ladies come to do a little shopping.

At that time, there were only about a dozen of the houses, in the narrow street that runs along the river, which allowed the importance of selling to compete with the necessity of dwelling. And the few, that did appear inclined to do a little trade, if coaxed into it, were half ashamed of their late concession to the spirit of the age. No man had yet appeared who shatters the ancestral sense of congruity, who routs up the natives, as a terrier bullies mastiffs, and scarcely even leaves them their own bones. And it may be maintained, that people got things better, and found [24] them last longer than they ever do now. And this was only natural, because it always took a much longer time to buy them.

This enabled me to take my time about my own business, without any risk of being left behind by the lady housekeeper and her fair companion. From time to time I assured myself by a glance between flower-pots, or among drapery, that my quest was not gone astray, that as yet I had not lost all that I cared to see, and that I could keep in my own background, while thinking of things far beyond me.

It never had been my manner yet to be much afraid of anything; not that I stood at all upon my valour, but simply because, to the best of my knowledge, I had no enemy anywhere. Yet now, very much to my own surprise, instead of proper courage, I was full of little doubts, and more misgivings than I can at all describe, and even a tendency to run away, and try to forget the very thing I was longing for. And I knew for a certainty that if the matter came to the very best opportunity, I was quite sure to do my very worst, and cut a despicable figure, to my own undoing.

I tried to recover myself, by doing a few strokes of business on my own account, going into the butcher's, and complaining sadly that he now weighed the foot in with the leg of mutton—a privilege only to be claimed by lamb—but he said that it now was ordained by nature, and asked how I expected a poor sheep to walk. I knew that his logic would not go upon all-fours, but my wits were so loose that I let it pass; and at that very moment I discovered, betwixt the hearts of two bullocks, something very near my own. Miss Kitty Fairthorn had been set free by Mrs. Jenny Marker, while the housekeeper was driving a bargain in soft goods, unfit for young comprehension. After that, she was to go on for a talk with Widow Cutthumb, and meanwhile the young lady might look at the river, which was now rolling grandly in turbulent flood.

It was rather a shy and a delicate thing for me to go also in that direction; and the butcher (who never confined his attention to his own mutton) was as sure as could be to come out of his door, and look all up the lane. For Sunbury people, as long as I have known them, take a deep interest in one another's doings; and all the more so, when they happen to perceive that their sympathy is not requested. Wherefore I hurried back to ask another question, as if there were nothing in my mind but meat, and then turned up an alley, which would lead me round the back [25] of some houses to the Halliford Road further on.

There were many things now that I might have done, more sensible haply than what I did. I might have gone home, and had bread and cheese, and a glass of mild ale with Uncle Corny; or if that had seemed a little too ignoble, why not wander along the upper road, and thence survey, as from a terrace—which used to be the origin of the word "contemplate"—the many distant mazes of the flooded river, the trees along the margin bowing over their foundations, the weak smile of autumnal sunshine over the wrongs of its own neglect, and perhaps in the foreground a slender

figure, standing as if it were nothing in the mass?

However, what I did was to go straight on towards the one in the world who was all the world to me. By what process of reason, or unreason, or pure stupid heart, I was come in such haste to this state of mind, is more than I can explain to any, and I did not even try to explain it to myself. There was my condition, right or wrong; and those who cannot understand it may be proud of their cool wisdom; and I without harm may be sorry for them.

She wore a grey cloak looking wonderfully simple, yet gathered in small at her beautiful waist, and trimmed at the skirts, and over two little pockets, with a soft blue fur called Vicunha. And she carried a little muff of the same material, and the strings of her hat (which was like a sea-shell) were also of a blue tint very sweetly matching. But the blue that was sweetest and richest of all was that of her large, soft, loving eyes, than which it is impossible for any poet to imagine anything in heaven more lovely.

However, I shall not go on any more about her, though things may slip out unawares; and without being rude, I may say plainly, that I have a right to keep such matters to myself. For a short time, I was at a loss for the commonest presence of mind, and stood wondering; hoping that she would turn round, and yet fearing that she might think I had no business there. Her whole attention was taken up, as I knew by her attitude—for already I seemed to have a gift of understanding her—not with any thought of people near her, but with the grandeur of the rolling flood, and the breadth of quiet lake beyond it. She was saying to herself—so far as I could tell —"What is the use of such a little dot as I am, and what is the value of my little troubles, when the mighty world goes on like this, and all I can do would not make a wrinkle and scarcely a [26] flutter on the vast expanse?"

Then suddenly, an if in dread of her own thoughts, she turned round and saw me within a landyard of her. As if she had been taken in a rosy fog—for we are all ashamed of large thoughts, when caught in them—she coloured to the tint of one of Uncle Corny's peaches, though without any of the spots he was so proud of; and then she drew one hand from her blue muff, and I found it so soft and warm and precious, that I almost forgot to let it go again.

"Oh, how I am surprised to see you here!" she said, as if my general place of residence was the moon; and probably I looked as if it should be so.

"And I am even more amazed to see you here," I answered without any of my wits to help me, "but I came to do a little bit of business with the butcher. He has been doing things he had no right to do."

"I have often been told that they are inclined to take advantage," she replied, with a look which convinced me at once that she would make a first-rate housekeeper, for what butcher could resist it? "My dear father would have much trouble with them, if, if—I mean if he were at all allowed to have it. But he is always so full of great things."

"Oh, what a happy man he must be! I have heard that he is the most clever, and learned, and one of the most celebrated men in London."

I may not have heard all that, but still I was perfectly justified in saying it, for it made her talk; and every time she spoke, her voice sounded sweeter than it did the time before.

"You have been told the truth; it is acknowledged universally," she went on as if there were no fame to equal his, and with a sparkle in her blue eyes, as if a star had flashed in heaven; "there seems to be nothing that he does not know, and nothing that he does not improve by his knowledge, and make useful for—I mean for the world at large. How I can be his child, and yet so stupid and slow-witted, is a thing that amazes me, and I am trying always not to think of it."

"I am sure you are not stupid. I am sure you are very quick-witted. I never saw any one half so clever, and accomplished, and ladylike, and gentle, and"—"lovely" was the word I was about to use; but she stopped me, with a smile that would have stopped a rushing bull.

"I am showing my quick wits now," she said, presenting the charm of her hand again, "by [27] never even thanking you for all you did last evening. I was thinking before you appeared, that but for you I should probably be tossing in these wild waters now, or probably carried down as far as London Bridge, without a chance even of being buried. And it made me so sad, when I remembered that it would make no difference to any one."

"How can you say such a dreadful thing?" I exclaimed with great indignation, for her eyes that had been so full of light were darkened with sadness, and turned away; "it is not true that I saved you in the least, though I wish that I had; I should deserve to live for ever; but you speak as if no one in the world had any love for the sweetest, and best, and most lovely creature in it."

This was going rather far, I must confess; not that any word of it was at all exaggerated, or even approached the proper mark; but that it might seem a little early, on the part of one who had never had the pleasure of beholding the lady, till the previous afternoon. The remembrance of this was very awkward to me, and I was wild with myself, but could not stop the mischief now.

"Will you oblige me, Mr. Orchardson," she asked, as gently as if I had shown no folly, "by just looking down or up the village, to see if Mrs. Marker is coming. She was to have been here ten minutes ago; and we have to make a long round now, since the bridge on the lower road is washed away. I ought not to trouble you; but I never know exactly where I am in country places,

although I love the country so.”

This was more than I deserved; for a good box on the ears was the proper reward for my frowardness, and I should have been less abashed by it. “I am a bigger cad than Sam Henderson himself,” I whispered with a timid glance at her. But she seemed at a loss to know what my meaning was; and so with a deep but very clumsy bow, I departed to do her bidding.

Before I had taken many steps, there appeared the lady housekeeper in the distance, walking with great dignity, perhaps to console herself for the insolence of that Widow Cutthumb. Of this I knew nothing as yet, though it was plain that something unrighteous had disturbed her. And this made my humble demeanour more soothing and persuasive to her upright mind. After shaking her hand very warmly and paying a well-deserved compliment to her fine colour, I ventured to [28] implore a little favour, which the sight of our garden wall sparkling in the sunshine, for it was newly topped with broken glass, suggested by some good luck to me.

“Oh, if you would only come,” I said, “and see my Uncle’s trees to-morrow! They are at their very best this week, before we begin to gather largely. The pears are hanging down, so that we have had to prop the branches, and the plums are as thick as eggs together, when the hen is sitting; only instead of being pale, some are of the richest gold, and some of a deep purple, like—like that magnificent amethyst you wear; and the peaches on the wall—you might almost compare these to a lady’s cheeks, when a gentleman tells her of her beauty—”

“Really, Mr. Orchardson, you are quite a poet!”

“And when you get tired of looking at them, and tasting the ripest, all you have to do is to come into the vinery, and sit beneath the leaves, and look all along it, wherever the clusters leave any room to look, until you don’t know which you like the best, the appearance of the black or the white ones, because so much depends upon the light. And then Uncle Corny comes with a pair of scissors, and says—‘Ma’am, that is not the way to look at it. The proof of the pudding is in the eating,’ and he hands you in a vine-leaf, being careful where he cuts it, a jet-black shoulder of Black Hamburgh, and an amber-coloured triplet of White Muscat.”

“Mr. Orchardson, you are making my mouth water, if a vulgar expression may be allowed to one who eats the bread of servitude.” I wondered to hear her speak thus, though I saw that she had been aggrieved by somebody. “And if you will be at home to-morrow afternoon, perhaps I might obtain permission to leave my mistress for an hour or two. I might walk down about four o’clock, when I have finished all the blacking of the boots.”

Something with a spiteful tang to it was rankling in her mind, as I perceived; but having no right to ask, I just lifted my hat and gazed at her gold chain and broach. Then a tear or two, started by her own words, came forth, and she looked at me softly.

“You would add to the favour of your invitation,” she said with a smile which made me look at something else, “if you would include in it Miss Kitty Fairthorn. Poor thing! She is put upon very sadly, and it would be such a treat for her. They see so little of the beauties of nature in London.”

“I am sure my Uncle will be most happy;” I answered as if I were not sure about myself. [29]

CHAPTER VII.
DE GUSTIBUS.

Now my Uncle Cornelius Orchardson (a stout and calm fruit-grower, called in contumely "Corny the topper" by strangers who wanted his growth for nothing) professed and even practised a large contempt for gossip. Nevertheless it was plain enough that his feelings were hurt, if a thing went on, which he was bound in politeness to know, and yet was not offered any tidings of it. With such people it is always wiser, if you have done anything against their wishes, to let them know all the particulars at once; and so to have it out and be done with it. And I was beginning to love him now, which as a boy I had done but little, inasmuch as he never gave way to me. Obstinate as he was, and sometimes hot—if one tried to play tricks with him—I was not much afraid of Uncle Corny, although so dependent upon him. For I knew him to be a just man in the main, and one who kept no magnet of his own to fetch down the balance to his own desires. Yea, rather he would set the beam against himself, when it trembled in doubt of its duty.

With the hasty conclusions of youth, I believed that because he was now an old bachelor, though able to afford a wife many years ago, he had taken and held to an adverse view of the fairer and better half of the human race. And his frequent counsels to me to keep out of their way confirmed my conviction. The course of time proved that I was wrong in this, as in many other matters of my judgment; and my rule, if I had to begin again, would be to think the best of every man, till he compels me otherwise. But the worst of Uncle Corny was that he never cared to vindicate himself.

His countenance also was in keeping with this manner, and the build of his body and the habit of his gait. His figure was tall, yet wide and thick, and his face very solid and ample. He had never been comely by line and rule, yet always very pleasant for an honest man to look at, and likely to win the good word of a woman. Because there was strength and decision in his face, and [30] a power of giving full meaning to his words, which were generally short and to the purpose. And especially he was gifted with a very solid nose, not of any Roman or Grecian cast, but broadly English, and expansive, and expressive, and sometimes even waggish when he told an ancient tale.

Knowing that he would be quite sure to hear of my adventures soon, even if he had not heard already—for Sunbury is a fine place for talk—and trusting to his better feelings (which were always uppermost after a solid supper, when he stirred his glass of hot rum and water, and had his long pipe lit for him), I began upon him that very night with what my mind was full of. For Tabby Tapscott was now gone home, after looking at me rather queerly.

"What a knowledge of the world you have, Uncle Corny!" I exclaimed at the end of his favourite tale concerning Covent Garden; "your advice must be worth more than the counsel of the cleverest lawyer in London."

"More honest at least, and no fee to pay," he answered rather testily, for he hated all humbug and compliments. "What have you been at, young man? Is it my advice, or my aid, you want?"

"A little of both; or a lot of one, and a little of the other. I have made the acquaintance of a sweet young lady, the gentlest, and loveliest, and most graceful, and modest, and elegant, and accomplished, and lofty-minded, and noble-hearted, and—and—"

"Angelic, angelic is the word, Kit—don't begrudge it; it saves such a lot of the others."

"Yes, angelic," I replied with firmness; "and even that is not half good enough. You know nothing of such matters, Uncle Corny."

"Then what is the use of my advice? You had better go to Tabby Tapscott."

This threw me out a little; but I would not be brow-beaten.

"If you have no wish to hear any more about her, and compare her to an old creature like Tabby, all I can say is that I am sorry for your taste, very sorry for your taste, Uncle Corny."

"Well, well, go on, Kit. Let us have it all, while we are about it. Rasp the baker told me something. He has brought down a girl from London who can make short bread and maids of honour. No wonder you fell in love with her."

"You may try to provoke me, but you shall not succeed; because you know no better. What will [31] you say when I tell you the young lady is the niece of Miss Coldpepper of Coldpepper Manor?"

I looked at Uncle Corny with a glance of triumph; and then stood up, to breathe again, after my own audacity. But instead of being terrified, he took it very coolly.

"Well, a cat may look at a king," said he, pursuing his pipe with his usual discretion; "and I suppose you have only looked at her; though somebody said you pulled her out of our watercress brook."

"Sir, I have had two delightful talks with her; and I mean to have another to-morrow. Not that I have any hope—of course, I am well aware—"

"That you are unworthy to worship her shoe-string, and lie down for her peg-heels to tread on. If she likes you, I don't see why you shouldn't have her. By-and-by, I mean, when you get a little

wiser. But has the girl got any money?”

“I hope not; I hope not, from the bottom of my heart. It would be yet another obstacle. She is as high above me, as the heaven is above the earth, without—without even a penny in her pockets.”

“Flies all the higher, because her pockets are so light.” He spoke with a jocosity, which appeared to me most vulgar. “Don’t look as if you longed to knock me over, Kit. By the way, I heard that you had floored Sam Henderson. If so, you deserve the best maid that ever looked into a looking-glass. What do you want me to do, my lad? I know a little of those people.”

I wondered what people he meant, but feared to ask him for the moment, lest I might lose the chance of getting the favour I had set my heart on. “It is a very simple thing,” I said, “and need not take your time up. Mrs. Marker is longing to see your garden; and if she may come to-morrow afternoon, she will bring the young lady, and I can show them round. You need not stir a step, or even turn your head.”

“It is quite enough to have one head turned. They may come, if they choose, but they must not bother me. Hand me the jar of tobacco, Kit, and be off to the books, instead of spooning.”

My uncle might easily have taken a more ample and cordial view of the question; still I was pleased not to find him worse, and ordered our crock-boy on the Tuesday morning to fetch a little round while he ate his breakfast, and leave a note for Mrs Marker at the lodge of the Coldpepper [32] grounds, near the dairy, which the housekeeper visited early. And then I went to gather, and basket a quarter of Keswick codlin and Quarantines. This occupied all the forenoon, and what with seeing that they were picked aright, and sorted into firsts and seconds, and fairly packed, with no rubbish at the bottom, into bushel-baskets, and yet presented smiling with their eyes upward to meet the gaze of the purchaser, the day went so fast that it was dinner-time, before I could sit down, and dwell upon my heart. Then at a reproachful glance from Selsey Bill, our orchard foreman, who had heard the church clock strike one, and felt it to the depths of his capable stomach, I set three fingers to my teeth, and blew the signal, which is so welcome to the men who have lived upon nothing but hope, ever since half-past eight o’clock.

It is not to be denied, however, that I had taken pretty sharp advantage of being well mounted from time to time on the upper rungs of a ladder, which gave me command of the Halliford Road —the higher road, I mean, for the lower now was stopped and except to carts and carriages—in such a manner that none could come from that part of the world, without my knowledge. Seeing only a pedlar and some few women (highly interesting to themselves no doubt, but not concerning my state of mind), I went in to dine with Uncle Corny, and took care to eat none of his onions.

“What cheeks you have got, Kit!” he cried with a laugh; “and it is not from eating too much dinner. You have stolen the colour of my Quarantines. Eat, boy, eat; or how will you pull through it? No more visits from young ladies, if you are to go off your head like this. You have put the new mustard-spoon into the salt. A pretty muddle, I’m afraid, among my apples.”

Being always very dutiful, I let him have his grumble; and presently he lit his pipe, and made off for the packing-shed, though the load was not going till to-morrow night. Then I put myself into a little better trim, feeling that the best I did could never make me fit to look round the corner of a wall at somebody. Although I was considered in our village a smart and tidy and well-built young fellow, and one of the girls at the linendraper’s had sent me a Valentine last spring, said to be of her own composition, beginning—“Thou noble and majestic youth, Thy curls and thy ruddy cheeks proclaim the truth, That whenever I think of thee, I have a sigh, And if thou provest [33] false, I shall jump into the Thames and die!” But it was in vain for me to think of this at present; it gave me no support at all worth having; and even a book of poetry, which I put into my pocket, might just as well have been the list of pots and pans from Turnham Green.

Before I could get into any real courage, there came a gentle double knock, as if from the handle of a parasol, at the green door near the corner of the wall, and then a little laugh; and then a sweet voice said, “Oh, Jenny, don’t you think we had better go back? Are you sure that Auntie said that I might come?” In dread of further doubts, I ran up promptly, and opened the door, and brought them in, and locked it.

“This young lady,” began Mrs. Marker, as if they were come for her sake only, “has never seen any fruit-garden, fruit-orchard, fruit-establishment, or whatever the proper name is. And I thought perhaps before she goes back to London, this would enlarge her store of knowledge; and her father, who is a very learned man, might like to hear her account of it. Now keep your eyes open, Miss Kitty, and see all. You would fancy that she noticed nothing, Mr. Orchardson, by the way she goes on, and her quietness. And yet when you come to talk afterwards, it turns out that nothing has escaped her blue eyes; and she can tell ten times as much as I can, and I am considered pretty accurate too. But we must pay our respects to your Uncle, Mr. Cornelius Orchardson. I always like to do the proper thing. Business first, and pleasure afterwards.”

“He will smile, when he hears how you have put it. He is very busy now at the packing-shed. But he told me to take you wherever you liked; and he will come down, when he has made out his list. On the left you have the peach-wall, and on the right the plums; and the figs are getting very ripe down this alley. We very seldom eat much fruit ourselves, because we have such a lot of it. But we always long to get ladies’ opinions, because of the delicacy of their taste.”

“It is a perfect shame,” said Mrs. Marker, while making up her mind what to begin with, “that, in such a Paradise, there should be no lady, to give you the knowledge of good and evil. I brought a silver knife with me, in case of being tempted. Not that I mean to taste anything of course, unless my opinion should be absolutely required. My constitution is not strong, Mr. Kit; and I am compelled to be very careful.”

I knew what was meant by that, having heard it often. “You shall have nothing, madam, but the very best,” I answered; “for we never throw away an opportunity like this. What shall we offer [34] first for your judgment?”

“Kitty, what do you say?” She turned as if in doubt. “You know, my dear, how careful we must be. This young lady, Mr. Kit, allows me to call her ‘Kitty,’ in our private moments. Kit and Kitty—what a very strange coincidence!”

I could not help looking at the beautiful Miss Fairthorn; and to my eyes she became more beautiful than ever. For a deep blush spread upon her lovely cheeks, and she turned away, and said, “I leave it quite to you.”

If Mrs. Marker had been planning all the morning how to get the best of the tasting to herself, and to render her judgment supreme, she could hardly have hit upon a better device than this. For her young companion became so nervous and so much confused, and I myself so diffident and deeply occupied, that our only object was to fill the lady housekeeper’s mouth, and keep it running over with nothing worse than fruit. Now and then I ventured to steal a glance at the one with whom my heart was filled, as if to ask whether she would ever forgive me for my sad name of Kit. But her eyes were afraid to encounter mine; or if by any chance they did so, the light that was in them wavered like a timid gleam pursued by cloud. To relieve this trouble, I began to chatter vague nonsense to the other visitor, who was falling to in earnest.

“Everything is out of time this year, and nothing up to character. There has been no sunshine on this wall, until you ladies shone upon it; and what amazes me most is to find that anything has any colour at all. Here is a Grosse Mignonne now, a week ago as green as a leek, and covered now with downy crimson, except just where a leaf has made a pale curve across it, like the pressure of a finger on your cheek. Taste it, Mrs. Marker; you are not getting on at all.”

“Let me see, that makes seven, I think. I shall have lost my taste before we get among the gages. Thank you, I am sure. Oh, how lovely, and delicious! Luscious perhaps is the better expression. There goes ever so much more juice on my dress. I ought to have brought a bib, Mr. Kit; and I will, if I ever come again. But would not you say it was just the least thought woolly?” She had never heard of such a thing before, but I had taught her, and she was growing critical. “Kitty dear, you are tasting nothing. Don’t you consider that just an atom woolly?”

“Very likely it is. I don’t know enough to say. But I never remember tasting wool, with so fine a [35] flavour in it.”

Perhaps I was not in a proper mood to judge; but verily this appeared to me to show an inborn aptitude for taking the management of the fruit, and the government of the grower. To exaggerate is altogether out of my nature, and I find it a great mistake to be ecstatic; but in spite of all that, I would have given every sixpence allowed me by my Uncle Corny—who was always afraid of allowing me too much—if only I could have conveyed to this exquisite judge my opinion of her sentence. But that blessed discovery of Mrs. Marker’s about the everlasting fitness of our names,—upon which I had been dwelling in my heart, long before her stupid slowness blurted it—this, I say, had acted in a very awkward manner upon a mind infinitely higher than hers; and yet I hoped humbly that it might suggest something, which might be for the best, if let alone.

Things being so, it was not at all amiss that a loud voice reached us from the clipped yew-hedge, which was set across to break the north winds here—“Kit, where the deuce are you gone mooning? I thought you would have come up with the ladies, long ago.”

“Here we are, looking from a distance at your peaches. Oh, Mr. Orchardson, how lovely they do seem!” Mrs. Marker lost her dignity by giving me a wink, believing as she did—and many others thought the same—that I was next to nobody in these gardens, and my Uncle a tiger over every fruit he grew.

“We have had as many peaches as we can eat, sir,” I said, without any wish to contradict her, but simply to show the position I held.

“Ladies will excuse my present plight;” he had no coat on, and his sleeves were tucked up, showing a pair of thick brown arms. “My peaches are very poor this year, and many have split their stones, and rot instead of ripening. We have not had such a season since 1852. I hope you will not judge us by the wretched things you see. But come on a little further, and try something else. All fruit is water, such a year as we have had. But possibly I may find a plum or two worth eating.”

“Allow me the pleasure, sir,” said Mrs. Marker, who always insisted on proper forms, “of introducing you to Miss Fairthorn, the only daughter of Captain, or as he now is considered, Professor Fairthorn—a gentleman of the highest scientific tendencies.”

“To be sure,” said Uncle Corny, as he took his hat off, and smiled with surprise at her beauty; [36] “I knew Captain Fairthorn, years ago, and a very noble man he is. I have very good cause to remember him—but I will not trouble you with that now. Mrs. Marker, if you would just turn this

corner—take care of your most becoming bonnet, young lady”—this pleased the good housekeeper more than twenty plums,—“our trees are not as sensitive as we are.”

His urbanity amazed me, for I never could have thought a good man could be so inconsistent; and I said to myself that after all there is something irresistible in women. So I ventured to sidle up to Miss Fairthorn, as he led the way with his convoy, and asked her what she thought of him.

“Oh, I think he is so nice,” she replied smiling at me, as if she was pleased with my question; “so upright, and manly, and such a fine countenance. No wonder, I’m sure, that his fruit is good.”

“Did you notice how much he was surprised at you, at your very pretty dress, and exceedingly sweet smile, and most ladylike appearance, and silvery voice, and lovely—lovely way of holding your parasol?”

“How can you talk such nonsense, Mr. Orchardson? And your Uncle appears such a sensible man! Dear me, we are losing all the wise things he can say. Let us hurry on—it was this way, I think.”

“No, no! Don’t you hear their voices down this path? Not twenty yards off, if it were not for these trees. Oh, do let me carry your parasol. You will want both hands to get along. Before you know where we are, we shall be in the broad road. Oh, I am so sorry—it was all my fault. You must let me undo the mischief I have done. May I show you how well I understand all roses?”

By good luck, combined with some little skill of mine, her simple yet wholly adorable frock was captured in three places by gooseberries whom I envied. I expected great delight from this. But she showed at once the sweetness of her temper, and her height above me. Instead of blushing stupidly, she smiled, and said—“Thank you, I will do it for myself. You can hardly be expected to understand such things.”

CHAPTER VIII.
BAD COUNSEL.

[37]

THERE are very few things that have the power to please us both in heart and mind, even when they have the will to do it, which is very seldom. Great events in our lives flash by without a word, and scarcely seem to give us time to chuckle, or to sob, till afterwards. But the little turns of time are more indulgent, and pass us with a sauntering foot, more often dull than lightsome.

For the moment, I was glad to find that my Uncle Cornelius, in his plain way, had taken a liking to my love. But I gave him little credit for it, inasmuch as it seemed impossible to me that he could do otherwise. Such was my petty jealousy that I did not even want to hear him praise her, except in my own words. But he, in his solid way, would take his own view of her character—as if he knew anything about it!

"I don't care a farthing about all that," I cried, when he had spoken of some things, which tell the longest.

"I can see she is very quiet, and full of home affections," he persisted, as if I were a boy at school, and he were holding the spelling book; "she is not extravagant, nor fond of waste; that I saw by the way she went through a 'Huling's Superb,' with a hole in it. I could scarcely have done it any better myself. And she was really grieved, which the lady-housekeeper had not the sense to be, by the freedom—she called it recklessness—with which I picked those Jeffersons, to find one in tip-top condition. And then when I offered to make some tea, the housekeeper who had been stuffing for hours only asked if the water was boiling. But your sweetheart began to buckle up, and asked who could touch tea, after such delicious things."

"Buckle up, indeed! Uncle Corny, you are outrageous. She had got no such thing as a buckle near her. Her waist is done round with a narrow blue ribbon, the colour of the sky, as her eyes are. And I will thank you not to call her my sweetheart, if you please. I shall never have such luck. And it sounds so common. There ought to be a better expression for it. And such things are not made to be talked of."

"Very well! You won't hear me say another word. It will all come to nothing; that's one comfort. She goes back to London on Friday; and you will very soon console yourself with Rasp's [38] young woman. I am told that she has fine black eyes; and I am not sure that black don't beat blue ones, after all."

This was so disgusting that I went away, and worked till dusk at a heavy piece of trenching; and when it was dusk I lay in wait for three felonious boys who came from Hampton, almost every evening, prowling for our apples. I caught all three, and trounced them well—which is the only proper plan—and the sound of their wailings, as they went home, restored my faith in justice. For I had given them their choice—"a licking or a summons"—and they said very justly, "Oh, a licking, if you please, sir." The world has now come to such a pass, that a father would summon me for assault, if I so discharged his duty for him; but thirty years ago a bit of common sense survived.

But in spite of that little satisfaction, I could not get much sleep that night, for rolling, and pondering, and twisting in and out, the tangle and the burden of a troubled mind. Turn it as I might, there was no opening through it for another view of that perfect creature, with whom my whole life seemed to flow. Terrible, terrible was the truth that she would leave us all on Friday, and be swallowed up and no more seen, in that great earthquake, London. A thousand wild ideas, and schemes, for stealing yet one more interview, and countless crazy hopes that she herself might try to compass it, all came thrilling through my restless brain, but not one would stop there. None had any shape or substance, such as could be worked upon, and brought to likelihood of success. This was Tuesday night; last Saturday night how different everything had been! Then I had only cared to know, that things in the ground were doing well, that all the fruit which required gathering got its due, and looked its best on its way to be devoured, that every man pocketed his wages in good time to spend them, and that there was a little hope of the weather taking up at last. Now there had been three days without rain, and with touch of autumnal sunshine; heaven began to look bright again, and the earth (which, like the dwellers therein, lives only aright in view of it) was beginning to lift her sodden crust, and fetch once more her storm-trampled breath and issue anew the genial green in the midrib of mouldy foliage. In a word, the summer which had failed the year, for want of a smile to lead it, was breaking out at this last moment, better late than never.

Possessed as I was with my own troubles, and only a flickering sunshine, I could not resist the [39] contagious lightness of cheerful faces all around. The workmen, who do (in spite of all British reserve, and manly selfishness) take a deep interest in their employer's welfare, and stand up for him bravely, when any one abuses him, except themselves—every man of them laid heel to spade, or hoisted ladder on shoulder, with new briskness; because they could say to one another—"The old buffer, who carries on this place, has fought against long odds like a man; and now things look as if they was taking a little turn in his favour."

On the Wednesday morning glum however was my mind, and grim my face, and Uncle Corny made some jokes, which may have seemed very good to him. Our breakfast things were set as usual, and our breakfast cooked and served by Mrs. Tabby Tapscott, that sage widow from the village, whom we were often pleased to laugh at for her Devonshire dialect. Also for her firm

conviction, that nothing in these outlandish parts, and none of our biggest men, were fit to compare with the products of the West. There was one point however on which we gladly confessed the truth that was in her—she could fry potatoes, not leathery chips, nor the cake of pulpy fatness, but the crisp yet melting patin of brown gold, so as none of the East may fry them. She turned them out of the frying-pan upon a willow-pattern plate, and the man deserved to wear the willow, who could think of weeping near them.

Now this good woman, who was a “cure,” as the slang boys of our village said, took (though I knew it not as yet) a tender interest in my affairs. For the last day or two, I had observed that she glanced at me rather strangely, and once or twice behind my Uncle’s back, she had put her finger on her lips, and then jerked her thumb over her shoulder, as if to say—“Come and have a quiet word with me.”

But my frame of mind had appeared to me too noble and exalted to be shared with her, until it was come to such a pitch that any aid would be welcome.

This morning, as half of her fine work remained on my plate neglected, she could no longer contain herself, but pinched my sleeve and whispered, while my Uncle was going to the window, “Come out in gearden, I want to spake to ’e.”

“Speak away,” I answered, “there is nothing to stop you, Mrs. Tapscott;” but she looked at me and muttered that I was just a fool, and she had a mind to have nought to do with me. [40]

By the common law of nature, this made me long to hear what on earth she could have to say, and I gave her the chance, while she washed up the things, to see where I was, and to come out if she pleased. She might do exactly as she pleased, for I did not intend to encourage her. She came out, and began without asking me.

“I can’t abide to zee ’e look so crule weist and peaky. The toorn of your nose bain’t the zame as her was, and you don’t zim at home with your vittels, Measter Kit. Lor’ bless ’e, I been droo the zame my zen, and I knaws arl about ’en.”

At first I was inclined to walk away; but it would have been shabby to be rude to her, and a look of good-will and kindly pity was in her hard-worn eyes and face. “What can you have to say to me?” I asked.

“You be young, and I be old,” she took my coat to stop me; “you be peart and nimble, and I be a’most crippled with rheumatics and rumbago. But the Lord hath made us arl alike, though He have given us different. I knows as wull what ails ’e now, as if it arl coom droo my own heart. And what you be zaying to yourzelf is—‘How be I to goo on with it’?”

This was a wonderfully accurate description of my present state of mind. I looked at Mrs. Tapscott, with the admiration she deserved, and said—“Well then, how be I to goo on with it?”

“I’ve athought ’un out,” she made answer bravely; “what you be bound to do, Measter Kit, is never to let she goo back to Lunnon, wi’out zettling zummat.”

Here was the whole of it in a nutshell. But how was I to settle anything?

“Oh, Tabby, dear Tabby!” I cried, with some loss of dignity, but much gain of truth; “how can I even get the chance of saying a word to her again? This is Wednesday, and she goes back on Friday, and perhaps she never comes again, and there are millions of people between us. Everybody knows what Miss Coldpepper is, as proud as Punch, and as stiff as starch. If I even dared to go near the house, she’d just tell the gamekeeper to shoot me.”

“Wull, a young man as have vallen in love must take his chance of shot-guns. But if so be you latts her goo awai wi’out so much as anoother ward, you desarves to have no tongue in the head of ’e.”

“How easy it is to talk!” I replied, making ready to leave her, and think by myself. “But how [41] hard and impossible, Tabby, to find any chance of doing anything. I must make up my mind not to see her any more; but to think of her always, as long as I live.”

“Boddledicks!” cried Mrs. Tapscott, her favourite interjection of contempt—what it meant we knew not, and probably not she. “Boddledicks, where be the brains of they men? I could tull ’e what to do in half a zecond, lad, to vetch old Coldpepper, and the young leddy too, and every mortial ’ooman in thic there ouze, to hum eartr’e, the zame as if they zighted ’e a burning to the muckpit, with all their Zunday vainery under thee arm.”

I looked at Tabby Tapscott with some surprise; for she was giving greater force to her description by using leg and arm as if she bore a share in all of it. And the vigour of her countenance made me smile. But the old woman laughed with a superior air. “Tak’th a bit o’ time, for volks with slow brains to vollew my maind up—don’t her now? Goo up to ’ouze, young man, and stale old Ragless.”

“Steal old Regulus!” I cried in great amazement, “why, what good on earth would that do me? And if it would do any good, how am I to manage it? I have not been brought up to that profession.”

“I zeed a man to Barrinarbor, vaive and vorty year agone, the most wonnerful cliver chap, I ever zee. He coom a-coortin’ of me, the taime as I wor ruckoned the purtiest maid in arl the

parish of Westdown. But I wadn’t have none of ’un, because a’ wor so tricksy. Howsomever I didn’t zay ‘noo’ to wance, for a’ wor the most wonnerful chap I ever zee. The Lord had been and given he every zort o’ counsel. A’ could churm a harse out of any vield or linhay, a’ could mak’ the coos hurn to ’un, when the calves was zuckin’, a’ could vetch any dog a’ took a vancy to from atwane his owner’s legs or from’s own zupper. And a’ zhowed me a trick or two I han’t vorgotten yet. I could tull ’e purty smart how to vetch old Ragless, and kape ’un so long as you was mainded.”

Now I might have paid little attention to this, and indeed had begun to reject the suggestion of a stratagem far below the dignity of love, till suddenly a queer dream came to my remembrance, a dream of last Sunday night, the very night after that little adventure at the timber bridge. In that enchanting vision, I had seen Miss Fairthorn smiling as she came to me, through a lovely [42] meadow enamelled with primrose, and cowslip, and bluebell, herself of course the fairest of all the flowers. And when I approached her, behold, she was led by this same dog, old Regulus, who conducted her gracefully to my longing arms, by means of the long gold chain which had reposed on the stately bosom of Mrs. Jenny Marker. I am not superstitious—as everybody vows when recounting his dreams—but still it did seem strange.

“Lave it arl to me,” Mrs. Tapscott went on, as she saw my hesitation. “Nort for ’e to do, but to gie me a zhillin’, vor to buy the stuff, and nobody no wiser. Then goo avore zunrise, and vetch old Ragless. Putt ’un in a barg, and keep ’un znug in thic there old root-ouze. My stars and garters, what a bit o’ vun ’twill be!”

CHAPTER IX.
A DOG VIOLATE.

A GREAT observer of these latter days has advised us to abstain from deep research into the origin of our own names. Otherwise we might become convinced of a lamentable want of lofty tone among those, without whom we could not have been here, to show our superiority. A vein of fine thought is at once set flowing; but for “Ragless” it would have flowed in vain, as dogs have no surname to dwell upon.

His case was a strange one, and not without interest. Nobody in our parish had any knowledge of his ancestry, although he had won very high repute by biting many people who got over it. Any other dog would have become the victim of an injudicious outcry; but “Ragless,” by making some other good bites, established his legal right to do it, and was now considered a very wholesome dog, though he might have a temper of his own. But even if he had, who was to blame?

Some seven, or it may have been eight years since, Miss Coldpepper was “rolling in her carriage” down Feltham hill, when the coachman pulled up very sharply, and just in time to save mishap. All the boys in the village were let loose from school, and with one accord had found a genial pastime, which they were pursuing with the vigour of our race. They had got a poor dog, [43] with no father, or mother, or even policeman to defend him, and they had put him in a barrel near a garden-gate, and tacked in the head so that no escape was left. This being done to their entire satisfaction, what remained except to roll him down the hill? And this they were doing with a lofty sense of pleasure, and shouts that almost drowned the smothered howls from within, when the carriage came upon them, and very nearly served them right. “Let them have the whip,” cried the lady with due feeling, when the footman had jumped down and reported all the facts; but the ring-leaders had vanished, and the boys who tasted lash were some innocent little ones who had only helped in shouting. “Hand him in to me,” was her next order; and the poor trembling animal saw pity in her eyes, and gave her face a timid lick, which made his fortune. No claimant being found for him, the lady took him home, and aptly called him “Regulus,” which the servants very promptly converted into “Ragless,” reasoning well that the Italian greyhound wore a coat, but this dog had none, save the bristles wherewith Nature had endowed him. In the course of time he superseded every other dog, and probably every human being, in the affection of Miss Coldpepper.

If the early portion of his life had been unhappy, fortune had now made him ample amends, and he should have been in amity with all mankind. But whether from remembrance of his youthful woes, or cynical perception of our frailties and our frauds, Regulus never acquired that sweetness, which we look for in dogs, so much more than in ourselves. His standard of action was strict duty beyond doubt, but a duty too strictly limited, and confined to two persons—himself, and his mistress. With the rest of creation he was cheerfully at war, though tolerably neutral towards the cook, when she could bid high enough for his consideration. These things made him deeply respected.

In person however, he was not quite a dog to arouse any vast enthusiasm. He belonged to the order of the wiry-coated terriers, if he was a terrier at all; for in him all the elements were so duly mingled, that Nature could only proclaim him a dog. The colour of ginger and that of cinnamon were blended together in his outward dog; and he went on three legs, quite as often as on four, as much from contempt of the earth perhaps as from feelings of physical economy. There was nothing base about him; he had fine teeth, and he showed them, but never made insidious assault [44] on anybody. When he meant to bite, he did it quickly, and expressed his satisfaction afterwards.

To seduce such a sentry, was an enterprise worthy of him, who in sweet love’s service, and dispensing its mournful melodies, enchanted the son of Echidna. And it may have been this sense of difficulty, and a sporting desire to conquer it, which led me to follow up the joke, and try my hand at a job, which had beaten the deepest dog-stealers of Seven Dials.

All day long, I hoped to get at least a glimpse, or if bad luck would not allow that, to hear at any rate something of that young lady, without whom my life must grow old and barren. For this was no school-boy affair of the fancy, nor even a light skit of early manhood, such as fifty young fellows have out of fifty-one, and go their way quickly after some other girl. I had never been given to such fugitive sport; I was now in the prime of my years almost, and though I might have looked at maidens, and thought what pretty things they were, none had ever touched my heart till now. And “touched” is by no means the proper word to use; it should be said plainly, that all my heart was occupied, and possessed to its deepest fibre by a being far better, and sweeter, and nobler than its outer and bodily owner; and that this must abide so to its very latest pulse; as you will truly find, if you care to hear about it.

Not a word came to me about those things which destroyed all my attention to any other; and the dusk had stopped work—which was my only comfort—and I sat all alone that Wednesday evening trying to get through a little bread and cheese, but glancing more often from our old window at the gloomy rush of the river, which was still in high flood though some little abated. Uncle Corny was gone, to try to get some money from people who had thriven on his hard-won fruit, and Mrs. Tabby Tapscott had left the house early, upon some business of her own. The house-door was open, for we had not many rogues, till the railway came some years afterwards; and the evening was of those that smell of beehives, and cornstacks, and horses upon their way home. At last, when I had made up my mind to be forgotten by every one, in came Tabby, as

bright as a bun.

"Oh fai, oh fai!" she cried; "whatever be 'e doing of? Atin' no zupper, and zittin' as if 'e was mazed a'most. Look 'e zee what the Lord hath zent 'e! I was vorced to go arl the way to Hampton for 'un, for year of they long tongues to Zunbury. If this wun't vetch Measter Ragless, arl I can [45] zay is her bain't a dog. Putt 'un down in zellar, when I've larned 'e how to use 'un."

From beneath her shawl she produced a little box, which she opened in triumph, and the room was filled at once with a very peculiar odour quite unknown to me. It was pungent rather than pleasant, and it made me sneeze as well as laugh.

"You be up there by vaive o'clock, when the daisies' eyes be openin', and goo to the zide door I tould 'e of"—Mrs. Tapscott knew all the household ways at Coldpepper Hall, through a niece of hers who was kitchen-maid, "and vang this by the coord out o' heelin', wi'out titchin' of 'un with thy vingers, and drag 'un athort the grass and the pilm to backzide o' the zhrubbery, and then you step out o' zight in a lew cornder. Ould dog be put out at zix o'clock riglar, and 'tis liable he'll hurn straight to 'e. Then let 'un ate a hummick, and kitch 'un up vittily, and pop 'un into barg, and carr 'un home here, and I'll zhow 'e what to do with 'un. But mind as her don't scammel 'e. Her be turble itemy."

She gave me many other minute directions, and made me laugh so that my spirits rose, with the hope of an interesting little farce, to relieve the more tragic surroundings. I undertook briskly to play my part, looking on the matter as a harmless joke; though I came to think in course of time that the cruel theft I suffered from might partly be a just requital for this wicked robbery. And yet it was absurd and senseless, to make such comparison.

Without disturbing Uncle Corny, who slept very heavily, I was up before daylight on the Thursday morning, and set out with the box and bag on my felonious enterprise. Coldpepper Hall, or Manor, as it was called indifferently, stood back upon some rising ground at a distance from the river, and was sheltered well by growth of trees. There was nothing very grand about it, and it leaned on stucco more than stone; but there was plenty of room both within and without, and any one getting inside the doors might say to himself, with some comfort flowing into him—"I am sure that I need never be in any hurry here."

The sun meant to get up a little later on, when I jumped the palings of this old demesne, at a place where of right there should have been a footpath, but the owner of the Manor had stopped it long ago, perceiving the superior claims of quietude. Nobody had cared to make a fuss about it, but enough of ancestral right remained to justify me in getting over. Every window of the house [46] was still asleep, and I gazed at it with humble reverence, not as the citadel of the Coldpeppers, but as the shrine of my sacred love. Then I chose a place of ambush in a nest of hollies, and approaching the sallyport of Regulus, drew a slow trail from it across the dewy grass to my lurking-place, and there waited calmly.

Sweet visions of love from the ivory gate now favoured me with their attendance, partly perhaps because love had not allowed me to sleep out my sleep. Far as I am from any claim to the merits of a classical education, I had been for some years, off and on, as a day boy at Hampton Grammar-school, and could do a bit of Virgil pretty well, and an ode or two of Horace. Whenever Uncle Corny came across a Latin name he would call for me; and take it altogether, I had long been considered the most learned young man in Sunbury. Even now I remembered, though most of it was gone, the story of the Nymph who placed her son in ambuscade for Proteus, and the noble description of Regulus on parole, waving off the last kiss of his wife and babes. Grimly he set his manly visage on the ground; and my Regulus was doing the very same thing now.

Fat Charles had opened the door with a yawn, and sent forth that animal of Roman type, to snuff the morning air, and perform his toilet, and pay his orisons in general. Luxurious days had told their tale; it was too plain that Capua had corrupted Sabine simplicity. Regulus moved with a listless air, his desire to find whom he might bite lay dormant, and no sense of iniquity pricked his ears, or lifted the balance of his tail. "Let the world wag," was the expression of his eyes, "I get whatever I want in it, and would wag to it also, if I were not too fat." It appeared too certain that if I meant to catch him, I should have to go and bag him where he stood.

But suddenly down went his nose, and his bristles flew up, and every line of his system grew stiff as wire. He had lit on my trail near a narrow flower-border, and it presented itself with a double aspect. Was it the ever-fresh memory of a cat—not a cat of every-day life of course, but a civet-cat, a musk-cat, a cat of poetic, or even fabulous perfume? Or was it the long-drawn sweetness of a new ambrosial food, heaven-sent to tempt his once lively, but now vainly wept-for appetite? Whatever it might be, the line of duty was marked, and beyond evasion.

Those of our race who have made a study of dogs, for the sake of example, declare that the [47] best and most noble of them follow quest with their noses well up in the air. Regulus failed in this test of merit; he spread his nostrils affably within an inch of where the worms lay, pricked his hairy ears, which were of divers colours, and with the stump of his tail as the loftiest point of his person, ran a bee-line towards me. In accordance with his fame, I made ready for a bite; but to my surprise he paused, when he came point-blank upon me, and seemed taken aback, as with some wholly new emotion. Regardful of the teaching of my Nymph, I offered him a portion of the magic sop, and while he was intent upon it slipped a stout potato-sack over his head, tumbled him in with a push in the rear, and shouldered him.

Taking the path across the fields, I got home without meeting any one, and found Tabby

waiting for me near the root-house, which was simply the trunk of a grand old oak, with a slab of elm fitted as a door to it. No one was likely to visit this old storehouse at the present time of year, and the loudest wailing of the largest dog might be carried on in the strictest privacy. But I meant him to be happy there, and so he was—to some extent.

For he seemed to resign himself, as if recalling his early adventure in the barrel, and regarded his later prosperity as a dream; and probably the charm of the drug he had swallowed acted benignly upon his nerves. At any rate he allowed himself to be secured by a chain and a fold-pitcher, and even licked my hand instead of snarling and showing his teeth. Every arrangement was made for his comfort, and he lay down as happy as a lotus-eater.

After breakfast, I took a little turn in the village, and there had the pleasure of seeing fat Charles, the Coldpepper footman, nearly trying to run, and looking sadly out of breath. He carried a leading strap, with no dog to it, and under his arm was a bundle of papers. As I approached him with kind inquiries, he drew forth his roll and requested me to read, while he was recovering his breath a little. My face must have turned as red as his—for this was the first theft I ever committed, except of some apples from a rival grower, a curmudgeon who would not tell us what they were—and I felt very queer as I read the following, written in round hand and with many capitals.

"Reward of one guinea!—Lost, stolen, or strayed, a large brindled terrier, known as 'Regulus,' the property of Miss Coldpepper of Coldpepper Manor. He is very hard of hearing, and a little [48] fond of snapping. Any person bringing him home will receive the above reward, and no questions asked. Any one detaining him will be prosecuted, with the utmost rigour of the law."

Charles had a score perhaps of these placards, written in sundry hands, and spelt in divers manners, as if all the household had been set to work.

"Oh, Mr. Kit," he cried, for every one called me that; "there is the devil to pay, up to the 'All, and no mistake! And all of it blamed on me, as innocent as the babe unborn, and more so, for only obeying of my horders. What did I do, but just turn the brute out—for a brute he is and no mistake, though wholesome in his bite, because it is his nature to; and no one round these parts would be tough enough in the legs to come forrard with a view of making off with him—then I shut the door to, for his quarter hour airing, as laid down in written horders issued every night. And my hair stood on end when he never come back, the same as his does, when he flies at you."

"But surely, Charles, some of you must have some suspicion?" I asked, with astonishment at my own vice, and wondering what I should come to, though not far enough gone as yet to look at him; "why should the dog go from such a good home?"

"Because he've had enough of it, or we of him at any rate. He ain't been stolen, sir; the dog have that knowledge of the world, that all Seven Dials couldn't lay a tack to him. And everybody knows what our Missus is. A guinea! Who'd steal a dog for a guinea? Let alone a dog who'll make a pepper-caster of you. No, no, I always said Old Nick would come for 'un, some blessed morning; and I'm jiggered if he haven't! But bless my soul, you mustn't keep me loitering like this, sir. Mother Cutthumb wouldn't have one, to stick up in her dirty old window, Lord knows why. Do'e take one, and stick on your Uncle's wall; or a couple if you will, that's a dear young man. There'll be thirty more ready, by eleven o'clock."

It occurred to me that some of them perhaps had been written by a certain lovely warm hand, which had the most delicious way with it that could ever be imagined of stealing in and out of muff or glove, and of coming near another hand (as coarse as a crumpet) in a sort of way that seemed to say—"Now wouldn't you like to touch me?"

"Who on earth can have written all these?" I asked. "Mr. Charles, why you must have done most of them yourself."

"Never a blessed one; Lord save you, I've a' been on my poor legs, all the morning! Every maid [49] that could fist a few was ordered in. But the young leddy fisted them four at the bottom."

Making due allowance for his miscreant coarseness, I slipped away the lowest four, and two others; those two I stuck up on the outer face of Uncle Corny's red-brick wall; but the other four never were exhibited to the public, nor even to myself, except as a very private view. And every one of them belongs to me at the present moment. The footman thanked me warmly for this lightening of his task, and hurried on towards Rasp the baker, and the linendraper.

So far as my memory serves, Uncle Corny got very little work out of me that day. I was up and down the village, till my conscience told me that my behaviour might appear suspicious; and I even beheld the great lady herself, driving as fast as her fat steeds could travel, to get her placards displayed all around in the villages towards London. Although she was not very popular, and the public seemed well pleased with her distress, I felt more than half inclined to take her dear love back, and release him at his own door after dark. But Tabby Tapscott said, and she had a right to speak,—"Don't 'e be a vule now, Measter Kit. Carr' the job droo, wanst 'a be about 'un." And just before dark I met Mrs. Marker, and somebody with her, who made my heart jump. They had clearly been sent as a forlorn hope, to go the round of the shops where the bills had been posted. I contrived to ask tenderly whether the dog was found.

"Not he, and never will be," replied the housekeeper. "There are so many people who owe the cur a grudge. Why, he even flies at me, if I dare to look at him. Miss Kitty, tell Mr. Kit what your

opinion is."

"I fear indeed that somebody must have shot him with an air-gun. I am very fond of dogs, when they are at all good dogs; but very few could praise poor Regulus, except—except as we praise mustard. And I heard of a case very like it in London."

Her voice was so silvery sweet, and she dropped it (as I thought) so sadly at that last word, that I could not help saying, although I was frightened at my own tone while I said it,—

"Surely you are not going back to-morrow? Do say that you are not going to leave us all to-morrow."

Before she could answer, the housekeeper said sharply—"She was to have gone to-morrow, Mr. Orchardson. But now Miss Coldpepper has made up her mind to send for Captain Fairthorn the first thing to-morrow, unless she recovers the dog meanwhile. Not that he knows anything about dogs, but he is so scientific that he is sure to find out something. Good night, sir! Come, Kitty, how late we are!" [50]

Is it needful to say that Regulus indued a tunic of oak that night?

CHAPTER X.
AN UPWARD STROKE.

The character of Captain Fairthorn—better known to the public now as Sir Humphrey Fairthorn, but he had not as yet conferred dignity upon Knighthood—will be understood easily by those who have the knowledge to understand it. But neither Uncle Corny, nor myself—although we were getting very clever now at Sunbury—could manage at all to make him out at first, though it must have been a great deal easier then, than when we came to dwell upon him afterwards. All that he said was so perfectly simple, and yet he was thinking of something else all the time; and everything he did was done as if he let someone else do it for him. I cannot make any one understand him, for the plainest of all plain reasons—I could never be sure that I myself understood him. And this was not at all because he meant to be a mystery to any one; for that was the last thing he would desire, or even believe himself able to be. The reason that kept him outside of our reason—so far as I can comprehend it—was that he looked at no one of the many things to be feared, to be desired, to be praised, or blamed, from the point of view we were accustomed to.

I had thought that my Uncle Cornelius (though he was sharp enough always, and sometimes too sharp, upon me and my doings) was upon the whole the most deliberate and easy-going of mortals; but a mere glance at Professor Fairthorn showed how vastly the breadth of mankind was beyond me. To look at his face, without thinking about him, was enough to compose any ordinary mind, and charm away any trivial worries; but to listen to his voice, and observe him well, and meet his great eyes thoughtfully, and to catch the tranquility of his smile, this was sufficient to [51] make one ashamed of paltry self-seeking and trumpery cares, and to lead one for the moment into larger ways. And yet he was not a man of lofty visions, poetic enthusiasm, or ardent faith in the grandeur of humanity. I never heard him utter one eloquent sentence, and I never saw him flush with any fervour of high purpose. He simply seemed to do his work, because it was his nature, and to have no more perception of his influence over others, than they had of the reason why he owned it. So far as we could judge, he was never thinking of himself; and that alone was quite enough to make him an enigma.

Now people may suppose, and very naturally too, that my warm admiration of the daughter impelled me to take an over-lofty view of the father. People would be quite wrong, however, for in that view I was not alone; every one concurred, and even carried it still further; and certainly there was no personal resemblance to set me on that special track. Professor—or as I shall call him henceforth, because he preferred it, Captain Fairthorn—was not of any striking comeliness. His face was very broad, and his mouth too large, and his nose might be said almost to want re-blocking, and other faults might have been found by folk who desire to talk picturesquely. But even the hardest of mankind to please (in everything but self-examination) would have found no need, and small opportunity, for improvement in his eyes and forehead. I know my own stupidity, or at least attempt to do so, when it is not altogether too big; yet I dare to deny that it had anything to do with the charm I fell under in this man's presence. And this is more than proved by the fact that Uncle Corny—as dry an old Grower as was ever frozen out—could resist the large quietude of our visitor, even less than I could.

For the Captain had been sent for, sure enough, about a little business so far below his thoughts. And when he came into our garden, to thank us for all we had done towards discovery of the thief, and especially to thank me for my valiant services to his daughter, it is no exaggeration at all to say that I wished the earth would hide me from his great grey eyes. Under their kindly and yet distant gaze, I felt what a wretched little trickster I had been; and if he had looked at me for another moment, I must have told him everything, for the sake of his forgiveness. But he, unhappily for himself, if he could be unhappy about little things, measured his fellow-men by his own nature, and suspected nothing until it had been proved. And at that [52] very moment, he caught sight of something, which absorbed him in a scientific zeal we could not follow.

"A young tree dead!" he exclaimed; "and with all its foliage hanging! Three other young trees round it injured on the sides towards it. When did you observe this? Had you that storm on Saturday?"

"Yes, sir, it did rain cats and dogs," my Uncle answered after thinking. "We said that it might break the long bad weather; and it seems to have done it at last, thank the Lord. There was a lot of lightning, but not so very nigh."

"Then no trees were struck from above, not even that old oak, which seems to have been struck some years ago? May I cross the border, and examine that young tree? Thank you; have you ever known a case like this before?"

They passed very dangerously near the old oak; and I trembled, as that villain of a Regulus showed his base want of gratitude by a long howl; but luckily neither of them heard it. I went to the door, and threatened him with instant death, and then followed to hear the discussion about the tree. "You have known it before," Captain Fairthorn was saying; "but not for some years, and if you remember right, not when the storms were particularly near. I have heard of several similar cases, but never had the fortune to see one till now. You perceive that the life is entirely gone. The leaves are quite black, but have a narrow yellow margin. Forgive me for troubling you, Mr. Orchardson, but when did you notice this condition of the tree?"

“Well, sir, it kept on raining up till dark on Saturday; and I did not chance to come by here on Sunday. But on Monday morning it was as you see it now—gone off all of a heap, and no cause for it. As healthy a young tree as you would wish to look at—a kind of pear we call Beurré Diel. Dead as a door-nail, you can see. Kit, get a spade, and dig it up for Professor.”

“Thank you, not yet. I was going home to-night, but this is a matter I must examine carefully. That is to say, with your kind permission. We use big words, Mr. Orchardson, that sound very learned; and we write very positively from other people’s observation. But one case, that we have seen with our own eyes, and searched into on the spot to the utmost of our power, is worth fifty we have only read of. You will think me very troublesome, I greatly fear; and of gardening [53] matters I know less than nothing. But you will oblige me more than I can say, if you will let me come again, and try to learn some little. You know what has killed this tree, I presume.”

“No, sir, I have not got any sense at all about it,” my Uncle answered stoutly; “’Tis the will of the Lord, when a tree goes off; or if it is the doing of any chap of mine, he goes off too, and there’s an end of it. Something amiss with these roots, I take it.”

His boots were tipped with heavy iron, and he was starting for a good kick at the dead young tree, when I ran between, and said, “Uncle, let it stay just as it is, for a day or two. It can’t draw anything out of the ground; and this gentleman would like to examine it, as it is.”

“Young gentleman, that is the very point.” Captain Fairthorn, as he spoke, looked kindly at me; “if I could be permitted to have my own way, I would have a little straw shaken round it to-night, as lightly as may be, without any foot coming nearer than can be helped to it. That will keep the surface as it is, from heavy rain, or any other accident. Then if I may be indulged in my crotchets, I would bring my daughter, who draws correctly, to make a careful sketch and colour it. And after that is done, and I have used my treble lens at every point of divergence, I would ask as a very great favour to be allowed to open the ground myself, and trace the roots from their terminal fibres upwards. I would not dare to ask all this for my own sake, Mr. Orchardson; but because we may learn something from it of a thing as yet little understood—what is called the terrestrial discharge. We get more and more into big words, you see. You have known trees destroyed in this way before. It only happens on certain strata.”

“It has happened here, sir, for generations,” said my Uncle, trying hard to look scientific. “The thunderstorm blight is what we call it. We call anything a blight, when the meaning is beyond us. Seems as if some trees was subject to it. I never knew an apple-tree took this way. But pear-trees have been so, times out of mind, though never none but the younger ones. A few years agone, I can’t say how many, seventeen young pear-trees were killed outright, ten in one part of the grounds, and seven in another, and not a mark to be found on one of them. All as dead as door-nails when we come to look at them. A blight, or a blast, that’s what we call it. And there’s [54] nothing to do but to plant another.”

“A truly British view of the question,” Captain Fairthorn answered with his sweet smile, which threw me into a glow by its likeness to a smile yet lovelier; “I wish I could tell you how I feel for the English fruit-grower in his hard struggle with the climate, the dealers, and the foreign competition. It is a hard fight always, much worse than the farmers; and a season like this is like knocking a drowning man on the head. And yet you are so brave that you never complain!”

The truth of these words, and the tone of good will, made a deep impression upon both of us, especially upon my Uncle, who had to find the money for everything.

“No, sir, we never complain,” he replied; “we stand up to the seasons like our own trees, and we keep on hoping for a better time next year. But there are very few that know our difficulties, and folk that can scarcely tell a pear from an apple go about the country, spouting and writing by the yard, concerning of our ignorance. Let them try it, is all I say, let them try it, if they are fools enough. Why bless my heart, there’s a fellow preaching now about sorting of apples, as if we had not done it before he sucked his coral! But I won’t go on maundering—time will show. Glad to see you, sir, at any time, and if I should happen to be about the grounds, my nephew Kit will see to everything you want. What time shall we see you to-morrow, sir?”

We were walking to the gate by this time, and Captain Fairthorn pulled out his watch. I observed that he had a true sailor’s walk, and a sailor’s manner of gazing round, and the swing of his arms was nautical.

“What a time I have kept you!” he exclaimed with simple wonder; “and I have forgotten altogether my proper business. I was to have tried some special means, for recovering the dog we were speaking of. Unless he is heard of to-night, I shall have little time to spare to-morrow. I am bound to do all I can for my good hostess. But to think that a dog, and a dog of no benevolence—according to my daughter—should stand in the way of this most interesting matter! However, I will do my best all the morning, and try to be with you by eleven o’clock. If I cannot come then, you will know what the cause is. But even for the best of dogs, I must not drop the subject. Now I thank you most heartily. Good-night!”

“What a wonderful man!” was my Uncle’s reflection; “to know all about trees, and [55] thunderstorms, and dogs, and Covent Garden! And yet to let a woman twist him round her thumb, and tread on his child, and turn his pockets inside out! Come along, Kit, I am pretty nigh starved.”

And this wonderful man added yet another crown to his glory that very same night, as I heard.

For to him, and his wisdom, was set down the credit of a joyful and extraordinary event.

A young man, slouching with a guilty conscience and a bag on his back, might have been seen—if his bad luck had prevailed—approaching a fine old mansion craftily, when the shadows stole over the moon, if there was one. Then an accurate observer might have noticed a quadruped of somewhat downcast mien issuing with much hesitation from a sack, and apparently reluctant to quit his guardian, who had evidently won his faithful heart. But receiving stern orders to make himself scarce, he might next be seen gliding to a gloomy door, uplifting wistfully one ancient paw scraping at the paint where it had been scraped before, and then throwing his head back, and venting his long-pent emotions in a howl of inexpressible sadness. The door was opened, the guardian vanished with suspicious promptitude, lights were seen glancing in a long range of windows, an outbreak of feminine voices moved the air, and after a shrill and unnatural laugh, came a sound as of hugging, and a cry of—“Run, for your life, for his liver, Jane!”

CHAPTER XI.
THE FINE ARTS.

WHEN the butter that truly is butterine, and the "Cheddar" of the Great Republic, are gracefully returned to our beloved grocer, with a feeble prayer for amendment, what does he say? Why, the very same thing that he said upon the last occasion—"Indeed! all our customers like it extremely; it is the very thing we have had most praise for; and this is the very first complaint."

In like manner I received for answer (when I fain would have sent back to that storekeeper Love a few of the sensations I had to pay for) that everybody praised them, and considered them ennobling, and was only eager once again to revel in their freshness. And to tell the truth, when my own time came for looking calmly back at them, I became one of the larger public, and would have bought them back at any price, as an old man regards his first caning. [56]

However I did not know that now, and could not stop to analyze my own feelings, which might for the moment perhaps be described as deep longings for a height never heard of. All the every-day cares, and hide-bound pothers of the people round me, were as paltry pebbles below my feet; and I longed to be alone, to think of one other presence, and only one.

Uncle Corny, in his downright fashion, called me as mad as a March hare; but I was simply sorry for him, and kept out of his way, and tried to work. Tabby Tapscott became a plague, by poking common jokes at me; and the family men on the premises seemed to have a grin among themselves, when my back was turned. The only man I could bear to work with, was the long one we called "Selsey Bill," because he came from that part of Sussex, and resembled that endless projection. He was said to have seventeen lawful children—enough to keep any man silent. Moreover he was beyond all doubt the ugliest man in the parish; which may have added to my comfort in his mute society, as a proof of the facility of wedlock. The sharp click of his iron heel on the treddle of his spade, the gentle sigh that came sometimes, as he thought of how little he would find for supper, and the slow turn of his distorted eyes as he looked about for the wheelbarrow—all these by some deep law of nature soothed my dreamy discontent.

But what was there fairly to grumble at? If I chose to cast my eyes above me, and set my affections out of reach, reason could not be expected to undo unreason. And hitherto, what luck had led me, what good fortune fed me with the snatches of warm rapture! Even my own wickedness had prospered, and never been found out. Surely the fates were on my side, and the powers of the air encouraged me.

What a lovely morning it was now, for the fairest of beings to walk abroad, and for me to be walking in the same direction! Although the earth was sodden still, and the trees unripe with summer drip, and the autumnal roses hung their sprays with leathery balls, instead of bloom; yet the air was fresh, and the sky bright blue, and the grass as green as in the May month; and many [57] a plant, that is spent and withered after a brilliant season, was opening its raiment to tempt the sun, and budding into gems for him to polish. The spring, that had forgotten tryst with earth this year, and been weeping for it ever since, was come at last, if only for one tender glance through the russet locks of autumn. Why should not man, who suffers with the distresses of the air and earth, take heart again, and be cheerful with them; ay, and enjoy his best condition—that of loving, and being loved?

There was enough to tempt the gloomiest, and most timid mortal, to make his venture towards such bliss, when Kitty Fairthorn, blushing softly, and glancing as brightly as the sunshine twinkles through a bower of wild rose, came along to me alone, where I stood looking out for her father. Although I had been thinking bravely all the things set down above, not one of them kept faith, or helped me to the courage of their reasoning. Instead of that, my heart fell low, and my eyes (which had been full of hope) would scarcely dare to render to it the picture of which it held so many, yet never could manage to hold enough. She saw my plight, and was sorry for it, and frightened perhaps both of that and herself.

"It is so unlucky," she said, without looking any more than good manners demanded at me; "last night I began to think that all was going to be quite nice again; for that very peculiar dog, that my aunt is so strongly attached to, just came back; as if he had only gone for a little airing on his own account, and so as to have all the road to himself. He was as fat as ever, but oh so gentle! And his reputation is not quite that. Perhaps you have heard of him. He seems to be well known."

"I think I have heard of him. Why, of course it must be the dog that was mentioned in the hand-bills! We had two of them upon our wall. Mrs. Marker was speaking of him, when you passed on Thursday, only I could not attend to *her*."

"Then you ought to have done so," she replied, as if without any idea of my inner thought; "for there has been the greatest excitement about it. But I suppose, inside these walls, and among these trees and lovely flowers, you scarcely know what excitement is."

"Don't I, then? Oh, I wish I didn't!" I replied with a deeply sad look at her; "it is you, who are so much above all this, who can have no idea what real—real—a sort of despair, I mean, is like. [58] But I beg your pardon; you mustn't notice me."

"How can I help being sorry for you?" she asked very softly, when our eyes had met. "You have been so good to me, and saved my life. But of course I have no right to ask what it is. And I know that the crops are always failing. And now you have a dear little tree quite dead. My father has

sent me, to try to make a careful drawing of it, because it was struck by some extraordinary lightning. And the worst of it is, that he has been called away, and can hardly be back till the evening. He has invented a new conductor, for ships of the Navy, that are to have iron all over and under them, and therefore want protecting. He had a letter from the Admiralty this morning."

"Oh dear, what a pity! What a sad loss!" I replied. "I am afraid it will take us so much longer, without having him here to direct us. And I doubt if my Uncle Cornelius will be able to be with us, half the time."

"Oh that is just what I was to say!" her tone was demure, but her glance quite bright; "on no account am I to interfere with the valuable time of Mr. Orchardson. Indeed I shall not trouble any one. If I may only be shown the poor tree, and then be allowed to fetch a chair, or a stool, or even a hassock, and then be told where to find some clear water, and perhaps be reminded when the time is one o'clock, I am sure I shall do beautifully."

"You are certain to do beautifully; there is no other way that you could do. No one shall be allowed to disturb you; I should like to see any one dare to come near you except—except—"

"Except Mrs. Tapscott. You see I have heard of her. And it is so kind of you to think of her. Then I shall be quite happy."

"Mrs Tapscott indeed! No, except me myself. I shall lock that chattering woman in the back kitchen, or how could you ever do a stroke? I am sure it will take you a very long time. There are three other trees that you ought to draw, if you wish to show exactly what the lightning did. I hardly see how you can finish to-day. If you leave off at one o'clock, it will be utterly impossible. And my Uncle Cornelius will be in such a rage, if you think of going back without anything to eat."

"How very kind everybody is down here! It is the very nicest place I ever have been in. It will be so miserable to go away. I am not at all accustomed to such kindness." Her lovely eyes [59] glistened as she began to speak, and a tear was in each of them as she turned away. I felt as if I could have cried myself, to see such an innocent angel so sad. But I durst not ask any questions, and was bound to go on as if I knew nothing.

"What a little drawing-block you have!" I said; "you ought to have one at least twice that size. Do let me lend you one. I have three or four; and you can choose which you like of them. And my pencils too, and my colour-box. There are none to be had in the village. If you will rest a moment in this little harbour, I will get them all, and a chair for you."

It did not take me long to let Tabby Tapscott know, that if she dared even to look out of the window, she would mourn for it all the rest of her life; moreover that she must not let anybody know in what direction I was gone, even if his Grace of C. G. himself came down, to grant us the best stall he had for ever. Tabby winked with both eyes, and inquired if I took her for a "vule, or a zany, or a coochey hosebird," and said she would have "zummut good for nummatin," by one o'clock. And as I hurried back to the bower, there came almost into my very hand the loveliest *Souvenir d'un Ami* rose that ever lifted glossy pink, to show the richer glow within. This rose I cut with the tender touch which a gardener uses boldly, and laid it on my drawing-block, so that each exquisite tinge and fringe and curve of radiant leaflet, as well as the swanlike bend of stalk and soft retirement of sepal, led up to the crowning beauty of the bloom above them.

"I never saw anything to equal that," said one who might outvie the whole; "who can have taught you, Mr. Kit, such knowledge of what is beautiful?"

She had called me by my village-name; and more than that, she had let me know that she looked upon me as a rustic. I saw my advantage, and was deeply hurt, that she might make it up again.

"You are right," I answered, turning back, as if in sad abasement; "Miss Fairthorn, you are right indeed in supposing that I know nothing. However, I am able to carry a chair, and to wait upon you humbly. Let us go to the tree; and at one o'clock, I will venture to come, and tell the time."

"Oh, I never meant it at all like that! I could never have imagined you would take me up so. I seem to say the wrong thing always, as I am told every day at home. I hoped that it was not true; [60] but now—now, I have given offence to you, you, who have been so good to me. I could never attempt to draw to-day. I will tell my father that I was rude to you, and he will send somebody else to do it." I felt that this would have served me right; but I was not in love with justice.

"I implore you not to do that," I said; "really that would be too hard upon me. Why should you wish to be hard upon me? I am trying to think what I have done to deserve it. You are worse than the ground lightning."

"Then I suppose I killed your trees. I am not going now to be silly any more. Tell me what to do, to show that you have quite forgiven me. You know that I never meant to vex you." She looked at me so sweetly, that I could only meet her eyes.

"I declare it will be one o'clock, before I have done a thing. What will my father say? And I must be so careful. I am sure that you could do it better, better much than I can. Will you do it, while I go and look for Mr. Orchardson? I like him very much, and his fruit is so delicious. No,

you won’t relieve me? Well, shake hands, and be good friends again. May I have this lovely rose, to give my father something beautiful, when he comes back from London?”

I saw that she was talking fast, that my prudence might come back to me. She knew as well from my long gaze, that I loved her, and must always love her, as I to the bottom of my heart knew it. And she did not seem offended at me, only blushed, and trembled, just as if some important news were come (perhaps by telegraph), and she wondered while she opened it.

For me this was enough, and more almost than I could hope for—to let her keep this knowledge in her mind, and dwell upon it; until if happy angels came—as they gladly would—to visit her, the sweetest of them all might fan it, with his wings, into her heart.

“Halloa, Kit my lad!” cried Uncle Corny, when he came to dinner, and my darling was gone with her sketch half done, and I had only dared to hover near her. “Sweetheart been here, they tell me. What a leary chap you are! When I heard Cap’en was gone to Town, I thought it was all over. I’ve been wanting you up at packing-shed, for the last three hours. No more good work left in you. That’s what come of sweet hearting.”

“Uncle Corny, if you must be vulgar, because you have no proper sense of things, the least you can do is not to holloa, as if you were driving a truck of rags and bones.” [61]

“Hoity, toity! Here’s a go! One would think there had been no courting done, since Adam and Eve, till your time. Too hot to hold—that’s my opinion. And as for rags and bones, young fellow, that’s just about what it will come to. The girl won’t have sixpence, by what I hear; though there’s lots of tin in the family. I know a deal more than you do about them. Don’t pop the question without my leave.”

What a way to put it!

CHAPTER XII.
AN EMPTY PILE.

ALTHOUGH no token had passed between us, and no currency been set up, of that universal interchange, which my Uncle and Tabby termed "courting," I felt a very large hope now, that the goods I had to offer,—quiet as they were, and solid, without any spangle—were on their way to be considered, and might be regarded kindly. For while I knew how poor I was, in all the more graceful attributes, and little gifted with showy powers of discourse, or the great world's glitter, void moreover of that noble cash which covers every other fault, yet my self-respect and manhood told me that I was above contempt. Haughty maidens might, according to their lights, look down on me; let them do so, it would never hurt me; I desired no haughtiness. That which had taken my heart, and led it, with no loss to its own value, was sweetness, gentleness, loving-kindness, tender sense of woman's nature, and the joy of finding strength in man. For though I am not the one to say it, I knew that I was no weakling, either in body, or in mind. Slow of wit I had always been, and capable only of enjoying the greater gifts of others; but as I plodded on through life, I found it more and more the truth, that this is the better part to have. I enjoy my laugh tenfold, because it is a thing I could never have made for myself.

But for a long time yet to come, there was not much laughter before me. One of the many griefs of love is, that it stops the pores of humour, and keeps a man clogged with earnestness. At [62] the same time, he becomes the Guy, and butt for all the old jokes that can be discharged by clumsy fellows below contempt. None of these hit him, to any good purpose, because he is ever so far above them; but even the smell of their powder is nasty, as a whiff across his incense.

For eight and forty hours, it was my good fortune to believe myself happy, and thereby to be so; though I went to church twice on Sunday, without seeing any one except the parson, who was very pleasant. But suddenly on Monday a few words were uttered; and I became no better than a groan.

"Her be gan'," were the words of Mrs. Tapscott.

"Tabby, what the Devil do you mean?" I asked, though not at all accustomed to strong language.

"I tull 'e, her be gan'. Thee never zee her no more. Step-moother 'a been down, and vetched her." Tabby herself looked fit to cry; although there was a vile kind of triumph in her eyes, because she had prophesied it.

"Do you mean to tell me," I asked slowly, and as if I were preparing to destroy her, "that Miss Fairthorn has been taken away, without even saying 'Good-bye' to me?"

"Can't tull nort about no Good-bais. Her maight 'a left 'un for 'e. Her be gan to Lunnon town, and no mistake. Zeed the girt coach myzell, and the maid a-crying in her."

Without thinking properly what I was about, I clapped on a hat, and laid hold of a big stick, and set forth upon the London road; not the Hampton road which runs along the river, but the upper road from Halliford, which takes a shorter course through Twickenham. Tabby ran after me, shouting—"Be 'e mazed? If 'e could vlai, 'e could never overget her. Be gan' dree hour, or more, I tull 'e."

But in spite of that fearful news, I strode on. And I might have gone steadily on till I got to London—for there was the track of the wheels quite plain, the wheels of Miss Coldpepper's heavy carriage—if I had not met our "Selsey Bill," the Bill Tompkins whom I may have mentioned. My Uncle had sent him to Twickenham, I think, to see about some bushel-baskets; and he was swinging home with a dozen on his head, which made his columnar height some fifteen feet; for he was six and three quarters, without his hat.

In reply to my fervid inquiries, he proceeded, in a most leisurely yet impressive manner, to explain that he had not met the carriage, because it had passed him on his way to Twickenham, and might be expected back by now; as Miss Coldpepper never allowed her horses to go beyond [63] Notting-Hill Gate, whence her guests must go on other wheels into London. I took half of his baskets (for he was too long to be strong) and so returned to my uncle's gate with half a dozen "empties" on my head, and a heart more empty than the whole of them.

This was almost a trifle compared to the grief that befell me later on—which has left its mark on me till I die—for though cast down terribly, I was not crushed, and no miserable doubts came to rend me in twain. Though my darling was gone, I could tell where she was, or at any rate could find out in a day or two. And it was clear that she had been carried off against her will; otherwise how could our Tabby see her crying? It is a shameful and cruel thing, and of the lowest depths of selfishness, to rejoice at the tears of an angel; and I did my very utmost to melt into softest sympathy. To be certain of the need for this, I examined Mrs. Tapscott most carefully as to the evidence.

"I zeed 'un wi' my own heyesight; girt big drops," she said, "the zize of any hazzlenits. Rackon, thee mouth be wattering, Master Kit, vor to kiss 'un awai."

This may have been true, but was not at all the proper way to express it. The only thing wrong on my part was, that a lively thrill of selfish hope ran down the veins of sympathy. She wept—she

wept! Why should she weep, except at having left behind her some one whom she would most sadly miss? Could it be Miss Coldpepper? Happily that was most unlikely, from the lady's character. Mrs. Marker? No, I think not—a very decent sort of woman, but not at all absorbing. Uncle Corny? Out of the question. A highly excellent and upright man; but a hero of nails, and shreds, and hammers, and green-baize aprons, and gooseberry knives. Ah, but Uncle Corny has a nephew—

"Kit, I am sorry for you, my boy;" he came up to me, as I was thinking thus, even before he went to his tobacco-jar; "you are hard hit, my lad; I can see it in your face; and you shall have no more chaff from me. Very few girls, such as they are now, deserve that any straight and honest young chap, like you, should be down in the mouth about them. But your mother did, Kit, your mother did. And I am not sure but that this Miss Fairthorn does; though you can't judge a girl by her bonnet. But I am not going to be overcobbed like this. If you have set your heart upon the girl, and she on you,—so be it, Amen! You shall be joined together."

My Uncle came up, as he spoke, and looked with friendly intentions at me, and yet with a [64] medical gaze and poise, which inclined me to be indignant. "It takes two parties to make an agreement," I said, neither gratefully nor graciously.

"S'pose I don't know that, after all the robberies taken out of me? But I know what I say, and I tell you, that if your mind is set upon this matter, you shall have it your own way. Only first of all, be sure that you know your mind. Few people do, in this 'age of invention'—as they call it, without inventing much, except lies—if you are sure that you know your mind, speak out, and have done with it."

I stood up and looked at him, without a word. All my gratitude for his good-will was lost in my wrath at his doubt of my steadfastness.

"Very well," he said, "you need not stare, as if you were thunder and lightning. When you think about it, you will see that I was right; for this is no easy business, Kit, and not to be gone into, like a toss for sixpence. I have spoiled you, ever since you were a child; because you had no father, and no mother. You have had your own way wonderfully; and that makes it difficult for you to know your mind."

If that were the only obstacle, I ought to have the finest knowledge of my mind; for the times had been very far asunder, when I had been allowed to follow my own way. But I knew that Uncle Corny took the other view, and he had this to bear him out, that he always managed that my way should be his way. It was not the time to argue out that question now; and one of my ways most sternly barred was that of going counter to him in opinion. So I only muttered that he had been very good to me.

"I have," he continued; "and you are bound to feel it. Five shillings a week you have been receiving, ever since you could be trusted to lay in a tree; as well as your board and lodging, and your boots, and all except tailoring. Very well, if you set up a wife, you will look back with sorrow on these days of affluence. But to warn you is waste of words, in your present frame. Only I wish you to hear both sides. I have no time now; but if you like to come to me, when I have done up my books, I will tell you a little story."

This I promised very readily; not only to keep him on my side, but because I saw that he knew much, not generally known in Sunbury, of the family matters which concerned my love, and therefore myself, even more than my own. And while he was busy with his books, which he kept [65] in a fashion known only to himself, I strolled down the village in the feeble hope of picking up some tidings. It was pleasant to find, without saying much, that our neighbours felt a very keen and kind interest in our doings. There was scarcely a woman who was not ready to tell me a great deal more than she knew; and certainly not one who did not consider me badly treated. Miss Fairthorn, by her sweet appearance and gentle manner, had made friends in every shop she entered; and the story of her sudden and compulsory departure became so unsatisfactory, that deep discredit befell our two policemen. But the only new point I discovered, bearing at all upon my case, was gained from Widow Cutthumb. This good lady was now in bitter feud with the house of Coldpepper, although she made it clear that the loss of their custom had nothing to do with it, being rather a benefit than otherwise.

She told me, with much dramatic force, some anecdotes of Miss Monica, the younger daughter of Squire Nicholas, and a daughter by no means dutiful. She had married, against her father's wish, the Honourable Tom Bulwrag, a gambler, and a drunkard, and, if reports were true, a forger. As this appears in my Uncle's tale, it need not have been referred to, but to show that the lady's early records were not fair among us. After impressing upon me the stern necessity of silence, as to these and other facts, Mrs. Cutthumb ended with a practical exhortation, dependent upon the question whether I had a spark of manhood in me. I replied that I hoped so, but as yet had few opportunities for testing it.

"Then, Mr. Kit," she proceeded, with her head thrown back and one fat hand clenched, "there is only one thing for you to do—to run away with the young lady. Don't stop me, if you please, Master Kit; you have no call to look as if I spoke treason. Better men than you has done it; and better young ladies has had to bear it. It is what the Lord has ordained, whenever He has made two innocent young people, and the wicked hold counsel together against them. You go home, and dwell upon it. Sure as I am talking to you now, you'll be sorry till your dying day, if you don't behave a little spirity. Do you think I would ever give such advice to a wild young man with no

principles, to a fellow I mean like Sam Henderson? But I know what you are well enough; and every girl in Sunbury knows. 'Tis not for me to praise you to your face; but you are that solid and thick-built, that a woman might trust you with her only daughter. And that makes you slow to [66] look into women. If I may be so bold to ask, how do you take the meaning of it for that sweet Miss Kitty to be fetched home so promiscuous?"

"Mrs. Cutthumb," I answered, with a penetrating look, to show her that she underrated me, "I fear it must be that some mischief-maker has written up to say that I, that I—you know what I mean, Mrs. Cutthumb."

"Yes, sir, and you means well so far, and everything straight-forrard; but you ain't got near the heart of it, Master Kit; nor your Uncle neither, I'll be bound. Wants a woman's wits for that."

"What on earth do you mean? It is bad enough. I don't see how even a woman can make it any worse than it is. Speak out what you mean, since you have begun."

"Well, sir, it is no more than this, and you mustn't be put out by it. Suppose there is another young gent in the case—a young gent in London, they means her to marry."

The goodnatured woman looked so knowing, that I thought she must have solid proof; and perhaps the deed was done already. I tried to laugh, but could only stare, and wonder what was coming next.

"Oh, Master Kit," she went on with her apron to her eyes, or she was kind of heart, "you used to come, and play down here, when your head wasn't up to the counter. And I had my Cutthumb then, and he gave you a penny, because you was so natural. Don't you be struck of a heap like that, or I shall come to think that all women is wicked. It was only a bad thought of my own. I have nothing to go by, if I were to die this minute; and the same thought might come across any one. Don't think no more about it, there's a dear young man. Only keep your eyes open, and if you can manage to come across that stuck-up Jenny Marker, the least she can do, after saving her life, is to tell you all she knows, and to take your part. But don't you believe more than half she says. I never would say a single word against her, there's no call for that, being known as she is to every true woman in Sunbury; but if she's not a double-faced gossiping hussy, as fancies that a gold chain makes a lady of her, and very likely no gold after all, why I should deserve to be taken up, and there's no one has ever said that of me."

Here Mrs. Cutthumb began to cry, at the thought of being taken to the station; and I saw that time alone could comfort her, yet ventured to say a few earnest words, about her position and [67] high character. And presently she was quite brisk again.

"Why bless my heart," she said, looking about for a box of matches on the onion shelf; "I ought to have stuck up my candle in the window, pretty well half an hour agone. Not that no customer comes after dark, nor many by daylight for that matter. Ah, Master Kit, I am a poor lone widow; but you are the nicest young man in Sunbury; and I wish you well, with all my heart I do. And mind one thing, whatever you do; if you ever carries out what I was saying, here's the one as will help you to it, in a humble way, and without much money. A nice front drawing-room over the shop, bedroom, and chamber-suit to match. Only twelve shillings a week for it all, and the use of the kitchen fire for nothing. And the window on the landing looks on the river Thames, and the boats, and the barges, and the fishermen. Oh, Mr. Kit, with Mrs. Kitty now and then, it would be like the Garden of Eden."

CHAPTER XIII.
MY UNCLE BEGINS.

THAT last suggestion was most delicious, but it came too late to relieve the pang of the horrible idea first presented. I could not help wondering at my own slow wit, which ought to have told me that such a treasure as my heart was set upon, must have been coveted long ere now, by many with higher claims to it. Was it likely that I, a mere stupid fellow, half a rustic, and of no position, birth or property, should be preferred to the wealthy, accomplished, and brilliant men, who were sure to be gathering round such a prize? Black depression overcame me; even as the smoke of London, when the air is muggy, falls upon some country village, wrapping in funereal gloom the church, the trees, the cattle by the pond, and the man at the window with his newspaper. I could not see my way to eat much supper, and my Uncle was crusty with me.

"Can't stand this much more," he said, as he finished the beer that was meant for me; "a plague on all girls, and the muffs as well that go spooning after them! Why, the Lord might just [68] as well never have made a Williams pear, or a cat's-head codlin. S'pose you don't even want to hear my story; you don't deserve it anyhow. Better put it off, till you look brighter, for there isn't much to laugh at in it, unless it is the dunder-headed folly of a very clever man."

However, I begged him to begin at once; for he had hinted that his tale would throw some light on the subject most important in the world to me; so I filled him five pipes that he might not hunt about, and made his glass of rum and water rather strong, and put the black stool for his legs to rest on, and drew the red curtains behind his head, for the evening was chilly, and the fire cheerful.

"Like to do things for myself," he muttered, while accepting these little duties. "Nobody else ever does them right, though meaning it naturally for the best. Well, you want to hear about those people; and you shall hear all I know, my lad; though I don't pretend to know half of all; but what I know I do know, and don't talk at random, like the old women here. We'll take them in branches—male and female—until they unite, or pretend to do it; but a very poor splice; the same as you see, if you send for Camelias to Portugal, a great clumsy stick-out at the heel of the graft, and the bark grinning open all along. Bah! There's no gardeners like Englishmen, though we run 'em down for fear of boasting. Did you ever hear why Professor Fairthorn would ever so much rather be called 'Captain,' though 'Professor' sounds ever so much better?"

"Perhaps he has a legal right to be called 'Captain,' but not to the other title. I have heard that hundreds of people call themselves Professors, without any right to do it. And I am sure he would never like to be one of them."

"That has got nothing to do with it. He has held some appointment that gave him the right to the title, if he liked it. The reason is that his wife always calls him 'Professor'; and so it reminds him of her. Ah, don't you be in this outrageous hurry for a wife of your own, Master Kit, I say. For all I know, the Captain may have been as wild for her, some time, as you are for your Kitty. What can you say to that, my lad?"

"Why, simply that you don't know at all what you are talking about, Uncle Corny. My Miss Fairthorn is not that lady's daughter, and is not to be blamed for the whole of her sex, any more than you are for the whole of yours."

"There is something in that, when one comes to see it," my Uncle replied; for his mind was generally fair, when it cost him nothing. "But you must not keep on breaking in like this, or you [69] won't have heard half of it, this side of Christmas. Well, I was going to take them according to their sexes, the same as the Lord made them. And first comes the lady, as she hath a right to do, being at the bottom of the mischief.

"When I was a young man, thirty year or more agone, there used to be a lot of talk about the two handsome Miss Coldpeppers, of the Manor Hall down here. There used to be a lot also of coaches running, not so much through Sunbury, which lay to one side of the road, though some used to pass here on their way to Chertsey; and there was tootle-tootle along father's walls, three or four times a day. But the most of them went further back, along the Staines and Windsor road, where the noise was something wonderful; and it's my opinion that these Railway things will never be able to compare with it. They may make as much noise for the time, but it seems to be over, before the boys can holloa.

"Lots of young sparks, and bucks, and dandies, and Corinthians, and I forget what else, but all much finer than you can see now, used to come down by the coaches then, some of them driving, some blowing the horn, some upon the roof like merry-Andrews, making fools of themselves as we should call it now, and not be far wrong either. They were much bigger men than I see now, in their size, and their way of going on, and their spirits, and their strength of life, and likewise in their language. And the manners of the time were as different as can be, more frolicsome like, and more free and jovial; and they talked about the ladies, and to them also, ten times as much as they do now; and things were altogether merrier for them that had the money, and no worse for them that hadn't got it, so far as I can see. Ah, there was something to be done in growing then—pineapples ordered at a guinea a pound, and grapes at fifteen shillings, though of course you didn't always get your money. I'm blest if I won't have another glass of rum and water.

"Well, old Squire Nicholas, as they call him now, was as proud as Punch of his two fine

daughters, and expected them to marry at least an earl apiece, by their faces and fine figures. And they went about with great folk in Town, and to Court, and all that sort of thing, looking fit to marry the King almost, in their velvets, and their satin furbelows. The eldest daughter was Arabella, our Miss Coldpepper to this day, and the other was Miss Monica; as fine a pair of [70] women as the Lord ever made. But for all that, see what they come to!

"There was no love lost between them even then, jealous of one another no doubt, like two cats over a fish-bone. Some said that one was the handsomer of them, and some said the other. There was a good bit of difference between them too, though any fool could tell they were sisters. Such eyes and noses as you won't see now, and hair that would fall to their knees, I've been told, and complexions as clear as a white-heart cherry, and a cock of the chin, and a lordly walk—they deserved the name they went by in London, 'the two Bright Suns of Sunbury.' But after all, what good came of it? One is an old maid, and the other—well, not very likely to go to heaven, though she hasn't had much of that yet on earth. Kit, I have seen a deal of women, as much as is good for any mortal man; and I tell you the first thing, and the second, and the third, and the whole to the end of the chapter of them depends upon their tempers. Ah, those two beauties were beauties at that; but Miss Monica ever so much the worse.

"It seems that they both might have married very well, if it had not been for that stumbling-block. Many young women go on so soft, and eye you so pleasant, and blush so sweet, that you'd fancy almost there was no such thing as a cross word, or a spitfire look, or a puckered forehead in their constitution; and angels is the name for them, until it is too late to fly away. But these two Misses had never learned how to keep their tempers under for a week together; and it seems that they never cared enough for any one to try to do it. Till there came a man with a temper ten times as bad as both of theirs put together; and then they fell in love with him hot and hearty. This was a younger son of Lord Roarmore, a nobleman living in North Wales, or Ireland—I won't be certain which—and he was known as the Honourable Tom Bulwrag. He used to drive the Windsor coach from London down to Hounslow; for the passengers could stand him, while the stones and air were noisy; but there he was forced to get down from the box; for nothing that lived, neither man, nor horse, nor cow in the ditch, could endure this gentleman's language, when there was too much silence to hear it in.

"I suppose he was quiet among the ladies, as many men are, who can speak no good. And perhaps our two ladies fell in love with him, because he was a bigger sample of themselves. Not that they ever used swearing words, only thought them, as it were, and let other people know it. [71] Any way, both of them took a fancy to him, though their father would not hear of it; for the gentleman was not wealthy enough to have any right to such wickedness. Perhaps that made them like him all the more, for they always flew in the face of Providence. And for doing of that, they both paid out, as generally happens here, that we may see it.

"So far as I can tell, and I had better chances of knowing than any one else outside the house, everything was settled for the Honourable Tom to run away to Bath with Miss Arabella, with special licence, and everything square. But whether she was touched in heart about her father (whose favourite she had always been), or whether her lover came out too strong in his usual style, or whether her sister Monica had egged her on to it, sure enough she blazed out into such a fury, just when they were starting, and carried on so reckless, that the Honourable Tom, who had never quite made up his mind, was frightened of what she would be by-and-by, and locked her in a tool-house at the bottom of the grounds, and set off with Miss Monica that same hour, changing the name in the licence, and married her.

"Without being too particular, you might fairly suppose that a job of this kind was not likely to end well. Miss Monica had taken with her one—what shall I say? Certainly not servant, nor attendant, nor inferior in any way—"

My uncle here seemed to feel a certain want of power to express himself; and I knew that he was beating about the bush of the one and only one romance of his dry and steady life. He turned away, so that I could not see his eyes, and I did not wish to look at them.

"Well, that is neither here nor there," he continued, after pushing more tobacco into a pipe too full already; "but she took away a young lady of this neighbourhood, to whom she appeared to be much attached, and who alone had any power to control her furious outbreaks, just because she always smiled at them, as soon as they were over. The sweet-tempered girl could never quite believe that the Fury was in earnest, because it was so far beyond her own possibilities; and the woman of fury did a far worse thing than the wrecking of her own stormy life, she also wrecked a sweet, and gentle, loving, and reasonable heart. Never mind that; it often happens, and what does the selfish Fury care? Miss Monica became, as I have said, the Honourable Mrs. Bulwrag, and then she reaped the harvest she had sown.

"For in the first place Viscount Roarmore, being a hot-headed man likewise, stopped every [72] farthing of his son's allowance, and said—'Go to your new father. Your pretty cousin Rose, with five thousand pounds a year, was ready to marry you, in spite of all your sins, and you had promised to marry her. You have taken one of those two girls, who were called the "Bright Suns of Sunbury," till people found out what they were, and called them the two "Raging Suns." Now rage her down, if you can, and you ought to be more than a match for a woman. In any case, expect no more from me.'

"Then the young man came to Squire Nicholas, and screwed himself down to eat humble pie. But the Squire said, 'Sir, you have married my daughter without asking my leave, and against it. I

still have a dutiful daughter left. She is my only one henceforth.' Then the young man broke into the strongest language ever yet heard at Coldpepper Hall, although it had never been weak in that line. He was very soon shown the outside of the door, and got drunk for the night at the 'Bell and Dragon.'

"Then began the rough-and-tumble work between those two—the hugging and the hating, the billing and the bullying, the kissing and the kicking, all and every up and down of laughing, sobbing, scratching, screeching, that might be in a wild hyena's den. How they contrived to hold together so long as they did, Heaven only knows, or perhaps the opposite place to Heaven. There must have been some fierce love between them, some strange suitability; as if each perceived the worst part of himself or herself in the other, and flew to it, as well as flew at it. What kept them together was a mystery; but what kept them alive was a darker one. Without friends, or money, or credit, or visible robbery, they fought on together, for five or even six years, now here and now there. Three children they had, and fought over them of course, and perhaps began to teach them to fight each other, at least so far as example goes.

"But suddenly this queer union was broken up for ever. Mr. Bulwrag did something which risked his neck; he believed that Squire Nicholas was bound to contribute to the support of his grandchildren, and he made him do his duty, without knowing it. Then, having arranged for a three-days' start, he was well upon his voyage before pursuit began. It is not very easy to catch a man now, when he has a good start, and knows the world; but five and twenty years ago, it was generally given up as a bad job; unless the reward was astounding. No reward was offered, and [73] the Honourable Tom was next heard of from South America, where there seemed to be a lot of little States, which never allow their civil wars to abate their wars with one another. This condition of things was exactly to his taste; his courage and strong language made their way; he commanded the forces of one great Republic, with the title of 'Marshal Torobelle,' and he promised to send some money home in the last letter ever received from him.

"His deserted wife said after that, that she truly would believe in everything, if she ever saw a ten-pound note from her beloved husband. But she never was put to the trial, for the next news was that he was dead. He had found it much to his advantage to learn to swear in Spanish; and being proud of this, because he had little other gift of lingo, he tried it upon a young Spanish officer, who did not take it cordially. After parade, they had a private fight, and Marshal Torobelle could swear no more, even in his native language. His friends, for he seems to have been liked out there, wrote a very kind letter in bad French, telling how grand he had been, and how faithful, but grieving that he had left no affairs, to place them in a state to remember him. Then the Marshal's widow bought expensive mourning, for he had left with her a thousand pounds of the proceeds of his forgery, and wrote to his father, Lord Roarmore.

"Kit, I have found that one can generally tell what a man will do, in certain cases, from a rough outline of his character. What a woman will do, no man can tell, though he fancies he knows her thoroughly. My Lord Roarmore was a violent man, and hot more than hard in his resolution. And he took it very kindly that his son, when driven hard, had forged the name of the father-in-law, and not of the father, as he might have done. He was beginning to relent already, and finding it too late, naturally relented altogether. He talked of his noble and gallant son, and although himself in difficulties, bravely settled five hundred pounds a year upon the widow and the little ones.

"I dare say you are surprised, my lad, that I should have come to know so much of this unhappy story; more I believe than is even known by the lady's own sister—our Miss Coldpepper. Women are slower to forgive than men, and slower in beginning to be forgiven. Arabella has never forgiven her sister for running away with her lover; and Monica has never forgiven her sister for making such a fuss about it. They may try to pull together, when it suits their purpose; but the less they see of one another, the greater the chance of their reconciliation. But I am not [74] come to the poor Captain yet; and, bless my heart, it is ten o'clock! What a time to stay up about other people's business! If you want to hear the rest, you must have it to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIV.
AND ENDS WITH A MORAL.

ALL through the following day, we were forced to be hard at work, whether we liked it or not, gathering a large lot of early apples, such as Keswick, Sugarloaf, and Julien, which would have been under the trees by this time in an early season. But this, through the chill and continual rain of the time that should have been summer, was the latest season within human memory; which (like its owners) is not very long. And now a break-up of the weather was threatened, at which we could not grumble, having now enjoyed ten days without any rain—a remarkable thing in much better years than this. And in this year it truly was a God-send, helping us to make some little push, before the winter closed over us, and comforting us to look up to Heaven, without being almost beaten down. The people who live in great cities, where they need only go a few yards all day long, and can get beneath an awning or an archway, if a drop of rain disturbs their hats, give the weather ten bad words for every one we give it; though we are bound to work in it, and worse than that, have our livelihood hanging upon it. Not that we are better pleased than they; only that our more wholesome life, and the strength of the trees, and the unexhausted air, perhaps put into us a kinder spirit to make the best of things that are ordered from above.

Few things in the manner of ordinary work become more wearisome after a while than the long-continued gathering of fruit. The scent, which is delightful to those who catch a mere whiff of it in going by, becomes most cloying and even irksome to those who have it all day in their nostrils. And the beauty of the form and colour too, and the sleek gloss of each fine sample, lose all their delight in the crowd of their coming, and make us even long to see the last of them. Every man of us, even Uncle Corny, to whom every basket was grist for the mill, felt heartily glad [75] when streaky sunset faded softly into dusk, when flat leaf looked as round as fruit, and apples knocked our heads instead of gliding into the ready hand.

“Now mind one thing,” said my uncle with a yawn, when after a supper of liver and bacon knowingly fried by Mrs. Tabby, his pipe was between his teeth and all his other needs were toward; “if I go on with my tale to-night, I am likely enough to leave out something which may be the gist of it. For I feel that sleepy, after all this job, that I can scarcely keep my pipe alight. However, you have worked well to-day, and shown no white feather for your sweetheart’s sake; and of course you want to know most about her, and how she comes into this queer tale. Poor young thing, she smiles as sweetly, as if she trod a path of roses, instead of nettles, and briars, and flint! Ah, I suppose she forgets her troubles, whenever she looks at you, my lad.” This made my heart beat faster than any words of his tale I had heard till now.

“As if she cared for me! As if it were possible for any one to imagine that she would ever look twice at me! Uncle Corny, I thought you were a wiser man.” I hoped that this might lead him on.

“To be sure, I was making a mistake,” he answered, looking as if it were just the same thing. “When I said you, I meant of course Sam Henderson, the racing man. That’s the young fellow that has her heart. How beautifully she smiled when I mentioned him, and blushed when I said he was the finest fellow anywhere round Sunbury, and the steadiest, and the cleverest.

“No, no, Kit; it’s all my fun. You needn’t be looking at the carving-knife. You know how I hate Sam Henderson, a stuck-up puppy, and a black-leg too, according to my ideas. A girl who respects herself, as your Kitty does, would have nothing to say to him. But she might to a fine young gardener perhaps.

“Well, I have told you all about the first marriage and the widowhood of that precious Monica Coldpepper. What fools men are—what wondrous fools! Here was a widow, not over young, with a notorious temper, and no money, or none of her own at any rate, and hampered with three children—let me tell you their names while I think of it, Euphrasia, Donovan, and Geraldine—there’s no duty to pay on a name, you know. Now would not any one have sworn that a woman like that might wear the weeds, until she had stormed herself to death? Not a bit of it, my lad; [76] she married again, and she married the cleverest man in London; and more than that, she got every farthing of his property settled upon her, although the poor man had a child of his own! And I am told that she might have had a dozen other men.

“She was still a fine woman certainly, for it must have been some twelve years ago; and she is a fine woman to this very day, according to those who have seen her; which I hope I may never do, for reasons I will not go into. But beside her appearance, what one thing was there to lead a sane man to marry her? And a man who had lost a sweet-tempered wife, a beautiful, loving, and modest woman, as like your Kitty as two peas! Sometimes I feel sorry for him, when I think of his former luck; and sometimes I am glad that he is served out, for making such a horrible fool of himself. Nearly any other man would have hung himself, for the lady has gone from bad to worse, and is now a thorough termagant; but this man endures her as if she were his fate. Do you know who he is? You must know now.”

“Yes, I have known it, since you began; and from what other people said, I suspected it before.” As I answered thus, I was thinking how this condition of things would affect my chance.

“You don’t seem at all astonished, Kit;” my uncle went on with some disappointment at losing his sensation. “You young folk have so little sense, that you make it a point of honour never to be surprised by anything. If anybody had told me, without my knowing it already, that a man of great intellect, like Professor Fairthorn, would make such a fool of himself, and then submit to

have no life of his own, I should have said it was a crazy lie. But there is the truth, my boy, not to be got over; and far worse than at first sight appears. A man who robs himself may be forgiven; but not a man who robs his children. It is the difference between suicide and murder.

"Very likely, you are surprised that I, who have not a sixpence at stake, and not even a friend involved in the matter, should get so hot about it, as I can't help being. There are plenty of viragoes in the world; there are plenty of good men who cower before them, for the sake of their own coward peace; also there are robberies in abundance, of children who cannot defend themselves, and of people who can—so far as that goes. And ninety-nine men in a hundred would [77] say—'Well, this is no concern of mine. It is a very sad and shameful thing, but it does not touch my bread and cheese. Great is truth, and it will prevail; and I hope I may live to see it.' But, Kit, my boy, the worst wrong of all was mine. A deadlier wrong has been done to me, than of money or lands, or household peace. My life has been wrecked by that devil of a woman, as if it were a toy-boat she sunk with her slipper. I did not mean to tell you—an old man cannot bear to talk of such things to young people. Is your whole heart set upon your Kitty?"

I had never seen my uncle so disturbed before; and, to tell the plain truth, I was frightened by it. Sometimes I had seen him in a little passion, when he found a man he trusted robbing him, or the dealers cheated him beyond the right margin, or some favourite plant was kicked over; but he never lost his power then of ending with a smile, and a little turn of words would change his temper. But this was no question of temper now. His solid face was hardened, as if cast in stone; not a feature of it moved, but his grey curls trembled in the draught, and his hand upon the table quivered. I answered that my whole heart was set upon my Kitty, but I knew that I should never win her.

"If she is true to you, you shall. That is, if you behave as a man should do;" he spoke very slowly, and with a low voice, almost as if talking to himself; "if you are wise enough to let no lies, or doubts, or false pride come between you. There is no power but the will of God, that can keep asunder a man and woman who have given their lives to each other. All the craft, and falsehood, and violence of the world melt away like a mist, if they stand firm and faithful, and abide their time. But it must hold good on both sides alike. Both must disdain every word that comes from lying lips, from the lips of all, whether true or false, except one another. Remember, that is the rule, my lad, if rogues and scoundrels, male or female, come between you and the one you love. It has been a black streak in my life. It has kept me lonely in the world. Sometimes it seems to knock me over still. I have not spoken of it for years; and I cannot speak of it even now any more —not any more."

He rose from his chair, and went about the room, as if it were his life, in which he was searching for something he should never find. To turn his thoughts, and relieve my own, I took a [78] clean pipe and filled it; and began to puff as if I liked it, although in those days I seldom smoked. This had been always a reproach against me; for a smoker seems to love a contribution to his cloud.

"Well done, Kit, you are a sensible fellow;" said my uncle, returning to his usual mood. "Tobacco is the true counterblast to care. You take up your pipe, and I will take up my parable, without going into my own affairs. I never told you how that confounded woman—the Lord forgive me if I bear malice, for I trust that He shares it with me—how she contrived to hook the poor Professor, and, what is still worse, every farthing of his money.

"Not that I believe, to give the devil his due, that she sought him first for the sake of his money. He had not very much of that—for it seldom goes with brains that stamp their own coinage—but through his first wife, a beautiful and loving woman, he owned a nice house with large premises, in a rich part of London, or rather of the outskirts, where values were doubling every year, as the builders began to rage round it. Also he had about five thousand pounds of hers, which was not under settlement, and perhaps about the same amount of his own, not made by himself (for he had no gift of saving) but coming from his own family. Altogether he was worth about twenty thousand pounds; which he justly intended for his only child.

"This was pretty handsome, as you would say, and he took care not to imperil it, by any of his patents, or other wasteful ways. He had been for many years in the Royal Navy, and commanded at one time a new-fangled ship, with iron sheathings, or whatever they are called, which are now superseding the old man-of-war. Here he had seemed to be in his proper element, for he knew the machinery and all that, as well as the makers did, and much better than any of the engineers on board; and he might have been promoted to almost anything, except for his easy-going nature. He had not the sternness, and strength of will, which were needful in his position; and though everybody loved and respected him, the discipline of the ship in minor matters fell abroad, and he was superseded.

"This cut him to the quick, as you may suppose; for he still was brooding over the loss of his first dear wife, which had befallen him, while he was away on some experimental cruise. Between the two blows, he was terribly out of heart, and came back to his lonely London house, in the state of mind, which is apt to lay a man at the mercy of a crafty and designing woman. Unhappily [79] he was introduced just then to Mrs. Bulwrag; and she fell in love with him, I do believe, as far as she was capable of doing it. Though she might have flown, and had been flying at higher game in a certain sense, she abandoned all others, and set the whole strength of her will, which was great, upon conquering him. She displayed the most tender and motherly interest in his little darling daughter; she was breathless with delight at his vast scientific attainments, and noble discoveries; she became the one woman in all the world, who could enter into his mind, and

second his lofty ideas for the grandeur of humanity. Unluckily they were so far apart in their natures, that no collision yet ensued, which might have laid bare her true character, and enforced the warnings of his many friends. Not to make too long a story of it, she led him to the matrimonial altar—as the papers call it—without any solicitor for his best man, but a very sharp one behind her. With the carelessness of a man of genius, added to his own noble faith in woman, he had signed a marriage settlement, which gave her not only a life-interest in all his property, but a separate power of disposal by assignment, which might be exercised at any time. And the trustees were old allies of hers, who were not beyond suspicion of having been something even more than that.

"However, she loved her dear Professor—as she insisted on calling him—for a certain time, with the fervour of youth, though she must have been going on for forty, and she led him about in high triumph, and your Kitty was sent to a poor boarding-school. 'The Honourable Mrs. Bulwrag-Fairthorn,' as, in defiance of custom, she engraved herself, became quite the fashion among a certain lot, and aspired to climb yet higher. For if she has a weakness, it is to be among great people, and in high society. She changed the name of the poor Professor's house at South Kensington to 'Bulwrag Park,' she thought nothing of paying thirty pounds for a dress, and she gave large parties all the night long. Meanwhile he went about his work, and she took possession of every halfpenny he earned, and spent it on herself and her children. Her boy and two girls were pampered and indulged, while Kitty was starved and threadbare.

"You have seen the sort of man he is—simple, quiet, and unpretending, full of his own ideas and fancies, observing everything in the way of nature, but caring very little for the ways of men. He kept himself out of the whirl she lived in, and tried to believe that she was a good, though rather noisy woman. But suddenly all his good-will was shattered, and he nearly shared the same [80] fate himself.

"He was sitting up very late one night, in the little room allowed to him for the various tools, and instruments, and appliances, and specimens, and all that sort of thing, which were the apple of his eye; and by a special light of his own devising he was working up the finish of some grand experiment, from which he expected great wonders, no doubt. I don't know how many kinds of acid he had got in little bottles, and how many—I don't know what their names are, but something of a kail, like 'Ragged Jack;' and how many other itemies—as Tabby Tapscott calls them—the Lord only knoweth, who made them; and perhaps the men have got beyond even Him. At any rate, there he was, all in his glory; and he would have given ten years of his life, to be let alone for an hour or two. But suddenly the door flew open, as if with a strong kick; and the shake, and the draught, set his flames and waters quivering. He looked up with his mild eyes, and beheld a Fury.

"'What do you mean by this?' she cried. 'Here I come home from Lord Oglequince's, where you left me to go by myself, as usual; and on my red Davenport I find this! A fine piece of extravagance! Whose money is it?'

"'Well, Monica, it was not meant to go to you,' the Professor replied; for he saw what it was, a bill of about three pounds, for a cloak, and a skirt, and a hat, or some such things, which his daughter's school-mistress had written for, because the poor girl was unfit to be seen with the rest. 'My dear, I will pay it, of course. You have nothing to do with it. It was put on your desk by mistake altogether.'

"'Oh, then you mean to do it on the sly! To spend on this little upstart of yours the money that belongs to my poor children. Whose house is this? Whose chair are you sitting on—for of course you never have the manners to rise, when a lady comes to speak to you? Do you think you will ever make a penny, by all your trumpery dibbles and dabbles? I hate the sight of them, and I will not allow them. Hand me that cane, with the sponge at the end.'

"The Captain arose under her rebuke, and looked at her with calm curiosity, as if she were part of his experiment. He had never seen a case of such groundless fury, and could scarcely believe that it was real. Her blazing eyes were fixed on his, and her figure seemed to tower, in her towering rage. Such folly however could not frighten him; and he smiled, as if looking at a [81] baby, while he handed her the cane.

"'You laugh at me, do you? You think I am your slave?' she cried as she swung the cane round her head, and he fully expected the benefit. 'Because I am a poor weak woman, I am to be trampled on in my own house, and come on my knees, at these shameful hours, to hold all your gallipots and phials for you. Look, this is the way I serve your grand science! There go a few of them, and there, and there! How do you like that, Professor?—Oh, oh, oh!'

"At the third sweep of the cane among his chemical treasures, she had dashed on the floor, among many other things, a small stoppered bottle full of caustic liquid, and a fair dose had fallen on her instep, which was protected by nothing but a thin silk stocking. Screeching with pain, she danced round the room, and then fell upon a chair, and began to tear her hair, in a violent fit of hysterics.

"'It is painful for the moment; but there is no serious harm,' said the Captain, as he rang the bell for her own attendant; 'fortunately the contents of that bottle were diluted, or she might never have walked again; if indeed such a style of progress is to be called walking. It is most unwise of any tiro to interfere with these little inquiries. I was very near a fine result; and now, I fear, it is all scattered.'

“The next day he did, what he should have done some months ago. He took the copy of his marriage-settlement to a good solicitor, and found, to his sad astonishment, that the boasts of the termagant were too true. Under the provisions of that document—as atrocious a swindle as was ever perpetrated—he could be turned out of his own house, and the property he intended for his own child was at the mercy of her stepmother.

“From the lawyer he got not a crumb of comfort. The settlement was his own act and deed; there was no escaping from it. It had been prepared by the lady’s solicitors; and he had signed it without consideration. All very true; but he should have considered, and marriage was a consideration, in the eye of the law, and a binding one. If the Professor wished, the solicitor would take Counsel’s opinion, whether there might be any chance of obtaining redress from Equity. But he felt sure, that to do so would only be a waste of money. It was a most irregular thing, that in such an arrangement, one side only should be represented; but that was the fault of the other side, which surrendered its own interests. In fact, it was a very fine instance of [82] confidence in human nature; and human nature had been grateful enough to make the most of the confidence offered.

“If you did not know what the Professor is, you might suppose, Kit, that he was overcome, and overwhelmed with the result of his own neglect and softness. Not a bit of it; in a week’s time, he had mended all his broken apparatus; and the only difference to be noticed was, that he never began work without locking the door. His treatment of his wife was the same as ever. He bore no ill-will, or at any rate showed none, on account of that strong explosion; and he took thenceforth all her fits of fury as gusts of wind, that had got in by mistake. It is impossible for any woman to make a man of that nature unhappy. He would have been happier, I dare say, and have done much more for the good of the world, if he had married a peaceful woman; but I know very little of those matters. Only, as you have an ordinary mind, be sure that you marry a sweet-tempered woman. To bed, my boy, to bed! We must be up right early.”

CHAPTER XV.
MORAL SUPPORT.

In spite of all said to the contrary, I believe that young people, upon the whole, are more apt to ponder than the old folk are. At least, if to ponder means—as it should—to weigh in the balance of pros and cons the probable results of their own doings. The old man remembers the time he has lost, in thinking thoughts that came to naught; and he sees that if they had come to much, that much would have been very little now. The young man has plenty of time on his hands, and believes he is going to do wonders with it, and makes a bright map of his mighty course in life. And this is the wisest thing that he can do.

But when he falls in love, alas! his ripe wisdom is seldom applied to himself. Like a roguish grocer, with a magnet in his counter, he brings the scale down to his own liking; but he differs from him, in that he cheats himself.

Being very wise in my own eyes, I pondered very carefully my next step; not with any thought of retiring, but with a firm resolve to advance in the strongest and most effective manner. My [83] Uncle's long story, instead of damping, had added hot fuel to my ardour, and compassion had lent a deeper tone to passion. Tender pictures arose before me of my angelic Kitty, starved, and tortured, and snubbed, and trampled, and (worst of all perhaps to a female body) shabbily, and grotesquely dressed. Such a woman as my uncle had described was enough to drive the largest-minded man to fury, and to grind the sweetest of her own sex, into fragments of misery and despair. The one crumb of comfort I could pick up, was that such cruelty must make my darling pine all the more for tender love, and long perpetually for some refuge, however humble it might be. But the point of all points was—how should I get at her?

All these things were passing through my mind for about the thousandth time—yet all in vain—as I came back from Chertsey, on old *Spanker's* back, a day or two later in that same week. Old *Spanker* was as good a horse as ever tasted corn; and when we got together, we always seemed to fall into very much the same vein of thought. Not that *Spanker* had any love troubles, but plenty of other cares and considerations, which brought him into tune with me, as we jogged along. If anything went amiss on our premises, *Spanker* seemed to find it out, not one of us knew how, and to feel a friendly sadness for us, though it never affected his appetite. So warm was his interest in our affairs, that whenever he took a load to Covent Garden, the proper thing always was to let him know how it had been disposed of; and Selsey Bill declared that he came home with his ears pricked forward, or laid back, according as the prices had been up or down. But Selsey Bill, with seventeen hungry children, was himself as sympathetic as almost any horse.

It was very nigh dark; for the days were drawing in, being nearly come to the equinox, and the weather breaking up, as we had foreseen. Indeed but for that, I should not have been here, for my uncle would never have sent me to Chertsey, if the fruit had been fit to be gathered to-day. "Never gather any fruit when it is wet, except a horse-chestnut," he used to say; "and you may find the flavour of that improved." But the rain had not been so very heavy, only just enough to hang on things and make them sticky; and now there was a strong wind getting up, which was likely to fetch down a hundred bushels.

The river was no longer in high flood, though still over its banks, and turbulent; and I had not [84] to ride through great stretches of water, as our roads require one to do, even if they let him pass at all, when the Thames comes down at its utmost. When I was a lad in 1852, we could scarcely go anywhere without swimming. And now, without floods, I very nearly had to swim; for old *Spanker* stopped as suddenly as if he had been shot, in a dark place, where there was a ditch beside the road; and I, riding carelessly and mooning on my grievances, was as loose on his back as my hat on my head. I just saved myself from flying over his ears, and then flourished my whipstock, for I thought it was a footpad.

"Don't be a fool, Kit. You have done a little too much of that to me already."

The voice was well known to me, and the glimmering light showed the figure of Sam Henderson. He had a contemptuous manner of putting his heels on the earth, with his toes turned up and out; as if the world were not worth riding, except with a reckless attitude. But I was vexed to be pulled up like this, and nearly cast out of the saddle. Therefore I said something of his own sort.

"Young man, you don't value my good intentions; and you are not at all charmed with my new dodge, for fetching a horse up before he can think. You saw I never touched your bridle. Well, never mind that. I'm not going to teach you. How are things going on, at your crib, my boy?"

"Famously;" I answered, for it was not likely that I should discourse of my troubles to him. "Nothing could be better, Mr. Henderson; and since you have proved your new dodge satisfactory, I will say 'Good-night,' and beg you not to do it to me again."

"What a confounded muff you are!" he continued with his slangy drawl, which he had picked up perhaps at Tattersall's; "do you think that I would have come down this beastly lane, on a dirty night like this, without I had something important to say? How about your Kitty?"

This was a little too familiar, and put me on my dignity. At the same time it gave me a thrill of pleasure, as a proof of the public conclusion upon a point of deep private interest.

"If you happen to mean, in your cheeky style, a young lady known as Miss Fairthorn, and the niece of Miss Coldpepper, of the Hall; I can only tell you that she is in London, with her father, the celebrated Captain Fairthorn."

"A pinch for stale news—as we used to say at school. Perhaps I could give you a fresher tip, my [85] boy; but I daresay you don't care to hear it. Perhaps you have put your money on another filly. So have I; and this time it is a ripper."

Little as I liked his low manner of describing things too lofty for his comprehension, I could not let him depart like this. He lit a cigar under *Spanker's* nose, as if he had been nobody, and whistling to his bull-terrier Bob, turned away as if everything was settled. But I called him back sternly, and he said, "Oh well, if you want to hear more, you must turn into my little den down here."

I followed him through a white gate which he opened in the high paling that fenced his paddocks, and presently we came to a long low building, more like a shed than a dwelling-house, but having a snug room or two at one end. "This is my doctor's shop," he said; "and it serves for a thousand other uses. No patients at present—will be plenty by-and-by. Come into my snuggery, and have something hot. I will send a fellow home with your old screw, and tell the governor not to expect you to supper. Rump-steak and onions in ten minutes, Tom, and a knife and fork for this gentleman! Now, Kit, put your trotters on the hob, but have a pull first at this pewter."

This was heaping coals of fire on my head, after all that I had done to him; and I said something clumsy to that effect. He treated it as if it were hardly worth a word; and much as I love to be forgiven, I like to have done it to others much better.

"I never think twice of a thing like that," he replied, without turning to look at me. "A fellow like you who never sees a bit of life gets waxy over nothing, and makes a fool of himself. You hit straight, and I deserved it. I live among horses a deal too much to bear ill-will, as the humans do. Let us have our corn, my boy; and then I will tell you what I heard in town to-day, and you can grind it between your wisdom teeth."

In spite of all anxiety, I did well with the victuals set before me; and Sam was right hospitable in every way, and made me laugh freely at his short crisp stories, with a horse for the hero, and a man for the rogue, or even a woman in some cases. I endeavoured to match some of them with tales of our own nags, but those he swept by disdainfully. No horse was worth talking of below the rank of thoroughbred; as a story has no interest, until we come to the Earls, and the Dukes, and the Marquises.

"Now," said Sam Henderson, when the plates were gone, and glasses had succeeded them; [86] "Kit Orchardson, you are a very pleasant fellow; considering how little you know of the world, I never thought there was so much in you. Why, if you could get over your shyness, Kit, you would be fit for very good society. But it is a mistake on the right side, my boy. I would much rather see a young chap like that, than one of your bumptious clodhoppers. I suppose I am the only man in Sunbury who ever goes into high society. And I take good care that it never spoils me. There is not a Lord on the turf that won't shake hands with me, when he thinks I can put him up to anything. But you can't say I am stuck up, can you now?"

"Certainly not," I declared with warmth, for his hospitality was cordial; "you keep to your nature through the whole of it. It would spoil most of us to have so much to do with noblemen."

"You and I should see more of one another," Sam answered, with gratification beaming in his very keen and lively eyes; "and if ever you would put a bit of Uncle Corny's tin upon any tit at long odds, come to me. The finest tip in England free, gratis, and for nothing. But I called you in for a different sort of tip. When I was at the corner this afternoon, who should I see but Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot? I dare say you may have heard of him. No? Very well, that proves just what I was saying. You are as green as a grasshopper looking at a cuckoo. 'Pot,' as we call him—and it fits him well, for his figure is that, and his habits are black—is one of the best-known men in London, and one of the worst to have much to do with. 'Holloa, Sam,' he says, 'glad to see you. What'll you take for your old *Sinner* now?' *Sinner*, you must know, is my old mare *Cinnaminta*, the dam of more winners than any other mare alive; and the old rogue knows well enough that I would sooner sell my shadow, even if he had sixpence to put on it. He gives himself out to be rolling in money, but all he ever rolls in is the gutter. Well, sir, we got on from one thing to another; and by-and-by I gave him just a little rub about a hatful of money I had won of him at Chester, and never seen the colour of. 'All right,' he says, 'down upon the nail next week. Haven't you heard what's up with me?' So I told him no, and he falls to laughing, enough to shake the dye out of his grizzly whiskers. 'Going to buckle to. By Gosh, I mean it,' says he; 'and the sweetest young filly as ever looked through a riband. Rejoices in the name of Kitty Fairthorn, just the very [87] name for the winner of the Oaks. Ha, ha, wish me joy, old chap. She was down your way, I am told, last week. But I had spotted her before that, Sam.' I was thrown upon my haunches, as you may fancy, Kit; but I did not let him see it; though to think of old Crumbly Pot going in for such a stunner—'Rhino, no doubt,' I says; and he says, 'By the bucketful! Her dad is a buffer who can sit down and coin it in batteries. And only this kid to put it on; the others belong to a different stable. Think of coming for the honeymoon, down to your place. They tell me you keep the big crib empty.' Well I only shook my head at that, for the old rogue never pays his rent; and I asked him when it was to be pulled off. 'Pretty smart,' he said; but the day not named, and he must go first to Lincolnshire, to see about his property there; which I happen to know is up the spout to its outside value, though he always talks big on the strength of it. And no doubt he has got over

your grand Professor, with his baronetcy and his flourishing estates. That's about the tune of it, you may swear, Kit. Well, how do you like my yarn, my boy?"

"Sam, it shall never come off;" I cried, with a stamp which made the glasses jingle, and the stirrup-irons that hung on the wall rattle as if a mad horse were between them. "I would rather see that innocent young creature in her coffin than married to such a low brute. Why, even if she married you, Sam, although it would be a terrible fall, she would have a man, and an honest one comparatively to deal with. But as to the Crumbly Pot, as you call him—"

"Well, old fellow, you mean well," replied Henderson with tranquillity; "though your compliments are rather left-handed. But you may look upon me, Kit, as out of the running. I was taken with the girl, I won't deny it. But she didn't take to me, and she took to you. And between you and me, I am as sure as eggs that she hasn't got sixpence to bless herself. That wouldn't suit my book; and I am no plunger."

"She wants no sixpence to bless herself. She is blest without a halfpenny. And a blessing she will be to any man who deserves her, although there is none on the face of this earth—"

"Very well, very well—stow all that. A woman's a dark horse, even to her own trainer. But I've met with just as fine a bit of stuff, a lovely young filly down at Ludred. She's the only daughter of the old man there; and if ever I spotted a Derby nag, he has got the next one in his string this [88] moment. I have not quite made up my mind yet; but I think I shall go in for her. At any rate I'm off with the Fairthorn lay. Why, there's a cuss of a woman to deal with there, who'd frighten a dromedary into fits, they say. I wonder if old Pot knows about it. But Pot shan't have her, if I can help it; and you may trust me for knowing a thing or two. Come, let's strike a bargain, Kit, and stick to it like men. Will you help me with the Ludred job, if I do all I can for you in the Fairthorn affair? Give me your hand on it, and I am your man."

I told him that I did not see at all how I could be of any service to him, in his scheme on the young lady he was thinking of. But he said that I could help him as much as I liked; for a relative of mine lived in that village, an elderly lady, and highly respected, as she occupied one of the best houses in the place; and more than that, it belonged to her. It was some years now since I had seen her, but she had been kind to me when I was at school; and Sam proposed that I should look her up, and give a bright account of him, and perhaps do more than that; for the young lady visited at her house, and valued her opinion highly. I now perceived why Henderson had become so friendly, and was able to trust him, as he had a good motive. Moreover I had heard of his "lovely filly," and even seen her when she was a child; and I knew that her father (the well-known Mr. Chalker) had made a good fortune in the racing business, and perhaps would be apt to look down upon Sam, from the point of higher standing and better breeding. Being interested now in all true love, I readily promised to do all I could, and then begged for Sam's counsel in my own case.

"Take the bull by the horns;" he said with his usual briskness. "Never beat about the bush; that's my plan, Kit. Go up, and see the governor, and say,—'I love your daughter; I hear she is awfully sat upon at home, and doesn't even get her corn regular. She has taken a great liking to me; I know that. And although I am not a great gun, and am terribly green, my Uncle Corny is a warm old chap; and I shall have all his land and money, when he croaks. You see, governor, you might do worse. And as for old Pot, if you knew the old scamp, you'd sooner kill your girl than let him have her. Why, he can't even square his bets; and all his land in Lincolnshire is collared by the Moseys. Hand her to me, and I'll make her a good husband, and you shall come to our place, and live jolly, when you can't stand your devil of a wife no longer.' Kit, I'll write it down for you, if [89] you like. You say all that to him, exactly as I said it; and if you don't fetch him, turn me out to grass in January."

I was much amused that Henderson should call me "green," and yet be in earnest with such absurdity as this; which I recommended him (since he had such faith in it) to learn by heart, and then repeat, with the needful alterations, to the gentleman whose daughter he was anxious now to win. However, though indignant and frightened sadly at the news about that vile baronet, I was pleased on the whole with Sam's behaviour, though not with his last words; which were these, as he left me at the top of the village, and he uttered them with much solemnity—"I say, who stole the dog? Talk of angels, after that!"

CHAPTER XVI.
TRUE LOVE.

If any one had told me, so lately as last week, that Sam and myself would be sworn allies upon matters of the deepest interest, within fifty years of such a prophecy, I should have considered him as great a liar as the greatest statesman of the present period prove themselves daily out of their own mouths. Although I had not then the benefit of knowing how the most righteous of mankind deceive us, I knew well enough that the world is full of rogues, for no man can visit Covent Garden twice without having that conviction forced upon him. And Sam Henderson's quiet grins at my "greenness" naturally led me to ponder just a little upon the possibility of his trafficking upon it. However, I am glad to say, and still hold to it, that neither then, nor even in my later troubles, which were infinitely deeper than any yet recounted, did I ever pass into the bitter shadow through which all men are beheld as liars.

The difficulty was to know what to do next. If I did nothing, which was the easiest thing to do—and a course to which my bashfulness and ignorance inclined me—the foulest of all foul wrongs might triumph; the sweetest and most lovable of all the fair beings, who are sent among the coarser lot to renew their faith in goodness, might even by virtue of her own excellence become a [90] sacrifice to villainy. I knew that my darling had that strong sense of justice, without which pure gentleness is as a broken reed; and I felt that she also had a keen perception of the good and the bad, as they appear in men. But, alas! I knew also that she loved her father before any one on earth, and almost worshipped him, which he deserved for his character at large, but not so entirely for his conduct to herself. He was always kind and loving to her when the state of things permitted it; but the bent of his nature was towards peace, and in the strange home, which had swallowed him, there was no peace, either by day or night, if he even dared to show that he loved his own child. The blackest falsehoods were told about her, and the lowest devices perpetually plied—as I discovered later on—to estrange the father from the daughter, and rob them of their faith in one another. But this part of her story I mean to pass over with as light a step as possible, for to dwell on such matters stirs the lower part of nature, and angers us without the enlargement of good wrath. We must try to forgive, when we cannot forget, and endeavour not to hope—whenever faith allows us—that the cruel and inhuman may be basted with red pepper for more than a millennium of the time to come.

But as yet I had none of this clemency in me. Youth has a stronger and far more militant sense of justice than middle age. I was fired continually with indignation, and often clenched my fists, and was eager to rush at a wall with no door in it, when my uncle's tale and Sam's confirmation came into my head like a whirlwind. "What a fool I am, what a helpless idiot!" I kept on muttering to myself; "the murder will be done before I move."

I could see no pretext, no prospect whatever, no possibility of interference; and my uncle (to whom I confided my misery) could only shake his head, and say—"Very bad job, my boy. You must try to make the best of it."

Probably it would have made the worst of me, and left me to die an old bachelor, if it had not been for a little chance, such as no one would think much of. Time was drawing on, without a sign of sunshine in it; when to pick up a very small crumb of comfort, and recall the happiest day I had ever known yet, I went to my cupboard, and pulled out a simple sketch in water colours, which I had made of the stricken pear-tree; after some one had made of it the luckiest tree that [91] ever died. She had not finished her work of art, partly through sweet talk with me; and I hoped to surprise her and compare our portraits, when she should come to complete her drawing. Now as I glanced, and sighed, and gazed, and put in a little touch with listless hands, my good genius stood behind me, in the form of a little old woman, holding in one hand a bucket, and in the other a scrubbing-brush.

"Lor', how bootiful 'e have dooed 'un!" Tabby Tapscott cried, as if she would like to have a turn at it with her reeking brush. "A can zee every crinkle crankum of they leaveses, and a girt bumble-drum coom to sniff at 'un. Her cudn't do 'un half so natteral as thiccy, if her was to coom a dizen taimes, for kissy-kissy talk like. Think I didn't clap eyes upon 'e both? Good as a plai it wor, and the both of 'e vancying nobbody naigh! Lor', I niver zee nort more amoosin!"

"Then all I can say is, you ought to have that bucket of slops thrown over you. What business of yours, you inquisitive old creature?"

"That be vaine manners after arl as I dooed, to vetch 'un here for you to carr' on with! Ha, ha, ha, I cud tell 'e zummat now, if so be I was mainded to. But I reckon 'e wud goo to drow boocket auver Tabby?"

This renewed my courtesy at once, for I had great faith in Tabby's devices; and after some coying, and the touch of a crooked sixpence, she told me her plan, which was simplicity itself, so that I wondered at my own dulness. I was to find out where Captain Fairthorn lived, which could be done with the greatest ease; and then to call and make a point of seeing him, on the plea of presenting him with a perfect copy, such as his daughter had no time to finish. Who could tell that good luck might not afford me a glimpse at, or even a few words with, the one who was never absent from my mind? And supposing there were no such bliss as that, at least I could get some tidings of her, and possibly find a chance of doing something more. Be it as it might, I could make things no worse; and anything was better than this horrible suspense. I consulted my uncle

about this little scheme, and he readily fell in with it; for he could not bear to see me going about my work as if my heart were not in it, and searching the papers in dread of bad news every morning. And finding that I could be of use to him in London, he proposed that I should go that very night in the fruit-van, with Selsey Bill, and the thief-boy—that is to say, the boy who kept watch against thieves, of whom there are scores in the market. [92]

When I found my way, towards the middle of the day, to that wild weald—as it then was—of London, which is now a camp of Punch-and-Judy boxes strung with balconies, it took me some minutes to become convinced that I was not in a hop-ground turned upside down. Some mighty contractor was at work in a breadth and depth of chaos; and countless volcanoes of piled clay, which none but a demon could have made to burn, were uttering horizontal fumes, not at all like honest smoke in texture, but tenfold worse to cope with. Some thousands of brawny navvies, running on planks (at the head pirate's order) with skeleton barrows before them, had contrived (with the aid of ten thousand tin pots) to keep their throats clear and their insides going. Not one of them would stop to tell me where I was; all gave a nod and went on barrowing; perhaps they were under conditions, such as occur to most of us in the barrow-drive of life, when to pause for a moment is to topple over.

After shouting in vain to these night-capped fellows, I saw through the blue mist of drifting poison, a young fellow, perhaps about twenty-one, who seemed to be clerk of the works, or something; and I felt myself fit to patronize him, being four or five years his elder, and at least to that amount his bigger. But for his better he would not have me, and snapped in such a style that I seemed to belong almost to a past generation. "Fairthorn?" he said. "Yes, I may have heard of him. Elderly gent—wears goggles, and goes in for thunderbolts. Don't hang out here, stops business. Three turns to the left, and ask the old applewoman."

I was much inclined to increase his acquaintance with apples, by giving him one to his eye—external, and not a treasure; but before I could even return his contempt, he was gone, and left me in the wilderness. At last I found a boy who was looking after pots, and for twopence he not only led me truly, but enlightened me largely as to this part of the world. He showed me where the "Great Shebissun" was to be, and how all the roads were to be laid out, and even shook his head (now twelve years old) as to the solvency of this "rum rig." He dismissed me kindly—with his salary doubled—at the gate of the great philosopher; and with his finger to his nose gave parting counsel.

"Best not go in, young man. The old codger can blow you to bits, by turning a handle, and the old cat'll scratch your wig off. But there's a stunnin' gal—ah, that's what you're after! I say, young covey, if you're game for a bit of sweet'artin' on the sly, I'll show yer the very nick for it." He pointed to a gate between two old trees, and overhung with ivy. "How does I know?" he said, anticipating briskly any doubt on my part; "s'help me taters, it's the only place round here as I never took a pot of beer to." [93]

Anxious as I was, I smiled a little at this criterion of a trysting-place, and then did my utmost to fix in mind the bearings of this strange neighbourhood. Although I knew the busy parts of London well enough, of the vast spread of out-skirts I knew little, except the ups and downs of the great roads through them, and here and there a long look-out from the top of Notting Hill, or any other little eminence. Even so I had only lost my eyes in a mighty maze of things to come, and felt a deep wonder of pity for the builders, who were running up houses they could never fill. The part I was now exploring lay between the two great western roads, and was therefore to me an unknown land. But I felt pretty sure that the house now before me had been quite lately a mere country mansion, with grounds not overlooked, and even meadows of its own, where cows might find it needful to low to one another, and a horse might go a long way to find a gate to scratch against.

Even now there was a cattle-pond (the dregs of better days) near the gate that led up from the brickfields; and half a dozen ancient Scotch firs leaned in a whispering attitude towards one another; perhaps they alone were left of a goodly group, trembling at every axe that passed. The house itself was long, low, and red, and full of little windows, upon whose sills a straggling ilex leaned its elbows here and there, and sparrows held a lively chivvy. There was not a flower in the beds in front, and the box-edging of the walks was as high and broad as a wheel-barrow. Two large cedars, one at either corner of the sodden grass-plot, looked like mighty pencils placed to mark the extent of the building.

Descrying no one (except an ancient dog of mighty stature, and of some race unknown to me, who came up in a friendly manner) I summoned all my courage, with good manners at the back of it, and pulled a great bell-handle hanging, like a butcher's steelyard, between two mossy piers of stone. There was no sound of any bell inside, and I was counting the time for another pull, when the door was opened some few inches, and sharp black eyes peered out at me. [94]

"Subscription Bible? No, thank you, young man. Cook was put into County-court last time."

I did not know what she meant, until I saw that she was glancing at the poor portfolio, of my own make, which held my unpretentious drawing. "I am not come for any subscription," I said, drawing back from the door, as she seemed to suspect that I would try to push it open. "I have the pleasure of knowing Captain Fairthorn, and I wish to see him."

"Don't think you can," she answered sharply; "but if you will tell me what your business is, I will ask the Mistress about it. You may come, and wait here, while I go to her. Scrape your boots

first, and don’t bring in any clay.”

This did not sound very gracious; but I obeyed her orders with my best smile, and producing two very fine pears, laid them on the black marble chimney-piece of the hall. Her sallow face almost relaxed to a smile.

“Young man from the country? Well, take a chair a minute, while I go and ask for orders about you.” With these words she hastened up an old oak staircase, and left me at leisure to look about.

The hall was a large but not lofty chamber, panelled with some dark wood, and hung with several grimy paintings. Two doors at either end led from it, as well as the main staircase in the middle, and a narrow stone passage at one corner. The fireplace was large, but looked as if it had more to do with frost than fire; and the day being chilly and very damp, with an east wind crawling along the ground, I began to shiver, for my feet were wet from the wilderness of clay I had waded through. But presently the sound of loud voices caught my ear, and filled me with hot interest.

One of the doors at the further end was not quite closed, and the room beyond resounded with some contention. “What a fool you are to make such a fuss!” one feminine voice was exclaiming —“Oh, don’t reason with her,” cried another, “the poor stupe isn’t worth it. The thing is settled, and so what is the use of talking? How glad I shall be to see the last of her wicked temper and perpetual sulks. And I am sure you will be the same, Jerry. Nothing surprises me so much as Mamma’s wonderful patience with her. Why, she hasn’t boxed her ears since Saturday!”

“It isn’t only that,” replied the first; “but, Frizzy, consider the indulgences she has had. A [95]
candle to go to bed with, almost every night, and a sardine, positively one of our sardines, for her dinner, the day before yesterday. Why, she’ll want to be dining with us, the next thing! The more she is petted, the worse she gets. Now don’t you aspire to dine with us, you dear, you darling, don’t you now?”

“I am sure I never do,” replied a gentle voice, silvery even now, though quivering with tears; “I would rather have bread and water by myself in peace, than be scolded, and sneered at, and grudged every mouthful. Oh, what have I done to deserve it all?”

“I told you what would come of reasoning with her,” said the one who had been called “Frizzy”—probably Miss Euphrasia Bulwrag; “it simply makes her outrageous, Jerry. Ever since she came back from Sunbury, there has simply been no living with her. And she looks upon us as her enemies, because we are resolved that she shall do what is best for her. Lady Hotchpot—what can sound better? And then she can eat and drink all day long, which seems to be all she cares for.”

“That’s a little mistake of yours,” answered Miss Jerry, or Geraldine; “I know her tricks even better than you do. She cares for something, or somebody, some clodhopper, or chawbacon, down in that delightful village. Why, you can’t say ‘Sunbury,’ in the most innocent manner, without her blushing furiously. But she’s so cunning—I can’t get out of her who the beloved chawbacon is. Come now, Kitty, make a clean breast of it. I believe it’s the fellow that bets down there, and lives by having families of horses. Sir Cumberleigh told me all about him, and had a rare laugh; you should have seen him laugh, when I said that our Kitty was smitten. Well, I hoped she had a little more principle than that. And you’d think that butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth!”

“Butter never gets a chance”—I heard my darling say, and knew by her voice that the sweetest temper in the world was roused at last—“your mother never lets it go into my mouth; while you have it thicker than your bread almost. But I’ll thank you to enjoy among yourselves, or with any old rake you may fawn upon, your low and most ignorant gossip about me. You had better not strike me. Your mother may. But I will not take it from either of you; nor from both together.”

I could scarcely contain myself, I assure you; and if the young tyrants had fallen upon her, I [96]
must have got into a nice position—in the old, but not in the new sense of “nice”—that of bodily conflict with women. Luckily, however, these were cowards, as behoved such creatures; and I verily believe that my angel (if driven—as no angel should be—into a free fight) would have made a bad record of both of them.

I was hovering, as it were, upon my legs, burning to dash into the room, yet shuddering at the strange intrusion, when Miss Fairthorn came out very quietly, and holding her handkerchief to her streaming eyes. The door was banged behind her, as if by a kick, and a loud contemptuous laugh came through it. What I did is a great deal more than I can tell; for I must have been carried far beyond myself, by pity, indignation, and ardent love.

“Oh, don’t!” said Kitty, as I stood before her, almost before she could have used her eyes, being overcome with weeping; but the glance she gave me had told the thing that I cared for most in earth or heaven. And the strangest point was that we felt no surprise at being together in this wondrous way. To me it seemed right that she should fall into my arms; and to her it seemed natural that I should drop from heaven. “Oh, don’t!” said Kitty, but she let me do it.

I kissed away her tears, and I cannot tell you whether they gave me more bliss or pain; I stroked her softly nestling hair, as if it all belonged to me; and I played with her pretty fingers, putting them one by one between my great things, to make the thrilling process last. Then I looked once more into her lovely eyes—the wells of all my life-springs now—and lo, their tears were flown; and hope, and woman’s faith, and heaven’s own love, were beaming from their

lustrous depth, as the light that proves the jewel true!

“Darling of my life,” was all I said; and she only answered—

“Yes, dear.”

CHAPTER XVII.
TRUE FATHER.

Now anybody may suppose, who looks at things too sensibly, that true love never yet has chosen time and place more foolishly, for coming to grand issue, and obtaining pledge for ever. The sour-faced woman might have returned in the crisis of our doings, or the two young tyrants might have broken forth, and made sport of us from the parlour. Whether we knew these things or not, we never gave a thought to them; all we thought of was one another, and the rest might think what they liked of us. This is not a large way to look at things; and yet once in a life, the largest. [97]

My Kitty—as I called her now, and have never since wanted any other name—was the first (as behoved the more sensitive one) to bring common sense to bear on us.

“You must come and see my father, dear,” she whispered, with her hands in mine; “I am sure that he loves me all he can. And if you have quite made up your mind that you cannot do without me, we may trust him to make the best of it; for he always makes the best of things.”

“Show me where he is,” I answered, scarcely yet believing that my fortune was so glorious; while she looked at me as only one in the world can ever look at us; “I fear that he will be sadly vexed; but he is kind to every one.”

“He will not be vexed on his own account, nor yet on mine,” she answered very quietly; “but nobody knows what he has to bear. Let us go to him, while he is by himself. There is some one coming; we must be quick.”

We hastened down the long stone passage, just in time to escape the servant, who at last had found her mistress; and after passing several doors, we came to one with an iron bar, and iron rails, in front of it.

“See how he has to protect himself! If somebody knew that I have this key, it would very soon be torn from me. I dare say you are surprised; such things are not done down at Sunbury. How I love that quiet place!”

“And you shall live there all your life,” I answered, as we passed the barrier; “no one shall dare to insult you there; you shall be the Queen, the Queen of all; and you know who will be your slave of slaves.”

“That is all very fine talk,” she said; “I believe it is the usual style at first; and then we come to Bramah locks, and cold iron.”

But her smile, as she put her hand on my shoulder, proved that her own heart taught her better.

“Let me go in first, and see what he is doing. Oh, Kit, you have taken advantage enough. What right have you to say that it is your last chance? I am sure I hope not. Oh, how mean of you to turn my own words against me! Now have a little reason. Yes, yes, yes. For the fiftieth time at least, in five minutes—I love you, and never will have anybody else. Now let me go in first; sometimes he is too busy for even me to interrupt him.” [98]

Much against my will, I let her go, for half an hour later would have done as well according to my judgment; and after securing the fence behind us, which had wholly escaped my attention, she knocked at the door of the inner room, and without being answered opened it.

Her father was sitting with his back to us, so intent upon some small object that he did not hear our footsteps. Some instrument made of brass and glass, but quite unlike a microscope, was in his left hand, and with the other he was slowly revolving something. The appearance of the room amazed me, with its vast multitude of things unknown to me even by name or shape, but all looking full of polished mischief and poisonous intelligence.

“This is why my Kitty weeps, and is starved and crushed by female dragons,” I said to myself in bitter mood; and even the Professor’s grand calm head, and sweet scientific attitude, did not arouse the reverence which a stranger would have felt for him.

His daughter touched, as lightly as a frond of fern might touch it, one of his wavering silver locks, and waited with a smile for him to turn. But I saw that her bosom trembled, with a sigh of deeper birth than smiles. Then he turned and looked at her, and knew from the eyes, that were so like his own, and yet so deeply different, that she had something he must hear.

“You have been crying again, my child,” he said as he kissed her forehead; “they promised me you should be happy now.”

“Yes, if I let them do what they like. Father, you have no idea what it is. I am never allowed to see you alone, except by stealth, and at fearful risk. Father, come out of philosophy and science, and attend to your own child.”

“But my dear, I do. It is the very thing that is in my mind continually. I spoke very strongly not a week ago, and received a solemn promise that you should have new clothes, and diet the same as the rest, and everything I could think of for your good.”

“How many times have they promised it, father? And then I am beaten and put on bread and [99]

water, for having dared to complain to you. But all that is a trifle, a thing soon over. I must expect that sort of thing, because I have no mother. But, father, what they are trying to do to me is ten times worse than ragged clothes, or starvation, or bodily punishment. They want me to marry a man I detest—an old man, and a bad one!”

“My dear, I have promised you, and you know that you can rely on my promises, that you shall not even be allowed to marry a man of doubtful character. I have not been able, my darling Kitty, to do everything I should have liked for you; but one thing is certain—if inquiries prove that this gentleman—I forget his name—is a man of bad life and unkind nature, you shall have nothing to do with him. You know how little I am able now to go into what is called ‘Society,’ and most of my friends are men of my own tastes. But I have taken particular trouble, at the loss of much important time, to ascertain whether your opinion of this person is correct. He is wealthy and of good family, I am told, though that is merely a secondary point. He is likely to have outlived youthful follies; and the difference of age is in your favour.”

“But not in his”—interrupted Kitty, with a smile, for which I could have kissed her fifty times, it was so natural, and simple, yet sagacious.

“You are flippant, my dear, in spite of all your troubles,” continued her father, smiling also. “No length of discipline has entirely tamed you. And now I will tell you why I am so anxious that you should have a settled home, and some one to take care of you, as soon as can suitably be arranged. I am likely to leave England, on a roving expedition, for how long a time is as yet uncertain. It may be for a twelvemonth, or even more, possibly for two years; and all that time, where will you be, my darling child? I know that you are not happy now; though my object in making this second arrangement was mainly to have you protected and cared for. But things have not turned out exactly as I hoped; and I fear that in my absence they may grow still worse. When I heard that this gentleman was strongly attached to you, and wished you to become his wife this winter, I hoped that I might be of some little service to the cause of knowledge, without any neglect of my duty to you. And I may tell you, my child, that through a long course of rather extravagant habits, which I have failed to check, it is become of great importance to me, so far as mere money goes—which is not much—to accept the appointment which is offered me. I am often [100] deeply grieved at your condition, and do my very utmost to improve it; but am not always allowed; as you know, my dear, and are very sweet and patient with me—I am not always allowed to have my own way.”

“Don’t put it so, papa. That is not half the truth. Say that you never have been allowed, never are, and never will be, to have so much as a barleycorn of your own way.”

“Young people put things in too strong a light,” the man of science answered gently. “But we will not go into that question now. Only you will see, my dear, from what I have said, why I am so anxious that you should be settled in a happy and peaceful home of your own, far away from all those who worry you. This gentleman offers you a wealthy home; but knowing your nature, I do not insist on that. Indeed I should be quite satisfied with a very humble home for my darling, if it were a happy one.”

“Very well, papa, nothing could be nicer. I can please you now exactly, and meet all your wishes, though I cannot bear to hear of your leaving me so long. But you will not leave me to the tender mercies”—here my Kitty beckoned to me to come forward, which I had long been most eager to do, but in obedience to her signals, had remained by the door and behind a tall case of some wheel within wheel-work, almost as complex as human motives—“father, you see that you need not leave me to the tender mercies of anybody, except this gentleman, who saved my life at Sunbury, as you know, and wishes to make it a part of his own, for the rest of it.”

Captain Fairthorn looked at me with extreme surprise; my idea of his character was that nothing upon or below the earth could surprise him. But he had his glasses on; and these always seem to me to treble the marks of astonishment in the eyes that stand behind them. In deference to his large intellect, and fame, and great (though inactive) nobility of nature, I waited for him to begin, though I am sure—now I come to think of it—that he would have been glad for me to take the move.

“Kitty,” he said at last, with some relief at not having to fall upon me yet, “I should like to know a little more of this story. I remember this young man very well. But his name has escaped me for the moment. He will not think me rude. It is one of the many penalties we pay for undue devotion to our own little subjects. If he had been a zoophyte, or a proboscidian, or even one of the [101] constituents—”

“If he had been a zoophyte, papa, or anything else with a very big name, and a very little meaning,” Miss Fairthorn exclaimed in reproachful tones, “where should I be now? At the bottom of the Thames. And perhaps you would enjoy dredging for me.”

“In spite of all training, she has a temper;” the father addressed this remark to me. “Also she has a deep sense of gratitude—a feeling we find the more largely developed, the further we travel from the human order. But, my dear, you allow yourself vague discursions. In a matter like this you have brought before me, my desire is always to be practical. That great and original investigator, to whom we owe not only knowledge, but what is even more important, the only true course, by which to arrive—”

“My dear father, if you once begin on that—the knowledge we want, and a quick course to it, is whether you will be so good and so kind, as to make us both happy by your consent. This

gentleman loves me; and I love him. He is not wealthy; but he is good. You may leave me in his care, without a doubt. I have not known him long; but I know him as truly as if we had been brought up together. The only fault he has is that he cannot praise himself. And his reverence for you is so strong and deep, that it makes him more diffident than ever. You are dreadfully diffident yourself, papa, you know you are; and that makes me so despise all boastful people. Now fully understand that I won't have that horrible old Sir Cumbrous Hotchpot, and I will have this Kit Orchardson; that is to say, with your leave, father. And you owe me something, I should think, after all—but I have no right to speak of that. Only, if you don't give it, mind, I'll—I'll—" As a sample of what she would do, she began to sob deeply; and I caught her in my arms.

"You see, sir," I said—"oh, don't, my darling; your father is the kindest man in the world, and he will never have the heart to make you unhappy—you see, sir, how good she is, and how simple, and ready to be satisfied even with me. I am a poor man, and I have my way to make; but with her I could make it to—to—" I was going to say "heaven," but substituted, "the top of the tree. And we have a pretty place, where she would be happy as the day is long. And if I don't protect her, and cherish her, and worship her, and keep her as the apple of my eye, I hope you [102] will take me by the neck, Captain Fairthorn, and put me under this air-pump."

"How do you know that is an air-pump?" he asked, with admiration of my cleverness.

"By the look, sir," I replied; "I have seen them before."

"Well, then, it isn't; neither does it much resemble one. Kitty, you see what his diffidence is; and another proof, I suppose, is, that he has fallen in love with you?"

"Yes," said my darling, with a smile so humble, and loving, and confiding, that my eyes grew moist, and her father could not see through his spectacles; "it is a sure proof of his diffidence; for he deserves to have a better wife than I shall ever be; although I will do my best to please him."

"Well, after that," replied Captain Fairthorn, "it seems to me, that my opinion matters very little. You appear to have made up your minds; and your minds appear to have been made for one another. I am wholly unable to withstand such facts. Of course I shall make my inquiries, Master Kit. But so far as I can see at present, I will not deny you what you have won. If she is half as good to her husband as she always has been to her father, you will be a happy man, God willing. There kiss me, my pretty dear, and don't cry any more, till he makes you."

CHAPTER XVIII.
FALSE MOTHER.

Such is the balance of human events—if the phrase be held admissible—that the moment any member of our race is likely to strike the stars with his head sublime, he receives a hard thump upon that protuberance, and comes down with a crown—but a cracked one. As for myself—an unpretentious fellow, and of very simple intellect, though not quite such a fool as the world considered me in my later troubles,—desiring always to tell the truth, I will not deny that I walked on air, when I found myself gifted with my Kitty's love, and her large-hearted father's assent to it. It had been arranged that I must wait, and keep my bliss inside my waistcoat, until such time as slower prudence and clearer foresight might prescribe. But all I thought of were the glorious facts that Kitty loved me as I loved her, and that her father, who alone could enter sound [103] denial, would not deny. "What do I care for that old stepmother?" I said to myself, as I buttoned my coat.

That coat was henceforth sacred to me. There may have been smarter and grander coats, coats with more tone of high art about them, and of sleeker and richer substance. But this coat was enriched for ever with at least three tears from Kitty's eyes, Kitty's lovely hair had fallen like a vernal shower upon it, and her true heart had quivered to it, when she owned whose heart it was. I knew that it might be my duty now to start a new coat of loftier order, to keep me abreast of my rise in the world, as the son of a celebrated man; nevertheless this would be the coat to look back upon and look up to, as it hung upon a holy peg, with the pockets full of lavender.

I had said farewell to my dear love, and was just beginning to think how I would come it over Uncle Corny, telling him a bit, and then another bit, and leading him on to laugh at me, until I should come out with news which would make him snap his favourite pipe—when suddenly, near the Captain's gate, I felt a sharp tug from behind. The dusk was gathering, and I meant to put my best foot foremost, and walk all the way to Sunbury, scarcely feeling the road beneath my feet.

"What do you want, little chap?" I asked, for it was not in my power then to speak rudely to any living creature, although I was vexed at losing time.

"If you please, young man, my lady says that you are to come back and speak to her. You are to come with me to the door over there. And you must be careful how you scrape your boots."

I looked at the boy, and felt inclined to laugh. He was dressed in green from head to foot, and two or three dozen gilt buttons shone in a double row down the front of him. For a moment I doubted about obeying, until it occurred to me that if I refused, my sin might be visited upon another. So I turned and followed the page, who seemed to think disobedience impossible. He led me to a door at the west end of the house, and then up a little staircase to a fine broad passage, with statues and pictures looking very grand indeed. Before I could take half of it into my mind, he opened a door with carved work upon it, and showed me into the grandest room I had ever entered, except in show places, such as Hampton Court, or Windsor Castle. All this part of the house was so different from the other end that I was amazed, when I came to think of it.

But I could not think now of floors and ceilings, or even chairs and tables, as I walked with my [104] best hat in my hand, towards a tall lady very richly dressed, who stood by the mantelpiece, almost like a figure carved upon it. Her thick and strong hair seemed as black as a coal, until one came to look into it; and then it showed an undercast of red, such as I never saw in any other person. Her form was large and robust and full, and as powerful as that of any ordinary man; but the chief thing to notice was her face and eyes. Her face was like those we see cut in shell, to represent some ancient goddess, such as I read of at Hampton School—Juno, or Pallas, or it may have been Proserpine, my memory is not clear upon those little points—but although I remember a god with two faces, and a dog with three heads, I cannot call to mind any goddess among them endowed with three chins. "My lady," as the boy in green had called her, certainly did own three fine chins, as well as a mouth which was too large for the shells, and contemptuous nostrils that seemed to sift the air, and bright eyes with very thick lids for their sheath—and they wanted a sheath, I can tell you—and a forehead which looked as if it could roll, instead of only wrinkling, when the storm of passion swept it.

As yet I was too young to understand that justice and kindness are the only qualities entitling our poor fellow-mortals to respect. I had passed through no tribulation yet, and coped with none of the sorrows, which enlarge, when they do not embitter, the heart. Therefore I was much impressed by this lady's grandeur and fine presence, and made her a clumsy bow, as if I had scarcely a right to exist before her. She saw it, and scorned me, and took the wrong course, as we mostly do when we despise another.

"Do I know your name, young man?" she asked, as if it were very doubtful whether I possessed any name at all. "I seem to have heard of you, but cannot say where."

"In that case," I said, with my spirit returning at the insolent disdain of her eyes and voice, "the boy who came to fetch me has made some mistake. No doubt you wished to see some other person. I beg you to make no apologies."

With another low bow, I began my retreat, and was very near securing it; for she became too furious to condescend to speak. But two young ladies, whom I had scarcely noticed, jumped up from their chairs, and intercepted me.

"Mamma forgets names so," said one of them, a little plain thing with a mass of curly hair; "but you are Mr. Orchardson, I think, of Sunbury. If so, it is you that mamma wants to speak to." [105]

"I am not Mr. Orchardson of Sunbury," I answered; "my Uncle Cornelius is the gentleman so known. I am Christopher Orchardson, who only helps him in his business."

"Then, Christopher Orchardson," resumed their mother, as I came back and looked at her quietly, "you seem to have very little knowledge of good manners. Allow me to ask you what you are doing in this house?"

"I understood that I was sent for, ma'am; and I am waiting to know what your pleasure is." I saw the girls giggle, and glance at one another, as I delivered this statement.

"None of your trifling with me, young man. What I insist upon knowing is this. What right had you to enter my house, some hours ago, without my knowledge, and to remain in it, without my permission? Don't fence with the question, but answer it."

"That is easy enough," I replied with my eyes full on hers, which vainly strove to look down mine; "I came to this house, without asking whose it was, to see Captain Fairthorn, with a little sketch of something in which he had taken interest. The servant, or housekeeper, told me to wait, while she went to look for her mistress. Then I met Miss Fairthorn, whom I have had the pleasure of meeting several times before; and she most kindly showed me to her father's room. And I was very glad to find him in good health. After a very pleasant time with him, I was leaving the garden on my way home, when I was told that you wished to see me. I was not rude enough to refuse, and that is why I am in this house again."

"You have made a fine tale of it, but not told the truth. Did you come to my house to see the Professor? Or did you come rather to see his daughter?"

"I came to this house to see Captain Fairthorn. But I hoped that I might perhaps have the pleasure of seeing Miss Fairthorn also."

"And what was your motive in wishing to see her? I have a right to ask, as she is in my charge. I stand in the place of a mother to her, whether she is grateful, or whether she is otherwise. What did you wish to see her for?"

I was greatly at a loss to answer this. Not from any shame at the affection, which was the honour and glory of my being, but from dread of the consequences to my precious darling. She [106] saw my hesitation, and burst forth,—

"Do you think that I do not know all about it? You have had the gross insolence to lift your eyes to a young lady far above you in every way. You fancy that because she has no mother, and her father is a man of no worldly wisdom, and of extravagant sentiments, a kind of philosopher in short, you will be permitted to reduce her to your inferior rank in life. What are you?—a small market-gardener, or something of that kind, I believe."

"You were kind enough to say just now," I answered, "that you did not know anything about me. Even my name was strange to you. I am not ashamed of my business; and I lay no traps for any one."

"Have you the insolence to refer to me?" Her guilty conscience caught her here, and under its sting she grew so wild that I thought she would have flown at me, though no thought of her had been in my words. "But you are below my contempt, and I wonder that I even deign to speak to you. And I will make short work of it. Go back to your spade, or your heap of manure, or whatever it is you live in, and never dare to think again of Miss Kitty Fairthorn. She is engaged to a gentleman of family, and title, and large property; and I mean to have her married to him very shortly. Go back to your manure-heap; I have done with you."

"Not quite so easily as you think." To her great amazement I approached her, not only without terror, but with calm contempt. "You have a foul scheme in hand, as is widely known, for selling a poor girl, whom you have vilely misused, and starved for some years, and made her life a misery; and you think you will be allowed to sell her to a reprobate old man, who has not even gold enough to cover the blackness of his character. As a girl she has borne your blows, as a woman she would have to bear those of a cowardly and godless scoundrel. You like plain speaking, and there it is for you. Do you think that God will allow such crimes? I tell you, poor tyrant, that the right will conquer. Miss Fairthorn shall have a happy home, with the affection and kindness of which you have robbed her; and you—you shall suffer the misery you have inflicted."

Now I had not meant to say a single word of this, and was thoroughly astonished at my own strong language. Bitterly angry with myself as well, for what I felt to be unmanly conduct (even [107] under fiercest provocation), when I saw the effect upon this haughty lady. It must have been many years now, since any one had dared to show her thus what she was like; for her strong will had swept black and white into one—the one she chose to make of them. Weak indolence, and cowardice, a thousandfold more common than the resolute will, had got out of her way, until her way turned to a resistless rush.

She looked at me now, as if utterly unable to believe that her ears could be true to her. Then glancing at one of her daughters, she said, "Geraldine, this young man does not mean it. He has no idea what he is talking about. Take him away, my dear; I feel unwell. I shall be able to think of things, by-and-by. Euphrasia, run for the sal volatile, or the Cognac in the square decanter. And

then he may come back, and tell me what he means."

This strange turn of mind puzzled me, as much as my straightforward speech had puzzled her. Dr. Sippets—our great man at Sunbury—said, when I spoke of it many years afterwards, that he quite understood, and could easily explain it. To wit, that with people of choleric habit, the vessels of the brain become so charged up to a certain tension, that if anything more—but I had better not try to put his hundred-tun words into my pint pot. He is a choleric man himself; and his vessels might become so charged as to vent themselves in a heavy charge to me. It is enough to say, that when the lady sank, with a face as white as death, upon the sofa, proper feeling told me to depart.

This I was doing, in a sad haze of mind; doubting whether duty did not require that I should halt on the premises, until I had learned how the sufferer passed through her trial. But now another strange thing happened to me, and perhaps the very last I should have dreamed of. I was lingering uneasily near the door, with many pricks of self-reproach and even shame, when a slim figure glided out and came to me. Although the night had quite fallen now, I could see that it was not my Kitty who came out, but some one much shorter, and smaller altogether. With great anxiety I went to meet her, fearing almost to hear fatal tidings; for who can tell in such a case what may be the end of it?

"You need not be alarmed, Mr. Orchardson," said a voice which I recognized as that of Miss Jerry; "my mother is all right again, and quite ready to have another turn at you, if you are anxious to come back."

"The Lord forbid!" I replied devoutly. "I would run into the hottest of the brick-kilns yonder, [108]
rather than meet the good lady again. But I am delighted that it is no worse. It was very kind of you to come and tell me. My best thanks to you, Miss Geraldine."

"It was not that at all," she said with some hesitation; "I did not come to set your mind at ease, though I thought that possibly you might be waiting here; which is very good of you. But I came to say how grateful I am for your behaviour. You have done a lot of good; I cannot tell you half of it. Nobody ever dares to contradict mamma; that is what makes her so much what she is. She is very kind and pleasant at the bottom, I am sure. But she has such a very strong will of her own; as a clever man said, when he tried to comfort my dear father many years ago, such a 'very powerful identity,' that every one has always given way before her, until she—until she thinks all the world is bound to do it. You spoke very harshly to her, I know. Perhaps a real gentleman would not have done it; and for the moment I hated you. But she is so delightful to us ever since! We shall have a sweet time of it, for at least a week. But won't Miss Kitty catch it?"

Those last words gave me a bitter pang. This odd girl, who seemed to have some good in her, spoke them, as I thought, with exultation, or at any rate without any sign of sorrow. Her justice, like her mother's, stopped at home.

"If I have done you any good," I said, with faint hopes of getting some little myself, "do promise me one thing; I am sure you will. Try to be kind to Miss Fairthorn, and lighten some little of the burden she has to bear."

"Oh, you don't know her," she answered, with a laugh. "You think she is wonderful, I dare say. I can tell you Miss Kitty has a temper of her own. She is awfully provoking, and she won't be pitied. I believe she hates Frizzy and me, just because we are our mother's daughters. If you ever marry her, you had better look out. However, I will bear with her, as far as human nature can. And now I will say 'Good-night.'"

She gave me her hand, which I did not expect; and I saw that she was rather a pretty girl which I had not noticed in the room. She had fine dark eyes, and her voice was much softer than that of her sister; and, it seemed to me that she might come to good, if she got among good people, and away from her terrible mother.

CHAPTER XIX.
DOE DEM. ROE.

[109]

WHEN I gave Uncle Corny, as I was bound to do, a full account of that day's work, he was mightily pleased, and clapped me on the back for having spoken so plainly to that haughty woman.

"But now you must make up your mind," he said, "to have the door slammed in your face, if ever you attempt to get a glimpse of your sweetheart there. Poor thing, what a time of it she will have! What puts my back up is to think that her own father lets her be knocked about like that. She never tells him, you think, because it would only get him into trouble, and do her no good. Well, she is a noble girl, if that is the case. But he must know how she is treated, as I told you, in fifty other ways,—badly dressed, half starved, or at any rate fed on rice and suet-pudding, and kept in the schoolroom away from the others. How was she dressed now? What clothes had she on?"

I answered that I really did not know; and this was the truth, though I blamed myself for it. When first she began to be so much to me, I had noticed how neat and becoming her cloak was, and her hat, and a little tender muff, which held a still tenderer pair of hands. But now that she was all the world to me, and more, I seemed to have no sense of her apparel, but to be filled with herself alone, as if her existence came into mine. I did not tell him that because he would have cried "Stuff!"

But he understood my meaning, so far as to tell me of a case he had known some years ago. A friend of his had married a lovely girl, who had not a penny to bless herself with, and he was most deeply attached to her. But although he was very well off for money, and not at all of a stingy turn, for a long time it never came into his head that his wife had only two gowns, two bonnets, and one cloak. She was too proud to ask him for money; and instead of doing that, went on and on, wearing out all her poor things, until they were scarcely fit to be looked at. And many bitter tears she shed, as she darned, and patched, and let pieces in, convinced more and more, as the light shone through, that her husband must hate her to keep her like that. And perhaps it would have ended in the ruin of them both, for some villain was making love to her, when, luckily [110] a sister of his came to see them, and scolded him roundly for his blind neglect. "Why, bless her heart!" he cried, opening his eyes; "I never see Mary's clothes—I see Mary."

"Now mind you are not such a jackanapes as that;" my Uncle drew the moral, as he rubbed his hands, for he loved to have his stories laughed at; "when you have got your Kitty, and I don't see why you should not, be sure that you praise her dresses and bonnets; not quite so much perhaps as you praise herself, but still every time you can think of it. Women like that sort of thing, somehow. I can hardly tell you why; for if any man praised my coat or my hat, I should be vexed with him, unless it was to say that I had got them dirt-cheap. But perhaps the reason is that a woman's clothes are a part of her mind and her body too, a sort of another self to her."

"How on earth do you know such a lot about women?" I asked, though I thought that he did not know much. "One would think you had been married for forty years! What woman can have taught you all these things!"

"Mind your own business," my Uncle answered sharply. "You will have quite enough to do with that, as things appear at present. You have made play with this pretty girl, and you have booked your place with her father. Also you have got over me, who meant to have nothing to do with it. And you have given that hateful woman a Roland for her Oliver. But I will go bail that you have no idea whose shoulders will bear the brunt of it. Who should you say was the trump-card now?"

"The learned Professor," I replied; "the man who could kill that woman with a wire, if he were not so magnanimous. The man who knows everything in this world, except how to manage his own household. He will stand up for me, and I shall win."

"So you shall, my boy; you are quite right there. But it won't be done through him, I can tell you; or you would have a precious time to wait. It shall be done through a small market-gardener —as she had the cheek to call me—and she may grind her teeth, and slap her husband. Very few people know what I am; because I don't care what they think of me. But I see the proper thing to do, and I mean to begin to-morrow. Now go to bed, and dream as you do all day. You'll be no good to me, till you've had too much of Kitty."

Being weary in body and in mind, I slept until Tabby called out that the breakfast was ready. [111] For this I expected to be well upbraided, as my uncle was always afoot with the sun; but to my surprise he was not come home, and I kept his rasher hot for him. At last he came in, and sat down without a word beyond his short "Good morning, Kit!" His appetite was fine, and his face most cheerful; though his gray curls appeared a little grimy, and his coat had a smell more peculiar than pleasant.

"Shall have to go under the pump again," he said, as he pushed away his plate; "but it won't matter now till dinner-time. That twitch does make such a sticky smoke, with the sow-thistles whelmed down over it. But the wind was the right way, and took it very level. Bless my soul, how he did cough, and how he ran from one room to another! 'Twas enough to kill American blight a'most, let alone what they call a 'human.' But it's high time to rouse them up again, my lad; bring one of them runner-sticks, and lend a hand. If he don't bolt by dinner-time, we'll try a little sulphur. I would have done it sooner, if it had not been for the Dutch Honeysuckle, and blue

creeper."

Wondering what this device could be, I took a kidney-bean stick and followed him. He marched at a great pace, with a pitchfork on his shoulder, down a long alley of pears and apples; on which, though the leaves hung very late from the wetness of the season, the chill air of some frosty mornings had breathed divers colours. Then we came into an open break, which I had helped to plant with potatoes in the spring, and here were a score of bonfires burning, or rather smoking furiously. Beyond them was "Honeysuckle Cottage," belonging to my uncle, and standing at the north end of his grounds, against a lane which led to Hanworth.

This cottage had five windows facing us, and receiving the volleys of foul gray smoke, as a smart south-west wind drove it; and the fires being piled with diseased potato-haulm, of which there was abundance in that bad year, as well as bottomed with twitch-grass, beth-wine, cat's-tail, and fifty other kinds of weed, and still more noxious refuse, the reek was more than any nose could stand, when even a mild puff strayed towards us. But the main and solid mass was rushing, in a flood of embodied stench, straight into the windows of that peaceful cot, penetrating sash and frame and lining. Once or twice as the cloud wisped before the wind, we seemed to catch a brief glimpse of some agitated mortal, holding up his hands in supplication, or wringing them, [112] and applying them in anguish to his nose.

"Pile on some more, Bill, and stir them up again," shouted Uncle Corny, with his pitchfork swinging in the thick of it. "Agricultural operations must not be suspended to suit the caprice of individuals,—as the County-court judge said, when Noakes tried to stop me from carting manure near his parlour-window. If old Harker won't hearken, well make him sniff, eh? See the joke, Selsey Bill?"

Selsey Bill saw it, after deep reflection, and shook his long sides with a longer guffaw. "If a' don't sniff at this, a' must have quare nostrils"—he was wheezing himself, as he clapped on another great dollop of rottenness, and stirred it; "I could never have bided it two minutes; though the Lord hathn't made me too partiklar. Sure us'll vetch 'un out this time, Maister. Here a' coom'th, here a' coom'th. Lookey see!"

Following his point we descried a little man, timidly opening the cottage door, and apparently testing the smells outside, to compare them with those he was quitting. He glanced at the bonfires, and shook his fist wildly; then threw his skirt over his head, and made off, as if he had smelled quite enough of this world.

"Run and get the key, Bill," my uncle cried, as soon as he could speak for laughing; "lock the door, and bring the key to me. We'll send for the fire-engine by-and-by, and wash down the front, and then put your wife in, and scrub the whole place out. Beat abroad the fires, men, and throw some earth upon them. That's what I call something like an ejectment. The old rogue has paid no rent since Lady Day; though he had it dirt cheap at three and six a week, and me to pay the rates and taxes. Come, you shall have a pint of beer all round. I am sure you want something to take the taste out."

As we went home, to have a good wash, and change our coats, I learned all the meaning of this strong measure, and felt no more pity for the tenant evicted. He had occupied this cottage for some seven years now, and although he lived so close to us and on our land, scarcely any one had exchanged ten words with him. He was of a morose and silent nature, living all alone, though he had some money, and never going out of doors when he could help it. His name was Ben Harker, and throughout the village his nickname was "Old Arkerate;" for when anything was said to him that he could pick a hole in, if it were only a remark about the weather, he would always say [113] —"No. That isn't arkerate." It was said that he had lost a considerable fortune, before he came to Sunbury, by some inaccuracy in a will, or title-deeds, and thence he had taken to challenge the correctness of even the most trivial statement. My uncle had been longing for months to recover possession of his own premises; but old Harker took advantage of the obstacles richly provided by English law in such a case, and swore he would never go out without a law-suit. But he had never spent a halfpenny on repairs, though he had it so cheap through his promises; and by his own default he was thus smoked out, and the key was in the landlord's pocket.

Mrs. Selsey Bill, mother of seventeen living children, was very fat and stumpy—as behoves a giant's wife—and was blest with a cold in her head just now, which redeemed all her system from prejudice. The greatest philosophers assure us that all things—if there be anything—are good or bad, simply as we colour them in our own minds—that is to say, if we have minds—and to Mrs. Bill Tompkins the stench of that house was as sweet as the perfumes of Araby. She flung up the windows, from the force of habit, and not from "æsthetic preference," and she scrubbed away with soda, and fuller's earth, and soft soap, and bristle, and cocoa-fibre. And the next day, as soon as we had finished dinner (which we never left for nightfall, as if it were a burglary), my uncle said, "let us go and see how that place looks, after Old Arkerate has had to cut and run."

When we got there, fat little Mrs. Tompkins was scrubbing almost as hard as ever. It is quite wrong to talk as if fat people cannot work. Many of them can, and can even carry on, by drawing on their own resources, when a lean person having hollow places down her begins to pant, and has no stuff to fill them out. She drew her breath a little, as she got up from the bucket; but neither of her hands went to her waist, because there was no such place to go to. She had three of the young ones strapped down on the floor of the room she had not yet grappled with; for her husband was of an ingenious mind, and necessity had taught him invention. Mrs. Selsey Bill stood up and faced us; she thought that we were come to say she had not done enough.

“Honourable gents,” she began with the lead, as women love to do, “it don’t look much; and you might think you got the worst of one and ninepence for a day, with the days going on for dusk at five o’clock. But when you has to find your own soap and flannels—” [114]

“I think you have done wonders, Mrs. Tompkins;” my uncle made answer with his pleasant smile. “If I only got the best of every bargain like this, I need never be out of elbows, ma’am. Why the stairs are as white as a scraped horse-radish. May we go up and see the view from the best bedroom? Not if it will upset any of your clever doings. You are the mistress now; and we take your orders.”

With a laugh, which challenged our criticism (for no man, except a sailor, knows the rudiments of scrubbing), she loosed for us a cord which she had tied across, lest any Selsey baby might break bonds, and crawl upstairs; and presently we stood in a pretty little bedroom, with an ample but rickety window, facing southwards. The room was not too lofty, and I might have knocked my hat against the ceiling, if I had not doffed it. But Uncle Corny, being not so tall though wider, had plenty of head-room, and asked what man could want more. And when I looked out of the window, I agreed that a man deserved less, who could not be pleased with this.

For Honeysuckle Cottage stood at the very highest corner of all his pleasant fruit-grounds; and I was much surprised, having never been inside this house before, at the rich view of gardening ever varied, and of fair land and water beyond the fruit-alleys, which shone in the soft spread of sunshine far away. Over the heads of countless trees, and betwixt their coats of many colours, matched by the motherly hands of autumn, the broad reaches of the flooded Thames, with many a bend of sheen and shadow, led the eye to dwell with pleasure, and the heart with wonder. And across the wide water, sloping meadows, streaked and rounded with hedge and breastland, spread a green footing for the dark and distant hills.

“Let me see, to-day is Friday—an unlucky day, Kit, for you to come first to the house. If I had thought of that, we might have waited for to-morrow. But it can’t be helped now; and I am not superstitious. On Monday I’ll have Joe and Jimmy Andrews in, and put all these window-frames and doors to rights. Then we’ll have Tilbury from Hampton, to see to the papering and painting, and all that. By the end of the week, we’ll have it snug and tidy. I have sent all old Harker’s traps after him to-day. They tell me he has taken that tumbledown barn of Osborne’s, over by Halliford. I suppose I may whistle for my back rents. I ought to have distrained upon his sticks; but I [115] laughed so, when I saw how he bolted, that I could not do it. But you’ll have to pay an improved rent, my lad. You can’t have it under five shillings a week, and cheap enough at that, I can tell you.”

“Why, what do you mean?” I asked. “I don’t want a house; and if I did, how am I to keep it up? I haven’t got a sixpence to call my own.”

“Then a pretty fellow you are, to make up to Captain Fairthorn’s daughter! Where did you intend to put her, I should like to know? But we’ll make that all right, between you and me and the bedpost. I have got a little nest-egg of your mother’s money for you, and a heel-tap of your father’s. Didn’t you know why I smoked that old rogue out? Why, that this might be a little home for Kit and Kitty.”

CHAPTER XX.
AUNT PARSLOW.

It is a bad thing for any man to be always beating his own bounds, and treading the track of his own grounds, and pursuing the twist of his own affairs—though they be even love affairs—as a dog spins round to catch his own tail. Under the hammer of incessant thought, and in the hot pincers of perpetual yearning, I was getting as flat as a horseshoe twice removed, when Sam Henderson gave a boy twopence to slip into our grounds, when my uncle's back was turned, and put into my hand an envelope addressed to "Samuel Henderson, Esquire, The Paddocks, Halliford, Middlesex." At first I thought, in my slow way, that his object was to let me see what deference he had won in racing circles; and I smiled at the littleness of the man. But the boy, who was shaking in his ventilated shoes, with dread of Uncle Corny, said—"'Tain't that side; turn 'un over." I obeyed his instructions, and beheld in pencil—"Come down the lane a bit. I have news for you, important."

What mortal, dwelling wholly on his own affairs, would not have concluded that this concerned him, on his own account, and unselfishly? I hurried on my coat, which had been thrown off for a job of winter pruning, and in less than two minutes I had turned the corner and was face to face with the mighty Sam.

"All right, old fellow," he said as coolly as if I had come to recover a loan. "You needn't turn a [116]
hair. It is not about your Kitty, but my skittish little Sally—Sally Chalker. You know I told you all about her, the daughter of the old bloke down at Ludred."

"Oh, I remember now," I answered, with a sudden chill of disappointment. "I might have known that it was not for me you were in such a precious hurry. You were very wise not to come into our place. My uncle is a man of short measures."

"A man of uncommonly short measures. He will get fined some fine day, I'm afraid." Sam laughed wonderfully at his own wit. "But I know he don't want me to see his little tricks. Don't bluster, beloved Kit; we all do it, and we respect one another all the more for it. Free trade has turned John Bull into Charley Fox. I can feel for you, my boy; for now there's a foreign rogue come poaching on my preserves at Ludred. And he doesn't know how many legs make a horse."

Sam tapped his own dapper and well-curved legs with a light gold-headed riding-whip, and his favourite mare, who was under the charge of a lad down the lane, gave a whinny to him. "There's nothing she don't know," said Sam; "and her name it is Sally."

I was not sure which of the two fillies—for I knew that he called his sweetheart one, and her name too was "Sally"—my friend was thus commending. But I rose to the situation, and said —"Let us go, and rout the fellow out."

"I was sure you would stand by a brother Briton," cried Sam, shaking hands very heartily; "and you won't find me forget it, Kit, when old Crumbly Pot comes back again. I am keeping a look-out for you there, as I gave you my word to do. It has been kettles to mend, I am told, in the fen-land where he hails from. I know a Jew fellow who brought him to book, and was very nearly quodding him. He won't be back this side of Christmas, unless my friend is a liar, and then I shall do you as good a turn as you are going to do me now. Can you make it fit to come to-morrow? I'll put my Sally in the spider, and call for you about ten o'clock. You can tell old Punnets, that you want to see your Aunt Parslow about important business—for important it is and no mistake. Think of a dirty Frenchman nobbling sweet Sally Chalker, and all her cash!"

Old Punnets—as he insolently called my uncle—was glad enough that I should pay a visit to my aunt, or rather my mother's aunt, Miss Parslow, who was said to be worth at least 10,000*l.*, as [117]
well as a very nice house, and large garden, and three or four meadows by the river Mole.

"You should never neglect such folk," he said; "you have no proper sense of the plainest duty. She has only one relation as near as you are, and he has got plenty of tin of his own. You might cut him out easy enough, if you tried, and now is the nick of time for it. Hannah Parslow is as proud as Punch, I know; and if you can only put it to her, with a little of the proper grease, of course, that your mother's son is considered unfit to marry a young lady, because he cannot cut a shine,—who can tell what she might do for you? She doesn't spend half of her income, I know. I was thinking of it only the other night. And she might allow you two hundred a year, without stinting a pinch of Keating's powder. You love dogs, and dogs love you. Half the dogs in the village come to see you home. Make up to Jupiter, and Juno, and the other bow-wows she has taken to her bosom, and you'll never want my thirty shillings a week, nor yet the little balance of your father and mother's money. You go and see her, Kit. Don't lose a day. You may accept a lift from that fast Sam Henderson; but throw him over, as soon as you have got it."

Now, this little speech was as like as two peas to Uncle Corny's nature. He had never said a word about meaning to give me any one pound ten a week—though Heaven knows that I was worth it; for let the weather be what it would, there was I making the best of it. On the contrary, I had very seldom put into the purse (which I carried more for the husk than kernel) so much as five shillings on a Sunday morning, which was my uncle's particular time for easing his conscience about me. Of course I had my victuals, and my clothes to a certain extent, and the power to pay his bills (which made people offer me something sometimes); also I could talk as if the place belonged to me; but people knew better for at least three miles away. So that his

talking of thirty shillings proved, without another word on his part, his high and holy views of marriage.

And again it was like him, to try to put me up to get something good out of good Aunt Parslow. Whatever I could get from her would mean so much relief for the Orchardson firm—as he often called us in his prouder times; though if I had asked for a penny of the proceeds, he would have banged his big desk upon my knuckles. But do not let me seem to say a word against him; for a better uncle never lived; and I felt his generosity very deeply, until I began to think of it. [118]

Few things have been more successful yet, and very few have been better managed, than that drive of ours to Leatherhead. Possibly Sam was a luckier fellow than myself; and I think it likely, because he was less deserving. Not that there was much harm about him, except a kind of laxity in talk, and a strained desire to be accounted sharp, and a strong ambition to rise in the world, without cleaning the steps ere he mounted them. But he showed a fine heart by his words just now—although he was much ashamed of it—and the pace we were going at brought it out, for a brisk air stirs up the best part of us.

"Ain't she a stepper?" he said, as we crossed Walton bridge, and dashed through the flood-water, for the high-road was not made up then; "wet or dry is all alike to Sally. That's the way to go through the world, my boy. Julius Cæsar crossed the river here; and I have got a yearling named after him. What makes it all the kinder on my part is that he hasn't got Latin in his family. How proud the old chap would have been for me to go out of the custom so! It will set a whole lot of the Emperors going, if the colt cuts the shine I expect of him."

Knowing nothing about the turf, and caring very little, I let him rattle on about pedigrees, and strains of double blood, and Waxy, and Whalebone, and I know not what, as bad as the Multiplication table; and I wondered that such stuff should form his discourse, when he should have been full of young ladies. Even the beauty of the country, which was more than enough to delight the eyes and hold the mind still with pleasure, seemed nothing to Sam beyond—"Yes, very pretty. Nice bit of training-ground up there. That's the sort of grass that suits milk teeth."

At last, as we came within a mile of our mark, and followed the fair valley of the river, I brought him to the business of the day, having heard enough of Spider-wheels, and flyers, and so forth; and requiring to know what he expected of me. We had gone at such a pace, up hill and down, scarcely ever varying from one long stride, which left every other "trap" far in the lurch, that but for my boyish remembrance of the place, I could scarcely have believed that we were almost in the village.

"Fifteen or five," he said, "that's her pace; there's no halfway house for Sally. She walks a good [119] five. Walk is the word, old gal. Well, all you have got to do, Kit, is just this. I put up at the 'Dolphin,' and you make a call, with your best gloves on, and your hat brushed up, at Valley-view House, where your good aunt lives. You have not seen her for years. So much the better. Tell her that a distinguished friend of yours, especially esteemed by your uncle, and well known in the best London circles, has important business in the town; and that you took occasion to pay your respects, where they have been due so long. Admire her dogs, and all that sort of thing; and when she insists on your staying to lunch, regret very deeply that you cannot leave your distinguished friend, etc. Then if she is any good, she will say—'Do you think he would waive formality?' and so on. And you say—'If he is not engaged at Lord Nethersole's, I will endeavour to fetch him.' I shall happen to be lounging up the hill, and shall pull out my watch and be doubtful. But the attractions of the spot are too many for me. I throw over his lordship, and get over the old lady."

I promised to do my best towards this, but without any fictions concerning him; for his best chance lay, as I told him, in moderation and simplicity. For my aunt, according to my remembrance, was rather a shrewd old lady; and Sam had shown some little sense of this, in the choice of what he called his toggery. All rich adornments, and gorgeous hues, had been for once discarded; his clothes were all of a quiet gray, and his tone had subsided from the solar to the lunar rainbow. In short, he looked more like a gentleman than I had ever known him look before; and seeing what a fine young man he was, I felt heartily glad that he had fixed his affections where they could not imperil mine.

When I entered the gate of Valley-view, nine or ten small dogs came scampering out, all giving tongue, and all making believe to be born for one end, namely my end. There were pugs, and Skye-terriers, and Blenheim-spaniels, and wiry-coated terriers, and Italian greyhounds, and little ridiculous toy-dogs fit for a child's Noah's ark, and I know not what else, but no dog of the name of "Silence." "What a pack of curs!" I said rather gruffly, and with a gesture of contempt, for I never did hear such a medley of barks. As dogs are the most humorous creatures in the world, they immediately looked at one another and laughed, each applying my remark to his neighbours. If they had been curs, they would have felt it more; being all of fine breeding, they took it lightly, [120] as I said it, for I had no real meaning to offend them. Then, a great deal more quickly than we settle matters, they referred the whole question to a grand old pug, with his face pulled up short, like a plaited blind, by the cords of disgust at the tricks of mankind, and lots of little pimples, like a turbot's moles, upon it. As a chairman of committee he came up to me, reserving his stump in a very strict line, till my character passed through the test of his nose. Then he gave a little doubtful trepidation to his tail, and after another sniff, a very hearty wag; and with one accord all the doggies set off to the house to announce that an honest dog was coming.

Miss Parslow was inclined, as appeared thereafter, to attach more importance to the verdict of

her dogs, even as a Roman admiral should have consulted his holy chickens. When the dogs came to say that they believed me to be safe, their mistress put them all into their own room and came out to the porch to meet me. She knew me at once, though I might have forgotten her, except for a great event in my life, when she gave me the first sovereign I ever possessed. Being a small and slim lady, she rested her head upon the upper pocket of my waistcoat, which seemed to be an excellent omen.

"Oh, how you do take after your dear mother!" she exclaimed, with a genial tear or two; "you are not like an Orchardson, my dear boy, but a Parslow, a Parslow all over! Why have you kept away from Valley-view till now?"

This was a difficult question to answer, and therefore I naturally asked another. "How are you getting on, my dear aunt? And will it put you out that I should come like this? I wrote last night, but it may have been too late."

"Oh, the posts are always wrong. Come and sit here by the fire. We shall have a sharp winter; I am sure of that. *Jupiter* knows the weather as well as if he made it. Now come and tell me all about your own affairs."

At first I was not at all inclined to do that, preferring to talk about hers, and desiring some knowledge of her character and opinions before I began to spread forth my own. But she took the lead of me, and contrived to get out of me all about Uncle Corny, and everybody else I had to do with, and even the whole of my hopes and fears concerning the main object of my life. For the old can always pump the young, when they know the right way to hold the handle.

"I cannot see where the presumption is," she said as she took my hand and placed it in one of [121]
hers and patted it; "your mother was Annie Parslow, as sweet a young lady as any Miss Fairthorn. Her father would have been Lord Mayor of London if he had only lived long enough. The Parslows were in the tea line, which is equal to almost any. It is true that she dropped several grades in life by marrying George Orchardson—"

"And Miss Fairthorn's friends, if she ever does it, will say that she dropped several grades in life by marrying Kit Orchardson." I felt that I had her there; but she would not see it.

"Don't talk nonsense, Kit. The case is wholly different. You may be counted as half a Parslow, while nobody knows what she is. And you must not consider what her friends will say, but your own, who are sensible people. You have acted very wisely in coming over to tell me all about this affair. I am sorry that the girl is so poor through her father's stupid carelessness. You know that I like your Uncle Cornelius, although he is such a queer character. One of the most obstinate men on earth, and nearly all men are obstinate. But he is apt to put things off. He is always waiting for something else to be ready. I shall pay him a visit as soon as Mr. Parker's fly has got its new cushions in, and his bay horse recovered from his lameness. Then we will settle something about you. I never let the grass grow below my feet. I shall make your Uncle Corny come to book. I am quite convinced in my own mind that he has been keeping all these years a nice little lump of your father's money, as well as your dear mother's property. No Parslow was ever a beggar yet. There was none of them but had a silver teapot, as was only decent in the business. And most of them could fill it with bank-notes, though I'm not saying that your mother could. Dear me, what a dreadful to-do there was when she ran away with George Orchardson! My dear brother vowed he would never forgive her, although she was his favourite child; so upright, and fair, and so ladylike, and cheeks like damask roses! You never see such a sweet face now. All their education is to learn to stare, and all their polish is like a brass knocker's. What they all want is a good stepmother, to starve and to slap their ears out of them. That may have made your Kitty nicer than you can expect to find them now. If I were a young man I wouldn't marry any girl who had not been ten years under a strong stepmother. Why, how many more times is that young man to [122]
lounge up and down the road over there? He is very like the one who comes from somewhere near you, and has taken a fancy to Sally Chalker."

"My dear aunt," I said, "your delightful conversation has driven him out of my head altogether. It must be Mr. Henderson who drove me over, a sporting man, but a landlord, and a very fashionable fellow. He is waiting for me to go back with him, no doubt, and he will not take the liberty of ringing your bell. I must not keep him any more. Good-bye, dear aunt."

"Do you think that I would let you go without a morsel? We shall have luncheon in about five minutes. Ask your friend to join us if he will oblige me. Oh, I do like a shy man, he is getting so scarce!"

CHAPTER XXI.
A TULIP BLOOM.

All Leatherheadians used to admit, and could show good reason for doing so, that my great-aunt Parslow was the cleverest woman, as well as the most respectable in the place. But even her abilities were hardly taxed to find in my friend Sam Henderson any large amount of that element of shyness, with which she had endowed him through the window. His merits were rather inclined to dispense with any bridal veil of modesty, and his charms never mantled themselves in moss, as the coy rose attracts by retiring. But I was pleased to find that he behaved much better than any of his best friends could have hoped; for he dropped all slang, and soared into lofty places among much more nobility than I had ever heard of. And I wondered a little at my aunt's familiarity with all the great names he was so friendly with; for she never said "No," but nodded intimately, whenever he presumed that she knew the Earl of something, or even the Duke of anything. I could not resist the conclusion that the Parslows had been in the peerage, and lost it; probably through excess of greatness, and consequent peril to the throne itself.

When Sam had told scandals enough of great people, to keep all Ludred in a ferment for a month—though I noticed with surprise his delicacy and deference to the fact (if to no other) that [123] he was speaking in the presence of a maiden lady—he played another card, even more effective; he asked, as the very greatest favour he could think of, the honour of an introduction to the noblest circle of dogs now existing in the kingdom.

"Perhaps you will regret it, Mr. Henderson," Aunt Parslow replied, with a smile and a blush, for she had a very pretty colour still, which had varied with some of his narratives. "My dogs are perfect little wizards and witches. They took to my nephew, because he is a Parslow, and perhaps because he is so innocent. But you have seen so much of the world—"

"Yet kept myself quite untainted by it." He spoke with such gravity that I was obliged to turn away. "Next to the society of accomplished ladies, I enjoy that of horses, and of thorough-bred dogs. With a very long interval between, of course. But I scarcely ever meet an accomplished lady. What a lucky mark I must put to this day! Oh, if I could only show you my little Tim! He can stand on his tail, and sing 'Rule Britannia,' and beat time with all his four legs in the air. But compared to your dogs he is nothing but a cur! What beauties! Why, Miss Parslow, I will never trust my eyes again."

"Yes, they are very pretty, and as good as any children, or a great deal better, I might say. *Jupiter*, don't growl, sir. *Cleopatra*, take your teeth out of Mr. Henderson's boot. *Vulcan*, and *Venus*, and *Mercury*—oh dear!"

At a signal from *Jupiter*, the ancient pug, all the pets had made a rush at the bewildered Sam, and a chorus of yells arose as he was obliged, in self-defence, to kick at them. Then they rallied in a body round the corner of the side-board, snarling and showing their little white teeth, with their bristles erect and their eyes full of fire, bravely encouraging one another for a still fiercer charge at the stranger. And he would have had the worst of it, or killed some of the tiny ones, if I had not spied a light whip in the lobby, and given Master *Jupiter* a crack on his fat sides, which made him bolt with a howl, and all his army followed suit.

"Oh, how shall I punish them? Do forgive me. I never knew them do such a thing before. And I thought them such excellent judges of character! How could I imagine that they would ever fly at you! And they have pulled down the cloth, and broken two decanters that belonged to my dear mother. But that is nothing, Mr. Henderson, compared with the shocking fright they have given [124] you. How can I ever thank you for not killing them?"

Then Henderson, with the skill of Hannibal, turned his defeat into victory. "What plucky little chaps they are!" he said; "I did all I could to put them in a rage, on purpose to test their breeding. Perhaps you saw me flash this pin at them. If anything drives a small dog wild, it is to catch him in the eyes with a large carbuncle. But I got the worst of it, and serve me right. I only hope I may not have hurt any of the darlings."

"You are magnanimity itself, my dear sir;" Aunt Parslow glanced shyly at his very good trousers, which would never be quite so good again; "the main point is whether you are hurt. Even a very little dog, you know—."

"Miss Parslow, a dog, unless really rabid, is not a quarter so venomous as a cat. If I had been attacked like that by cats, I could not have dared to show a bit of mercy, even if they had been prime favourites of yours."

"Oh, I cannot bear cats. I am so glad you draw that most just distinction. Dogs are so noble and generous, so candid and loving, and chivalrous. They showed that, even when they did their best to bite you. But a cat is so stealthy, and crawling, and crafty, and I might even say bloodthirsty. Next to my dogs, I love my birds, the dear little things that come and sing, even in the—not by any means an elegant expression—of winter. Not a robin could live here, until I had my doggies. But that sounds like the front-door bell! Kit, would you oblige me by just seeing who it is? Jenny and Biddy are engaged, I know. What a very strange thing, if it should be Miss Chalker! Of course, you never heard of our belle Chalker, Mr. Henderson."

"Madam, it appears to me that you are all belles here." Sam bowed as he spoke, and contrived to convey me a wink as I left the room, which told me that the very strange thing had been

brought to pass by post, or possibly by telegram.

When I opened the door, I saw a very pretty girl, but no more to be compared with my darling Kitty, than a tulip with a lily of the valley. Although it was close upon winter now, she had a striped parasol, which I detest; and her velvet hat (turned down over one ear, and turned up at the other) had two kingfisher's wings stuck crosswise, and between them a gorgeous topaz humming-bird. You might look at my Kitty fifty times; and if any one asked you how she was dressed, you would have to say, "I have not the least idea," if you happened not to be a woman. [125] But this young lady's attire compelled attention, and perhaps deserved it.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she said very nicely, and giving me a smile which made two dimples; "but I thought that Miss Parslow might he disengaged. I thought I would look in, as I was going down the town. But I will not intrude, if she has visitors."

She made some difficulty about coming in, as if she were not bent upon doing so; but I told her, with a look, which she feigned not to understand, that I should never be forgiven if I allowed her to depart. Then the lady of the house came out, and brought her in, and introduced her to both visitors. "Oh, I know Mr. Henderson, a great friend of my father's; I am so glad that he knows you, Aunt Parslow. I am sure he admires your lovely view."

Now, this was not exactly to my liking. What right had she to call my Aunt Parslow hers? If I ever met any one free from petty jealousy, I believe it is the one I see while shaving. But ever since Sam Henderson came in at my aunt's door, I, who had been getting on so well till then, seemed to be no better than a nobody. He had made himself the hero of the hour, and played first fiddle, and forced his way into her best graces, by working on her vanity, and social yearnings, and family pride, till I quite expected that he would declare himself to be a Parslow, and entitled to the silver teapot. And now here was this girl, who had made up her mind, as I could see plainly, to be Mrs. Sam ere long, daring to address my wealthy relative as her own Aunt Parslow!

"Kit, you don't look very well," said the lady of the house, after much chatter had been indulged in; "a little change will do you good perhaps. I suppose you are always up an apple-tree at home. Would you like to come with me through my long garden, and give me your advice about one or two things? The view up the valley is very lovely, and so perfectly rustic. Jenny will have tea ready, when we come back."

To this we all agreed with great pleasure, and my aunt contrived to let Sam and his Sally fall behind, quite out of our sight among the trees and shrubs, while she took my arm, and let me carry her camp-stool. *Jupiter* alone of the dogs came with us, for she scarcely went even to church without him; and he certainly was a clever and amusing fellow, full of information, and yet always adding to it. He looked at me with great respect, and not a shadow of resentment for the [126] very solid whack I had bestowed upon him. His black muzzle, big forehead, large deep eyes, crow's feet of experience, and furrows of philosophy, were relieved of their austerity, every now and then, by the gentle waggery of his corkscrew tail.

"Now I will show you as lovely a piece of rich English landscape as ever you saw;" the old lady said, as we turned a grassy corner. "I have often thought of having a bower made here; but perhaps that would tend to Cockneyfy it. Let me have the stool, Kit, and you sit on that stump. The view from the house is very beautiful, but this beats it, because it shows another bend, and perhaps the very prettiest bend of all the valley. You ought to be here in May, Kit, when the lilacs and laburnums, and the wild-broom, and the apple-blossom, and the soft green of the trees along the winding river—don't talk to me of Devonshire after that. I have never been there; but I won't believe it."

I admired the view, which was very nice indeed, and very prettily varied in its way. At the same time, I could not help thinking that some of the broad reaches of the Thames, and the long spread of meadows with the slanting sun, and the cattle too sleek to care a flip for flies, and the trees, and the islands and the glassy quiet—such as we have round our way—were much more likely to do a man good (which must be the thing they were made for) than all the sharp turns of a pretty little stream which our river receives without knowing it.

"You are right, my dear nephew," replied my dear aunt, when I had expressed opinions not exactly as above; "it is indeed a large and noble sight. But I fear that those two young people behind us will be looking all the time at one another, and perhaps never know that they are in a valley. Mr. Henderson is a very pleasant young man, so far as I can judge, and a clever one, likely to make his own way in the world, with the help of all the very great friends he has. But is he to be thoroughly depended on? Has he the strict principle, and downright honesty, and love of domestic life, without which no marriage can be truly happy? I have a great regard for young Miss Chalker; and though her father belongs to another grade of life, and one with which I have but little sympathy, I believe him to be a very upright man, and his heart is bound up with his only child. She has no mother, you must understand; and I will not lend myself to anything, for which I could not answer to her father and myself."

My aunt fixed her keen grey eyes upon me, and her white hair added to their force and truth. [127] For the first time I felt that I had acted rashly, and by no means rightly in the matter, as she put it. And that she put it sensibly, and honestly, and kindly, was too evident for my self-content. I should not have yielded to Sam's overtures, or at any rate, I should not have involved her in the case, without being far more sure than I was at present of his good qualities. I answered as truthfully as I could, which is the only right thing to do, however it may end. And I felt that the

end might be my disgrace with her.

“Aunt Parslow, I know very little of Sam Henderson. That is to say, I have known him from a boy, but never been intimate with him. In our village he is considered rather ‘fast.’ But we are a very steady-going lot; and any one who deals at all with racing matters, is sure to get that reputation with us. I have never heard anything against his honesty; if I had, I should not be with him, until it was disproved. I think that he is really attached to Miss Chalker; but whether he would be a good husband for her, is a great deal more than I can say. You ladies are the best judges of such matters. If you can give him a good word, do. But it must depend entirely on your own judgment. For as I said before, I do not know him at all thoroughly.”

“I am not very sanguine about it,” said my aunt, whose eyes had never left mine, while I spoke; “and I shall take good care that, if they meet again here, it shall be with her father’s knowledge. There is one thing to be said, that they both belong to the same class in life, and are likely therefore to understand one another’s ways. The same cannot be said of you, my dear; and your love is a much more romantic affair, and likely, I fear, to run no smooth course. There I will help you all I can, and my advice will be of great service to you. Also if you want a little money, you know where to come for it. And that reminds me that you may want some now. Your Uncle Orchardson is a man, I believe, of great integrity and fine principle; but I know that he objects very strongly to parting with any of the means God has given him. If you are obliged to run away with your Kitty, to save her from an old reprobate,—and it may come to that, though I dislike such things—what does your uncle propose to do for you? He ought to do something handsome.”

“And so he will, something very handsome. He has promised to pay me thirty shillings a week for my services in his business, and to let us a cottage at five shillings a week, which must be worth seven and sixpence.” [128]

“Exactly like him, the old curmudgeon! Well, I won’t say yet what I will do, because I have not even seen your Kitty, and I have of course so many claims upon me. But here is a ten-pound note, to save you from making your uncle unhappy by asking him to advance you a trifle; and if you want another you can have it any day. I am pleased with you, Christopher, because I think you have told me the truth about all these affairs, as well as about Mr. Henderson; and *Jupiter*, who is the greatest of all judges, has pronounced most strongly in your favour. Now let us go and look for that sporting pair. Quite enough of such proceedings in my garden.”

CHAPTER XXII.
COLDPEPPER HALL.

ALTHOUGH there was a little help of moonlight, Sam drove home very carefully; for the more a man has to do with horses, the better he knows where the risk is. And I saw that his speech about Sally's speed, as a power that could not be modified, was a speech, and nothing more. He set me down at my uncle's door, with many warm thanks for my kindness, and a strong assurance that he should now go in and win. But my uncle was not so well pleased; for he had very little love for Sam, and much hatred at being kept out of his bed.

"I suppose you don't want any supper," he grumbled; "if you do, you must go and get what you can find. Your Aunt Parslow is a wealthy woman, but not the one to feed you as I do. I'll be bound she has sent you quite empty away. There's a bit of cold hock of bacon in the cupboard."

I told him that I had been fed like a prince, which only increased his ill humour. "She wants you to go and do her trees for nothing. I understand that old woman;" he said, as he gave me an inch of tallow candle. "But after real turtle and Champagne, you will be able to make something out of this. It came by the girl who is old Tabby's niece, or cousin, or grandmother, or something. The footman, no doubt, was too grand to come down here. Don't bother me with it. I want my [129] nightcap."

He gave me a letter, which he had opened, and which was addressed in a crabbed hand to "Mr. Cornelius Orchardson, Market Gardener, Sunbury;" and when he was gone, I read as follows:—

"Miss Coldpepper presents her compliments to Mr. Orchardson, and will be much obliged if he will send his nephew Christopher to the Hall at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, as Miss Coldpepper has something to say to him."

My conscience being in a dreadful state of nervousness and discomfort, without anybody to relieve it to, or any one to put it on, I wondered and wondered what this could mean; till my dreams, like a thatcher's pole, twisted it into a thousand ropes of many-coloured stuff and stream. And when the morning came at last, I could not set about my work, until I had learned what Tabby Tapscott thought about this new surprise. She, in her provoking ways, pretended to know everything, but would only shake her head and mutter, and tell me to insure my life. At last I saw that she knew nothing, and the only comfort that I could find was to tell her that she should never know, because she was an old humbug.

It was a dull and foggy morning, with a gray rime on the grass, and dead leaves hanging tipped with wet, and dribbles of puddles along the walk doubting whether to freeze or flow, and the whole air reeking with that Job's comfort, which means that there is much worse to come. I buttoned my coat and strode more briskly, though going upon a loth errand, you may know.

When they showed me in at the tradesman's door—for I then looked up to dignities, which exist by being looked up to—a strange and unaccustomed thing upset all the rally of my conscience. *Regulus*, the foremost of all beings in a well regulated household, came down the passage, at a pace which spoke nine volumes for his digestion, though his lips were clouted with fine cream; and instead of taking a nip at me, he threw up his head, as if he would have taken his hat off, if he wore one, and indulged in a bark of welcome, which went ringing back to the hall itself. Then he cut a caper round my feet, and with the innumerable laughter of his tail, fell fawning, and begged but a word from me. I have often seen men of small self-respect do that sort of thing to great personages, but I knew that this dog was full of self-respect, and had little for other people. What was passing in his mind I cannot say, but simply record his actions. [130]

"Well, I never see the like!" said Charles, who had condescended to let me in. "Why, he snap'th worse than ever at me; though the Lord knows how I sweated to get 'un back. But come along this way, Master Kit; my lady will see you in the Justice-room."

He showed me into a square panelled chamber, where old Squire Nicholas used to rule over poachers and little thieves brought before him by the parish constable; and with *Regulus* still at my heels, I stood waiting anxiously for the lady.

At length there came a rustle of silk moving slowly, watered silk, such as we seldom see now, and can scarcely find time to think of. And as fine as the silk, and as able to stand alone, was the lady inside it. Although she lived so near to us, and drove by in her carriage so often, I knew her rather by sight than speech, and better by report than either. She was tall, and straight, and of goodly presence, with fine large features, and a steadfast look, which expressed clear perception and strong resolve, but less violence of nature than her sister showed. Her abundant hair, drawn back from her ample forehead and coiled at the back of her head, would have been jet black but for a few lines of silver and an undercast of a tint like that of an American oak-leaf. To me she appeared more imposing and handsome than her sister Monica; but I may have thought more highly of her because she lived at Sunbury. This lady made me a graceful bow, a very slight one, but still it was a bow, and proved that her nature was better than that of the Honourable Mrs. Bulwrag. I replied with a low bend and scrape of my foot, which I always understand to be the proper thing, in such a case. And the guilt of my heart, as I thought of her dog, was enough to account for the deep blush I felt.

"Are you the young Mr. Orchardson," she asked, "the nephew of that Mr. Orchardson who owns the large garden and long walls at Sunbury? Then I have a little matter to discuss with you.

But how strongly my dog seems to take to you! It is not at all his general character. He is not at all devoted to mankind. But he has a remarkable memory. Perhaps you were kind to him when he was quite young. Or perhaps you were even his master?"

"No, ma'am; I know him only as your dog. But most dogs are fond of me. An aunt of mine has [131]
nine, and I was with them yesterday."

"Oh, that explains it;" she spoke with a smile which made her face quite beautiful, and I wondered at the taste of the Honourable Tom in exchanging her for her sister. "Now I dare say you know why I sent for you. For some years I have not seen very much of my sister, now the wife of Professor Fairthorn, a man well known in the scientific world. But a few weeks ago Captain Fairthorn asked me to allow his daughter by a previous marriage to spend a few days with me here; and I consented, for I knew him long before he married my sister, and have always felt a great regard for him. There is no reason why I should enter into that. Miss Fairthorn was here for about ten days, and she might have been longer but for you. Who are you, that you should dare to fall in love with her?"

Now these words look very harsh as written, and would sound so too, if harshly spoken. But Miss Coldpepper scarcely seemed to mean them thus; for there was no contempt in her voice, and I thought that her glance was kind, though her face was very grave. Perhaps she was thinking of her own love-time; which would rouse at once pity for me, and ill-will towards the sister, who then had wronged her so.

It was difficult for me to answer her, and I was in no hurry to do so; knowing from dialogues with Tabby Tapscott, that women are ready to go on again, and perhaps answer themselves, when provoked to do it. Not that I compared Miss Coldpepper with our poor Tabby for a moment; only that much the same rule applies to all women, when they grow unruly. Their main object is to say something striking, being forbidden by nature to strike otherwise.

"You have nothing to say then," continued the lady, without giving me time to know how much I had; "very well, I think that it is better so. I have tried to make every allowance for you, and I am glad not to find you at all defiant. Miss Fairthorn, of course, has no particular claims of birth to stand upon; for you know, and perhaps you have thought about that, that she has none of the Coldpepper blood in her system. I suppose, if she had, you would scarcely have dared to behave in this way, Mr. Orchardson!"

"Certainly not, madam," I replied with genuine truth, for I must have been frightened at the fearful temper of the family. And if Kitty had been a Coldpepper, she could not have owned the [132]
sweet face which had won me.

"Really, I do not perceive in you," her ladyship (as our people called her) went on in a gentler tone, "any signs of that audacity with which my sister charges you. To me you seem to be a well-meaning and fairly educated young man. And it may be your misfortune, more than fault, that you have given this offence. You certainly were of the greatest service to my niece—as I allow her to call herself, although she is no niece of mine—when that excessively stupid Marker led her into needless danger. I do not know what I could have said to Professor Fairthorn, if his daughter had been swept away, through the folly of my housekeeper. And more than that, I was beginning to grow rather fond of that young girl. I found her so ready, and clever, and obliging, and free from the conceit the young people show now. When she was taken away like that, I missed her very sadly, and felt for her deeply at having to go back to—to so very dull a house. But I wish you to understand, young man, that though I am not in a position to forbid, I cannot in any way sanction, or even approve your suit to her. And I trust that your own common sense will induce you to withdraw it, and try to forget her. You may think it hard. But it must be so. Will you promise to think no more of her?"

"No, I cannot do that;" I answered in a low voice, which grew stronger, as my heart warmed with my words. "I will tell you no falsehood, Miss Coldpepper. As long as I live, I must think of her, and no one else in all this world. She is more to me than my life, my soul, or even my hope of another life. From the moment I first set eyes upon her, there was nothing else worth living for. The Lord, who governs all our ways, and knows what is the best for us, has been pleased to give me her pure love, a greater gift than the life He gave; and with His aid I will hold it fast; and He alone shall ever part us. I am not accustomed to strong words, but these are weak to what my meaning is."

"Well, I think they are pretty strong; but I will not blame you for them." She turned from my eyes, which were bright with deep passion, as behoved a well-bred lady. "When things have come to such a pass, there is little more to be said or done. Only it occurs to me, who have seen a good deal of men and women, that these brave words are often said, and for the moment felt, no doubt; but in a few years, or even one, or perhaps a month—where are they? A new love, equally [133]
the gift of Heaven, comes in with still hotter fervour; and the old one is whistled down the wind. And why should it not be so with you?" I knew that in the heat of the moment, she was referring to her own case; and my place was to be silent.

"Christopher Orchardson," she said at last, recovering her business tone, "I have delivered my message to you, and it has not made much impression. To me the matter is of little moment, except that I like Miss Fairthorn more than I ever expected to like a girl again. And I am not pleased, as you may suppose, that she, with her youth, and abilities, and beauty, should make so poor a marriage. Have you thought of this? Have you considered whether you have any right to

take her from a rank in life, or at least from a social position above your own, and keep her in a cottage, among working men, with a scanty and perhaps doubtful income? You are a man of spirit; do you think this fair?”

This was the point of all points, which perplexed me more than I could settle. She saw how deeply her words had moved me, and waited with a grim smile for my reply.

“Yes, I have fully considered that; and it is the one matter I doubt about. You have put it more clearly, madam, than I could put it, and entirely without exaggeration. And I scarcely know how to answer, without referring to things that may pain you. But you may be aware that Miss Fairthorn at present leads a most unhappy life. And even worse than that, everything is being done to force her into a miserable marriage with a man of more than twice her age, and of anything but good character. He is supposed to be rich, but is poorer than myself, because he owes more than he can pay. She had better go to her grave, than become the wife of such a person. From this she has no escape except the quiet home I can give her. And to live among working men, who would respect, and look up to, and admire her, is surely less of a degradation than to be brought into wild and rough company, as in the other case she must be. It will be known here, that she has had the honour of your acquaintance and liking; and though you may not think fit to continue it, under the change of circumstances, people will value her by what has been. And as for being happy, what is there to prevent it? She will live in a beautiful place and fine gardens, where there is always plenty to look at, and enjoy, according to the time of year, abundance of flowers, and fruit, and good living, my uncle to make much of her, and myself to worship her, and nobody ever to say a cross word.” [134]

“It is not surprising that you have won her consent,” Miss Coldpepper answered gravely, “if you have put your proposals thus. How could a poor London girl resist such a programme? And Kitty loves the country, as a lark or a wood-queist does. Well, you must understand that I will have nothing more to say about it. I have been asked to tell you what I think, I have done so; and there is an end of it.”

With these words, she rang the bell, for some one to show me the way out; but having found her much less awful than I had expected, I was not content to let well alone, but must needs try to get further.

“Madam,” I said, “you have listened so kindly to all I have ventured to tell you, that I hope you will let me ask one question, without being thought impertinent. It is only that I should like to know, who it is that has begged you to speak to me, and whether Captain Fairthorn is aware of it.”

At once her demeanour was changed to me, and her lofty indifference was gone. Her eyebrows rose, and her eyelids quivered, and her face flushed with wrath, like a storm-cloud with the sun.

“I think that I have listened too kindly to you, and the things you have dared to tell me. It will teach me to have less to say to underbred young men henceforth. Charles, show this young man where the front door is.”

This was very clever, and abashed me deeply; as if I had no right to know any other than the back-entrance. And I observed that she did not lose her self-command, nor revile me as if on her own level, as her far less dignified sister did. I was much more entirely smitten down, and made sensible of my distance from her, as one too deep to be bridged by words. And yet the sense of justice, which is always strongest in the young, stood up and bade me take all this as only of human ordinance. For no thought of presumption had been in my mind, or of undue familiarity. A cat may look at a king; and the king (like a dog) hath only his own day.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT BAY, AND IN THE BAY.

[135]

EVERY one, who can call to mind that year of bad weather, 1860, will bear me out in saying that it showed no weakness, no lack of consistency to the last. Rain and chill were the rule of the summer, snow and severe cold the order of the winter. In the beginning of December, the earth was sodden, and the rivers thick with flood. Then the sky was amassed with fog, and the trees hung low with trembling drip, and even the humble weeds and grass were bearded with a glaucous reek, not crisp nor bright as of rime or frost, but limp, and dull, and bleary. Having never seen such a thing till now, I could not tell what to make of it; but Uncle Corny, who had been compelled for years to watch the weather, said—"Up with all the winter apples, and the Glou Morceau, and Beurré Rance, up with them all to Covent Garden, or we shall have them frozen on the shelves. Or even if we can keep the frost out, we shall have the van snowed up. Things looked just as they do now, in December, 1837, only the ground was not so wet. Go down to the barges, and order in ten tons of coal, we shall want it all, and twenty chaldrons of gas-coke. The frost will last till February, and fuel will cost a rare price then."

I was inclined to laugh at this as a bold and rash prediction; but it was more than verified by the weather that set in upon the eighteenth of December, not with any sudden change, but the cold growing more decided. By this time Honeysuckle Cottage was thoroughly cleansed, and in good trim, painted, and papered, and neatly furnished, with Tabby put in to keep it warm, but only permitted to use one room. And I used to go there every day, and sit in the little parlour, reading the only letter I had yet received from one who was more to me than words. It was written in a small clear hand, and dated on the very day after my visit to her, and the purport of it was to comfort me and persuade me to wait with all endurance, until I should have leave to come again. And long as the time had seemed, and dreary, and empty of all except distant hope, I had done my best to get through it, with the courage of a man, and the faith of love.

"It is for my dear father's sake," she wrote, "that I am compelled to ask you this. There has been a fearful scene which even his sweet endurance and wonderful temper could scarcely carry [136] him through, without sad injury to his health and work. His heart is not very strong, and though he tries to laugh these troubles off, or despise them as below his notice, to me it is plain that they worry and wear him, a great deal more than he deigns to show. And I know that he bitterly reproaches himself, although he so rarely speaks of it, for having been so deluded as to place nearly all his property in the power of those who should only have a part. When he looks at me and sighs, I know exactly what he is thinking of; and it is my place to save him from all that can be avoided of strife and ill-treatment. A more placid and peaceful man never lived, yet comfort and peace are denied him. In a few weeks he will leave home again—if this house can be called a home—and then I should like to see you, dear, with his permission before he goes; because I am not afraid for myself, and I may have to settle what is to be done, if a certain gentleman should come back, and try to force his visits upon me, while my father is away. If this should happen, you shall hear at once, unless I am locked up, as I used to be sometimes. Do not write; she takes every letter; and it would only cause more misery. We must trust in Heaven, and in one another; for I know that you love me, as I love you."

This very faithful and sensible letter was beginning to grow threadbare now, or rather was returning to its original state of thread, with my constant handling. And it left me in a sore predicament, which became sorer, as time went on, and no other tidings reached me. It was grievous to reflect, that with better policy, and judicious flattery, I might perhaps have contrived to get a scrap or two of information even from the stately lady of the Hall, or at any rate through Mrs. Marker. But that good housekeeper shunned me now, probably under strict orders; or if ever I managed to bring her to bay, she declared that she knew nothing; and perhaps this was true, for the choleric sisters held little communication. As a last resource, I got Mrs. Tapscott to promise her niece the most amiable tips for every bit of tidings she could bring; but nothing came of that, and by this time verily my condition of mind was feverish. In vain I consulted that oracle of the neighbourhood—Uncle Corny; for an oracle he was now become, partly through making good figures of his fruit, partly through holding tongue and shaking head, and partly no doubt by defeating the lawyers, and smoking out "Old Arkerate." But all I could win from this oracle was [137] —"Go up, and get in at the window."

I was ready to get in at any window—big enough for my head to pass—if only I could have found Kitty inside, and quick to forgive me for coming. But to talk is all very fine, and old men make it do for everything; to act is the province of the young, who have not found out how vain it is.

Being touched up therefore on every side—for even old Tabby made sniffs at me, and Selsey Bill winked, in a manner that meant—"Would there ever have been seventeen young Selseys, if I had hung fire as you do?"—and my Uncle said quietly, between two puffs—"In for a penny in for a pound; that used to be the way when I was young"—being stirred up more deeply by my own heart, which was sadly unquiet within me, I set off at last, without a word, and not even a horse to help me.

The frost had set in, that mighty frost which froze the Thames down to Kingston Bridge, and would have frozen it to London Bridge, except for one pause at the end of the year, and the rush of so much land-water. The ground was already as hard as iron, but no snow had fallen to smother it up. The walking was good, and the legs kept going to keep one another and the whole

affair alive. There must have been a deal of ground soon overcome between them; for they were not out of Uncle Corny's gate till Sunbury clock struck three, and they knocked against the gate of Bulwrag Park, when the twilight still hung in the sky. And this had been done against a bitter east wind, with a low scud of snow flying into the teeth, and scurfing the darkening road with gray.

Here it was needful to reflect a little; for to think against the drift of air is worthless, for anything weaker than a six-wheeled engine. I found a little shelter from the old Scotch firs, and halted in their darkness, and considered what to do. The house, about a hundred yards away, looked cold, and grim, and repellent, and abhorrent, except for one sweet warmth inside. The dark shrubs before it were already powdered with the gathering crust of snow; and the restless wind was driving cloudy swirls of white along and in under the laps of blue slate. So far as I could see, one chimney only was issuing token of some warmth inside. I had scarcely shivered yet in the fierce cold of the road, and the open tracks where no road was; but I shuddered with a deep thrill of anguish and dismay, as I watched that bleak house, with the snow flitting round it, the [138] bitter frost howling in every wild blast, and not a scrap of fire to keep my sweet love's body warm.

"If they have not quite starved her, since her father left," I said to myself, being sure that he was gone, "they will not lose this chance of freezing her to death. I have heard what they do in such weather. They keep her where the water-jugs burst, and the ice is on the pillow, while they roast themselves by a roaring fire. May they roast for ever!"

Slow as I am of imagination, this picture had such an effect upon me, that I caught up my stick which had stood against the tree, and determined to knock the front door in, if they would not admit me decently. But glancing back first, to be sure of having the place to myself, I beheld through the wind-hurried flakes an advancing figure. Two looks were enough; it was my darling, bending to the wind, but walking bravely, and carrying a basket in her ungloved hand. Her little thin cloak, and summer hat—for they had given her no other—were as white as the ground itself with snow, and so were the clusters of her rich brown hair, which time shall whiten by the side of mine. But her large blue eyes and soft rosy cheeks were glistening bravely through the fleecy veil, and a smile of resolve to make the best of all things showed little teeth whiter than any snowflake. Through the brunt of the storm she had not descried me, until she was suddenly inside my arms.

Then she dropped her basket in the snow, and looked up at me, and tried hard to be vexed. But nature and youth were too many for her, and she threw her glad arms round my neck, and patiently permitted me to leave no snow either on her face or in her curls.

"Oh, Kit, if they should see us from the house!" she whispered; and I said,—

"They had better not, or they shall have this stick."

However, for fear of any rashness about that, I led her with a smooth and easy pace—for she could move beautifully with my arm round her, which no clumsy girl could do—to a snug little nook, where a large bay tree broke the power of the wind, and screened the snow. Here we found a low branch upon which we could sit, with the fragrant leaves to shelter us; and ever since that when I smell a bayleaf, I can never help thinking of my love, even when it is in pickled mackerel.

When I had told her a thousand times of my delight at finding her, and she, with a hundred blushes perhaps, had begged me to show it judiciously, I asked where she had been in such [139] dreadful weather, and what she had got in the basket. "Two bottles of brandy," she answered as coolly as if it had been a cowslip ball; "from the Bricklayers' Arms I had to fetch them, because nobody else would go out in the storm."

"What!" I cried, looking at her pure and bashful eyes, "do you mean to say that you are sent alone to a common public-house, where the navvies go?"

"Oh, they never say anything to me, dear Kit. But I cannot bear to go, when there are noisy people there. And I believe that my father would be angry if he knew it. It has only happened once or twice, when the weather was very bad."

"Does she ever send her own daughters there?" I asked as mildly as I could, for Kitty was trembling at my natural wrath, and stern manner.

"Oh no! She would not like to send them at all, even if they would go, which is very doubtful. But she says that my place is to be useful; and she never can do without brandy long. She gets tired of wine in the evening."

"The case is just this," I said, wishing to let off my wrath, that I might speak of more pleasant things; "she revels upon your father's money, and squanders it on her children's whims; she locks him up in a corner of his own house, makes a slave of his only child, starves and beats her, and degrades her by sending her for drink to a pot-house. A young lady—the best, and the sweetest, and noblest—"

I was obliged to stop, in fear of violence. But my dear one became all the dearer to me, as I thought of her misery and patience. If my Uncle Cornelius tried to "put upon" me, was I ever known to put up with it? And consider the difference betwixt an uncle, who fed me, and kept me, and allowed me money—or at any rate promised to do so—and a vile stepmother, who ruined the father, and starved and bullied and disgraced the child! Truly we learn to forget right and wrong;

as our country has learned in these latter days.

“No one can degrade me, but myself,” Miss Fairthorn answered gently, and without any thought of argument. “But I will not go again, if you think it wrong. I have been so accustomed to run errands for her, that I never gave a thought to the difference at first, and having done it once, I could not say ‘no’ the next time. But I know it is not nice; and I will never go again, now that I know you object to it, dear. You won’t be angry, when I have given you my promise?”

“To send an angel to a public-house”—but I said no more about it, for the angel sighed, and put [140]
her hand into mine, to be forgiven. Then I asked her, with my wrath turning into jealous pangs, about that old villain, who had dared to imagine that his wealth—if he had any—or at any rate his position, could bridge over the gulf between virtue and vice, loveliness and ugliness, sweet maidenhood and sour decrepitude of bad living. Of these things I could not speak to her; but her modesty shrank, without knowing why.

“That poor old gentleman has been very ill,” she answered in her clear and silvery voice, which made me thrill, like music. “He went to see to some business in Lincolnshire, and was laid up for weeks with ague. But he is to come back when the weather permits. If he had appeared, I would have let you know, for I should have been frightened, with my father not at home. But I am sorry to say there is some one coming, more formidable to me than Sir Cumberleigh is. You will think I am full of dislikes, dear Kit, but I do dislike that Downy so. He is her son Donovan, her only son; and she worships him—if she worships anything.”

I had heard of this Donovan Bulwrag more than once, but knew very little about him, except that, unless he was much belied, he combined the vices of both his parents. But my duty was now to reassure my Kitty, and leave her in good spirits, so far as that was possible. Though every minute of her company was as precious as a year of life to me, I was fearful of keeping her longer in the cold, and insuring a very hot reception from her foes. Of the latter, however, she had not much dread, being so inured to ill usage, that a little more or less was not of much consideration. But her cloak was threadbare, and her teeth began to chatter, as the keen wind shook the tree above us, and scattered the snow upon our shoulders.

In a few words we arranged to be no longer without frequent news of one another; for I told her very truly, that without this luck I must have gone home in utter misery, unless I had forced my way to her; and with equal sincerity she replied, that she did not know what she could have done, for the time had been dreary and desolate. Then she promised to write to me every week, not long love-letters, for of those there was no need with our pure faith in one another, and her opportunities would be but brief; yet so as to let me know that she was safe, and not persecuted more than usual. These letters she must post with her own hand, and my answers she must call for at a little shop kept by an old servant of the Captain’s, who would not betray her. If possible, [141]
she would write on Saturdays, so that I might get the letter on a Sunday morning; and if anything were added to her troubles, I might come, and try to let her know of it through Mrs. Wilcox, who kept the little shop she had spoken of. With this I was obliged to be content for the present; much as I longed for a bolder course, she would not leave her father, without his full consent.

“But you shall have something to remember me by, and something too that came from him,” she whispered, as her fears began to grow again. “He gave me a watch on my last birthday, a beautiful watch with a blue enamel back, and Kitty done in little diamonds. She said that it was much too good for me, and she gave it to Geraldine, her youngest girl. But oh, I cheated them out of something, because I felt that they were cheating me. They never knew that he had given me a gold key for it, a lovely little key with a star in the centre. Here it is, see how it sparkles in the dusk! Take it, my dear, and wear it always, and you will think it is the key of my heart, Kit, which you managed to steal down at Sunbury so. You must not give me anything in return. Not now at least; perhaps some day you may.”

It was now so dark that I ventured to lead her, and carry her basket to the little side-door, for that part of the house was dark and empty. Then she gave me a sweet farewell, with one little sob to strengthen it; and the snow whirled into her glistening eyes, and a shiver ran through me, when she was gone.

CHAPTER XXIV.
HARO!

A STRANGE thing befell me on my way home, which I would have avoided describing if I could; for my adventures have but little interest, except so far as they are concerned with Kitty. But this one unluckily did concern her deeply, inasmuch as it brought great affliction on her, and left her without my assistance, at a time when she stood in especial need of it.

She had made me promise that I would not attempt to walk all the way to Sunbury in such a bitter night, and with the storm increasing, till no one could tell what might come of it. Accordingly I made my way to Notting Hill, intending to get into an omnibus there, which would [142] take me at least as far as Richmond. There I meant to have a mutton chop or two, and perhaps a pint of Mortlake ale, which is generally of good substance, and thus be set up for the cold walk home. And if this had been done, as was really intended, probably I might have been at home in good time to tell my uncle all about it, before he had finished his go-to-bed pipe.

But as it happened, when I came out at last, from all this brick and mortar skittle-ground, into the broad Western road, and knew pretty well where I was and how the land lay, not an omnibus was to be found anywhere, except those that had travelled out before the storm began, and were bound to get home again somehow. And these had some trouble in getting along, with the snow clouding up in the horses' faces, and forming great balls on their feet, and clogging the dumb, heavy roll of the frozen wheels. All the 'busses that should have been ploughing and rolling towards Shepherd's Bush and Turnham Green, had resolved to remain in their yards for the night. Let other horses tug, and wallow, and smoke like beds of mortar; let other coachmen flap their breasts and scowl instead of answering; and let other threepenny fares look blue and stamp in the straw to thaw their toes. It was worth much more than the money would fetch, to cross their legs by the taproom fire, or whisk their tails in stable.

At first I took it as a wholesome joke, that the fourteen miles of road before me must be overcome by toe and heel. As for a cab, I had never been inside any feminine bandbox of that name, and if I would have condescended to it, there was no such thing to be got to-night. I was young, and strong, and full of spirit, with the sweet words kindling in my heart, as memory stirred it from time to time; and if any one had bidden me look out for danger, I should have said, "Let me see it first." And in this humour, I strode on, without even turning my collar up.

But the world became wrapped up more and more in deep white darkness, as I trudged on. As the houses along the road grew scarcer, they seemed to go by me more heavily and slowly, and with less and less power of companionship. There was scarcely a man to say "Good-night" to; and the one or two I met would not open mouth to answer. And when I came through a great open space, with a white spire standing like a giant's ghost, I could hardly be sure that it was Turnham Green, so entirely was distance huddled up with snow. But I ran into a white thing in the middle [143] of the road, and the gleam of an ostler's lantern showed me that it was a brewer's dray, with the horses taken out, and standing with their heads between their legs close by a sign-post. "You better turn in, mate," the ostler shouted; "you're a fool if you go further, such a night as this." I saw a red steam in the bar, and knew that this must be the *Old Pack-Horse Inn*, whose landlord had raised a famous apple; and my better sense told me to follow advice. But the pride of fool's strength drove me on, and without slacking a foot I lost sight of it in the solid daze.

There was nothing to be afraid of yet, and I felt no kind of misgiving, but began to let my legs go on, instead walking consciously. At one time I began to count, as if they were a machine of which I was no longer master. I counted up to a thousand, and thought—"About seven thousand more will do it, and that they can manage without much trouble." Then I gave up counting, and must have passed through Brentford, as in a dream, and so to Twickenham, and through that again.

There were nearer ways in better weather; but although I could not think clearly now (through cold, and clogging feet, and constant dazzle of white fall around me) I had sense enough to stick to highways, as long as they would stick to me. At Twickenham I had a mind to stop and get something to eat, being faint with hunger, for I had seven and sixpence in my waistcoat pocket. I cannot tell why I did not stop, and only know that I went on.

The snow must have been ten inches deep on the level, and as many feet in the drifts, for a strong wind urged it fiercely, when I came at last to the *Bear* at Hanworth, an old-established and good hotel. The principal entrance was snowed up, from the sweep of the roads that meet there, for every road running east and west was like a cannon exploding snow. But I went in by the little door round the corner, and finding only the barman there—for all neighbours had been glad to get home while they could—I contrived, with some trouble, to ask for a glass of hot brandy and water. So great was the change from the storm and the whirl, that my brain seemed to beat like a flail in a barn, and the chairs were all standing on the ceiling.

"Don't you go no further, sir; you stop here," said the man, who seemed to know me, though I did not know him. "It would take a male helephant to get to Sunbury to-night There's been no such snow for six and forty year; old Jim the ostler can call it to mind; and then it was over the [144] roof, he saith. You look uncommon queer already, seem to be standing on your head a'most. Why, bless me, you be drinking from the empty glass!"

But I found the right glass with his help, and swallowed the hot brown draught without

knowing it. Then I asked him the time, and he said, “Nigh on ten o’clock. You take my advice, and have a bed here. Well, wilful will, and woeful won’t, when it’s too late to mend it.” He cast this at me as I said “Good night,” and without sitting down, staggered out again.

I believe that even now I should have reached home safely, not having so very much further to go, if the roads had been wide and straight as they were thus far. But two things were very much against me now, and both of them made a great difference. I had turned from the main road into twisting narrow lanes, and my course was across the wind instead of right before it. Without that strong wind at my back I could scarcely have reached Hanworth by that time, though it seemed a very long time to take from Notting Hill, compared with the usual rate of walking. But now the fierce wind was on my left side quite as often as behind me, and it drove me from my line, as I grew more feeble, and knocked my weary legs into one another. Moreover, it seemed to go through me twice as much, and to rattle me like splinter shaken up, and to drive the spikes of snow to my heart almost.

If I had walked as in a dream before, I was moving as in a deep sleep now. I had some sort of sense of going on for ever, as a man has a knowledge of his own snoring; and I have some weak remembrance of beating with my hands—for my stick must have gone away long ago—to keep off a blanket that was smothering me. Then I seemed to be lifted, and set down somewhere, and it did not matter where it was. And what happened after that was not to me, but to people who told me of it afterwards.

For my Uncle Corny went to bed that night, in a very bad worry of mind, and fitter to grumble at the Lord than to say his prayers. Not from anxiety about his nephew, who was sure to turn up somehow; but because he had frightful misgivings about his glass, and his trees, and his premises at large. The roof of his long vinery was buckled in already, when he went with a lantern to look at it; and many of his favourite apple-trees, which he loved to go and gaze at on a Sunday, were bowed with the wind and the snow, and hanging in draggles, like so much mistletoe. He never [145]
swore much at the weather; because it seemed like swearing at heaven, and he had found it grow worse under that sort of treatment. But our Tabby Tapscott (who feared to go home, and tried to sleep on two chairs in the kitchen) declared that he used some expressions that night, which were quite enough to account for anything.

In the morning, however, there was no fault to find with him, as soon as he had done a good hour’s work in the deep snow and the nipping wind, and improved his circulation by convincing everybody that he was still as young as he ever was. He relieved the laden trees, wherever it was wise to do so, and with the back of a hay-rake fetched the white incumbrance from the glass, and stamped his feet and shook his coat, and had a path swept here and there, and told himself and Selsey Bill, that a good old-fashioned winter was the thing to send all prices up. But when he sat down to breakfast, he kept looking at the door, as if for me; and at last he said to Mrs. Tapscott, who was shaking in her apron—“Why, where’s that lazy Kit again? Is he frozen to his pillow? Go and give him a good rattle up. He deserves cold victuals, and he shall have nothing else.”

“Her bain’t coom home,” replied Tabby, looking as crossly as she dared at him. “Much you care for the poor boy, measter. I rackon the znow be his winding-shate. No more coortin’ for he, this zide of kingdom coom, I’d lay a penny.”

“Kit not come home! Kit out all night, and you let me go on with my trees and roofs! But you know where he is, or you would not take it so, and you snoring away by the kitchen fire. None of your secrets about him. Where is Kit?”

“The Lord A’mighty know’th where a’ be.” Poor Tabby began to whine and cry. “The zecret be with Him, not me. A’ wor to coom home, but her never didn’t. A vaine job for e’e to zake for ’un. Vaind un dade as a stone, I reckon.”

“Nonsense! Kit can take care of himself. He is the strongest young fellow for miles and miles, and accustomed to all sorts of weather. What’s a bit of snow to a young man like Kit? You women always make the worst of everything.”

“But her bain’t coom home;” answered Tabby with all reason. “Her would ’a coom home, if so be her worn’t drowned in the znow, I tull ’e, sir. No more coortin’ for Measter Kit, in this laife. A’ may do what a’ wool, in kingdom coom.”

“Stuff!” cried my uncle, not caring to discuss this extreme test of my constancy. “He has [146]
stopped at some house on the road, or up there. Perhaps the Professor would not let him go, when he saw how bad the weather was. There is nothing to be done, till the post comes in; though I am not sure that the post will be able to get in. If the letters are not here by ten o’clock, I shall go to Hampton to look for them. They are pretty sure to get that far.”

The morning was fine, though bitterly cold after that very heavy fall; and people began to get about again, though the drifts were too deep in many places for a carriage to pass till they had been cleared. My uncle set out on foot for Hampton, and there found the mail cart just come in. The postmaster was in a state of flurry, and would not open the Sunbury bag, but sent it on by special messenger, as the cart could get no further. My uncle had the pleasure of walking with it as far as our post-office; and after all that there was nothing for him. “Well, a man must eat,” was his sound reflection. “I shall have a bit of dinner, and consider what to do.”

It was getting on for two o’clock, as they told me, when a man who had come from the Bear at Hanworth, upon some particular business in our village, knocked at my uncle’s door on his

return, to say that I had forgotten (which was the truth) to pay for what I had the night before. He was also to ask how I got home, because I looked “uncommon dickey,” as he beautifully expressed it. In half an hour every man in Sunbury, owning a good pair of legs, and even a number of women and boys, set forth to search the roads and fields, for it was hard sometimes to tell which was which, in the direction of Hanworth. This was no small proof of the good-will and brave humanity of our neighbourhood; for any of these people might have lost themselves in the numb frost, and the depth of drift; and there were signs of another storm in the north-east.

My uncle, with a big shovel on his shoulder, and a bottle of brandy in his pocket, put a guinea upon me at first, and then two, and then jumped to five pounds, and even ten, as the hope of discovery waned; and at last, when some had abandoned the search, and others were muffling themselves against the new snowstorm, he mounted a gate and with both hands to his mouth shouted—“Five and twenty pounds for my nephew Kit—dead or alive; twenty-five pounds reward to any one who finds Christopher Orchardson.”

This may appear a great deal of money for anybody to put me at (except my own mother, if I had one), and the people who heard it were of that opinion, none of them being aware perhaps that the reward would come out of my mother’s property, which had no trustees to prevent it. And for many years afterwards, if I dared to think anything said or done by my uncle was anything short of perfection, the women, and even the men would ask—as if I were made of ingratitude—“Who offered five and twenty pounds for you?” [147]

And they felt the effect of it now so strongly that a loud hurrah went along the white plain, and several stout fellows who were turning home turned back again, and flapped themselves, saying, “Never say die!” With one accord a fresh pursuit began, though perhaps of a ghost even whiter than the snow; and taking care to keep in sight of one another, they began to poke more holes, wherever they could poke them. For some had kidney-bean sticks, and some had garden forks, and some had sharp pitch-forks from the stable; and if they had found me, I had surely been riddled, and perhaps had both my eyes poked out. But the Lord was good to me once more, and I escaped being trussed, as I might have been.

For just when it was growing dark, and another bitter night was setting in, with spangles of hard snow driving, as they said, like a glazier’s diamond into their eyes, and even the heartiest man was saying that nothing more could be done for it; through the drifting of the white, and the lowering of the gray, a high-mettled horse came churning. It was beautiful, everybody thought, to see him scattering the snow like highway dust, flinging from his nostrils scornful volumes, with his great eyes flashing like a lighthouse in the foam. Men huddled aside, lest he should spurn them like a drift, for his courage was roused, and he knew no fear, but gloried in the power of his leap and plunge.

“Giving it over, are you all?” Sam Henderson shouted, as he drew the rein, and his favourite stallion *Haro* stood, and looked with the like contempt at them. “Then a horse and dog shall shame your pluck.”

From beneath the short rough cloak he wore, a pair of sharp eyes shone like jewels, and two little ears pricked up like thorns.

“*Spike* is the best man here,” said Sam, as the wiseacres crowded round him. “All you have done is to spoil the track. Keep behind me, and let me see things for myself.”

My uncle, who never had been fond of Sam, said something disdainful and turned away; but Henderson, without even looking at him, rode on, and the best men followed him. He took them almost to the *Bear* Hotel, watching both sides of the road, as he went, and still keeping his dog before him. Then he turned back, and said, “Keep you all on my left. None of you tread any gap on the right. I saw the place as I came along. When the moon gets clear, we shall find him.” [148]

The snow-cloud in the east began to lift, and the moon came out with a bronzy flush, as my uncle told me afterwards, and the broad expanse of snow was flickered with wan light and with gliding shades. Then all came back to the place where Sam, being mounted and able to command the slope, had discovered certain dimples—for they were nothing more—which might be the trace of footsteps snowed over. Here he gave his horse to be held, and leaving the road with his little Scotch terrier *Spike*, scooped the light surface from one of the marks, and found a hard clot beneath it. He put the dog’s nose in, and patted him, and *Spike* gave a yelp, as if a rat were in prospect.

“Let him alone. Don’t say a word to him,” cried Sam, as our people grew eager. “He don’t want you to teach him his business. If you knew your own half as well, there’d be less money in London than in Sunbury. Keep back, I say, all of you.”

The little dog led them across a broad meadow, two or three hundred yards from the highway, yet in a straighter line towards Sunbury, and nearly in the track of an old foot-path. Then he stopped in a dip, where a great rise of snow, like a surge of ground-swell, swung away from them, and combed over into the field beyond without breaking, like the ground-swell frozen. They said that it was a most beautiful sight, such as they never had seen before, and could scarcely hope to see again in one lifetime; reminding them of the great wax-works, when the wax is being bleached, at Teddington. But they could not stop to look at it; and the little dog went round, and dived into the tunnel on the further side.

Presently he yapped, as if in hot chase of a rabbit; and an active young fellow jumped through

the great wave, and was swallowed up, leaving his hat behind. Then they heard him crying faintly, “Here he is! Come round, and dig us out to this side.”

It is a strange thing, and I have not the smallest remembrance of having done it; but I must have dragged my frozen body through the hedge, in the cope of life with death, and got on the leeward side of a stiff bulwark of newly bill-hooked ashplant, which stopped the sweep of drift, and served to cast it like the lap of a counterpane over me. In the bottom where I lay there was scarcely any snow, but a soft bed of fallen leaves, upon which they found me lying like a gate-post flung by, to season. [149]

“Dead as a doornail!” said Rasp the baker.

“Stiff as a starfish!” cried Pluggs the grocer, who had spent his last holidays at the seaside.

“Ay, and colder than a skinned eel!” added Jakes, the barrowman.

But my uncle said—“Out with you, coward lot of curs! Our Kit shall outlive every one of you. The Lord hath not put him in that nest for nothing.”

Then Sam Henderson pulled off his cloak, like the Good Samaritan, and threw it over me. And taking me by the shoulders, with my uncle at the feet, he helped to bear my stiff body back to the road; where they set me upon *Haro*, with my head upon his mane; and the young man who had jumped into the drift was sent ahead, to fetch Dr. Sippets to my uncle’s house.

CHAPTER XXV.
ON THE SHELF.

THAT season, there was no Christmas-tide for me; no “Happy New Year,” to wish to others, and be wished; nor even so much as a Valentine’s Day, to send poems to girls, and get caricatures. In the leeward of the wild storm, I had been saved by a merciful power from the frost of death, and by constant care and indefatigable skill, I was slowly brought back into the warmth of life. But strong as I was, and of tough and active frame, with habits of temperance and exercise, there was no making little of the mischief done; and I could not have survived it, if I had been a clever fellow. For one of the most racking and deadly evils of all that beset the human frame was established in mine, and there worked its savage will. When I was just beginning to get warm again, and to ask where I was, and to stretch my tingling joints, symptoms of rheumatic fever showed, and for weeks and for months it ran its agonizing course. The doctor did all that any man [150] could do; and my uncle went up to his cupboard in the wall by the head of his bed, and brought down a leather bag, and looked at it fondly, and then looked at me.

“It was put by for a rainy day; and there can’t be a rainier day than this,” he said with some drops in his own eyes, as Tabby told me afterwards. “Let the business go to the dogs, if it will. Where’s the use of keeping up, with no one to keep up for? Dr. Sippets, I never thought to see this day. Fetch the best man in London, and let him cheat me, if he will.”

If I had been at all a clever fellow, my mind would have stayed with me, and worried out my heart, when dreadfully pushed to carry on its proper work, with the lowering and the heightening, and the quivering of the pulse. But being just a simple mind, that took its cue from body, and depended on the brain for motion, and the eyes for guidance, when these went amiss it quite struck work; and never even asked who its master was. Thus it came to pass that Kitty’s sweet and tender letters lay upon a shelf but a yard or two away, and no hand was yet stretched out for them.

At last there came a letter sent in special trouble, as was plain from many signs upon it, and from the mode of its delivery. For Mrs. Wilcox came herself, the roads being once more passable, and perceiving how things were in the house had a long talk with my uncle. This good woman, as I may have said, was much attached to Miss Fairthorn, and had promised to take charge of my replies, and even to give me tidings of her, if anything happened to disable her from writing. But no provision had been made for any default on my part, as I was supposed to be free, and strong, and sure to come when called for.

“The poor young thing has been in such a taking,” Mrs. Wilcox told my uncle, “at not having so much as a single line from your poor nephew, you see, sir. You may put it to yourself how you would feel to be looking and looking for letters about business; and this is worse than business to young folk; they goes on as if it was all the world to them. And Miss Kitty always did have such an uncommon tender heart; you never see the like of it in all your life. What was she to conclude except that Mr. Kit had throwed her over, and perhaps taken up with some of them country girls [151] down here. It wasn’t, you see, sir, as if he had written once, and told her he meant to stick fast to her. And yet she couldn’t bring her mind for to believe that such a nice young gent would be guilty of such conduct; and of course she knows right well how bootiful she is, though you never see her look that sort of way, as young ladies with a quarter of her good looks does. I declare to you, sir, when I was in the ’bus, holding of this bag exactly as you see me now, I felt that I could scratch out both his eyes, tall and strong as he is by Miss Kitty’s account. Bless her gentle heart, what a way she will be in, when she hears she have thought ill of him undeserving. Though a relief, sir, on the whole, for I believe she never done it; and better be in a snow-drift than belong to another woman.”

“You are a remarkably sensible lady,” said my uncle, desiring to make the best of things. “But I do not like to open poor Kit’s letters; and there are six of them already on a bracket by his bed, waiting till he comes round a bit. You must understand, Mrs. Wilcox, what this means. He isn’t off his head, exactly, but—you know that we all get a little abroad, when we lie on our backs so long as not to know our legs.”

“I do, sir, I do. I can feel it all through me, by means of what happened to my own husband. Ah, he was a man—could take a scuttle full of coals, and hold it out straight, the same as you might march up the aisle on a Sunday, with your hat right for’ard, to show that it was brushed and shining. But poor Wilcox, he went away at last, with a tub of clothes in his lungs, and the same may occur to the best of us; mayn’t it, Mr. Orchardson? But if you feel a delicate sort of feeling about breaking open the young lady’s letter, and the young gent from the snow-drift is still looking at his legs, I can tell you a good bit of what is going on; though I never was one, and Wilcox knew it, for hearkening so much as a word they say, when the women have done with their teas, and the men stand against the low green palings, with a pot, and a pipe as long as their shirt-sleeves.

“Well, sir, it do appear that two bad ones has turned up, over and above the one always there, which I will not name, consequent upon fear. One was Sir Cumberance Hotchpots, or some such name, proving to be a wicked man from the North; and the other was her brother, as ought to be all over, according to the flesh of marriage, sir. Donovan Bulwrag is his name, but every one prefer to call him ‘Downy.’ A hulking young man is my opinion of him; and it has been my lot to [152] behold a good many. You may see it on the tables, sir, that come down from the Mount, going

into church any Sunday, that such is forbidden by the law of Moses, for any Christian man to marry. Their father is one, and their mother is one; and they have no right to make a pair of them. You holds on with that, sir, as a respectable man, who has trodden his way in the world, is bound to do?”

“Yes, Mrs. Wilcox, I hold to it strongly,” said my uncle, “if I understand you. Do you mean to tell me, that this young man—”

“There is the facts, sir, and none of my telling. I was always a very bad hand at telling, though Wilcox he used to say otherwise, when he might be overcome in argument. But facts or no facts, the truth is as I tell you. This Mr. Donovan have come home, from Germany, or some such foreign parts; and whatever his meaning is, that is what it comes to—Miss Kitty can’t have no peace with him. And a yellow young man, Mr. Orchardson; as yellow as a daffodil, his hair, and beard, and eyes.”

“I don’t care a fig what his colour may be,” cried my uncle, being now on his high ropes; “he must be a black blackguard, and nothing else, if he dares to take advantage of a girl he should protect. Poor Kitty, what a pretty kettle of fish she is in! You need not tell me, ma’am, I can see it all. I have always had a gift in that way. Though I have not had so very much to do with women, for which I thank the Lord, every night of my life, I understand their ways, as well as if I had been one of them.”

“Then you must be a wonderful man, sir, indeed. The most wonderful I ever come across.” Mrs. Wilcox smoothed her dress, as if to ask what was inside it, but reserved her own opinion as to what was not.

“I mean it,” said my Uncle, who grew stronger always, whenever called in question. “It may not be the general thing; but so it is with me. And now I would venture to ask you, ma’am, what you consider the next thing to do.”

“Well,” replied the lady, highly flattered by request for advice from such an oracle, “if I were a strong man and a very clever one, I know what I should do at once. I should go up and fetch her away from them all, and let none of them come anigh her.”

“And what would you say, ma’am, supposing you had done it, when you found yourself served, [153]
the next morning perhaps, with a warrant for abduction of a maiden under age, and then committed for trial as a criminal? What would you say to that, Mrs. Wilcox?”

“I should say that the laws was outrageous, and made for the encouragement of vice and wickedness. And I should put it in the newspapers, right and left, till the public came and broke down the doors of the jail, and got up a public subscription for me.”

“Where is her father? What is he about?” My uncle thought it waste of time to argue after that. “Her father is the only person who can interfere. Has he been knocked on the head, and killed by one of his own battering rams?” Mr. Orchardson’s knowledge of scientific matters was more elementary than even mine.

“Not to my knowledge, sir; though like enough that will be the end of him. He have gone to the ends of the earth, I believe, to arrange for going ever so much further in the Spring. There is no help to be got from him, sir, now, if there ever was any chance of it. The poor young lady is delivered as a lamb between two lions to devour her, with a tigress patting them on the back, and holding her down while they carry it out. What will Mr. Kit say, if you allow it, sir?”

“You may be quite sure that I will never allow it, though at present I cannot see what to do. You have quicker wits than we have, ma’am; I ask you again, is there anything you can think of? Has her father any friends who would take her in?”

“Not one, to my knowledge,” answered Mrs. Wilcox, after counting on her finger-tips some names that she had heard of; “that dreadful creature have contrived to make every lady in the land afraid of her. And the poor Professor only knows the learned men, and the learneder they are the less they cares for one another. ’Tis the learning that is at the foot of all this trouble. You must see it so yourself, sir, when you come to think about it.”

“And the law, Mrs. Wilcox, the law is still worse. She is not of age, you see; and her father has placed her, or at any rate left her, in the charge of that woman, whom he has been fool enough to marry. If my nephew were in health, I should say to him at once, ‘Take the bull by the horns, or at least take the young lady, get a licence, and marry her, and defy those people. Her father’s consent has been given; and if he chooses to leave her in that helpless state, you must rescue [154]
her, and have no shilly-shallying. But for me to come and take her, is another pair of shoes. It might ruin her fair name, as well as get me into trouble; and what could I do with her, when I had got her?”

“You are right, sir; I see it all as clearly as you put it. But will you come up, and have a talk with her? A word from you would go as far as ten from me. And it would make her feel so much less forsaken like. I could manage to get her down to my little place, and the news I have got for her about poor Mr. Kit will set her up in one way, while it knocks her down in another. Oh, how she have cried, to think that he could be so false to her, because she wouldn’t believe a single word of it, all the blessed time! And now, if I can send my little Ted to her to-night—the sharpest little chap he is, in all the brick and mortar trade; he have never lost a sixpence, sir, from all them roaring navvies—though you might not think it, it will brisk her up amazingly. There is

nothing so hagonizing to the female spirit, sir, as to find itself forsaken by the other sex. And your nephew, Master Kit, he mustn't think of dying yet; no cough about him, sir, nor nothing in the kidneys, only got a chill from being frozen to a hicicle, and his head upon the moon, which goes for nothing. Lor', sir, the number of young men comes every day, from the best part of London, too, according to my Ted, a-staring at the great works round our way, which is to be the fashion in a few more years, and not a head among them fit to go upon a donkey! It doesn't matter what's the matter with the head, one item, sir, in these times now upon us and increasing daily. Keep your spirits up, sir, and I shall tell Miss Kitty. A young man, as is all right, except inside his head, isn't no more to complain of than a cuckoo-clock, that have left off striking, and keeps better time for that. What time did you say the last 'bus at Hampton was, sir? If I was to lose it, wherever should I be? And a good step from here to Hampton, too."

"I will send you to Hampton, in the spring-cart, Mrs. Wilcox," said my uncle, warmly joining in her estimate of the age; "and to-morrow, if the roads permit, I shall hope to call upon you, about eleven o'clock; and if you can manage to get Miss Fairthorn to meet me, why, it may be a little comfort to her, and we may be able perhaps to see what can be done for her."

CHAPTER XXVI.
A DOWNY COVE.

[155]

It could hardly be expected that my Uncle Corny should grow very miserable about this matter. He knew that young people of the ordinary cast tumble into love and tumble out again, with perhaps a little running of the eyes and nose, and a hat crushed on the head, or a ribbon saturated; but nothing that penetrates the skin, far less puts a "tub of clothes," as Mrs. Wilcox said, into the lungs. And it would not have been reasonable to demand of him, that he should believe in any grand distinction between the case of Kitty and myself, and that of any other couple he might come across, in a life whose main nucleus was Covent Garden. That which chiefly moved him, as he told me in the end, and as I might have known without his telling, was the iron sense of justice, gilded haply at the corners, and crowned with a little touch of chivalry. To his sturdy sense of right it seemed a monstrous thing, that an innocent girl, and such a lovely girl, should be locked away from all who were longing to help her, and left at the mercy of two bad men.

Therefore he donned his Sunday clothes, though he grumbled a good deal at having to do it, and without a word to me, put old *Spanker* in the shafts, and drove away alone in the green spring-cart, with a face which made all the village say to one another, that he must have a County-court job on his hands. Dr. Sippets, who came to see me every day, had by this time supplied such a row of medicine-bottles, that we glazed a new wall with them forty yards long, for he would not allow a farthing on their return, though he put them in the bill at twopence halfpenny apiece; and that glazing brought him even more than that much again, from the number of boys' fingers which he had to dress. For he was a skilful, as well as zealous man, and did his utmost for his patients and his family.

He had now begun to "exhibit" mustard oil externally, as well as zinc, and especially sulphur inside; till the sulphur began to ooze through my pores, as if I had been a tea rose suffering from mildew. Then Tabby had to rub me with the mustard oil; and the more I groaned, the surer she became of its effect. With this vigorous treatment I began to rally, and even heard Uncle Corny depart, and contrived to steal a peep at him behind the window curtain. But they told me some [156] fib about his errand.

When he put up his horse, somewhere near Holland Park, he had not far to walk to find Mrs. Wilcox, who received him with great cordiality. And she sent her little Ted, who proved to be the very boy that had guided me among the brickfields, with a note which he managed to convey to Miss Fairthorn. "Rumpus going on," he said when he came back; "they makes more rumpus in that house, than a score of navvies over one red herring. But cooky's not a bad sort; she'll give it to her."

It was nearly an hour before Miss Fairthorn came, and then she was so nervous, and down-hearted, that they scarcely knew what to do with her. At first she had quite forgotten Uncle Corny, having never seen him in his best clothes at home, and being distracted with sorrow and ill usage. For as yet Mrs. Wilcox had been unable to get a word with her about the visit of the day before. Gradually, however, she began to understand what had happened, and why she had not heard from me.

"Then he has not forgotten me, after all!" she said, in a tone that made her old nurse sob, and my uncle look out of the window. "Something told me all along, that he could not forget me, any more than I could do such a thing to him. But you say that he is ill, that he has long been ill; and perhaps he will never be well any more. Tell me the truth, I would rather know it. Is he dead, is he dead, Mr. Orchardson?"

"No, my dear, thank the Lord, he is all alive, and getting ever so much better every day. He went off his head, just a little for a time; and he did not know me from the man in the moon; and what do you think was the word that was on his tongue, all day, and all night too for that matter? Guess, and I'll tell you if you are right."

"Oh, I know what it was! It began with a K, and it was not a very long word, was it? It was 'Kitty.' Don't tell me that it was anything but 'Kitty.'"

"No, my dear, I won't, because I never tell fibs. Sure enough that was it, like a cherry-clapper; only in a hundred different tones. I used to say that if you were there, you'd get heartily tired of your own name."

"Never, so long as it came from his lips. But I think I should have broken my heart, all the same. It has been the kindest thing you could do, to keep all knowledge of this long suspense from me. How soon will he be better? How soon will he be well again? Well enough, I mean, to [157] come down and let me see him?"

"At present, Miss Fairthorn, wherever he is not mustard, he is brimstone. You cannot expect him to present himself in that condition. But we have got the mischief out of his joints by this time. Dr. Sippets considers it a very happy thing that the ailment flew there; for his heart will be all right, and that's a great part of the system, in love. His head is of no importance in that condition; and Mrs. Wilcox proved to me last night, that it is quite a superfluity in the present days. Madam, you know you did, and you did it thoroughly."

My uncle gave a wink at Mrs. Wilcox, not with any overture to familiarity—for he was very shy

of widows—but to intimate to her that she should talk a little nonsense, after his example, as a rescue from hysterics. For poor Kitty had been passing through much outrage all the morning; and now to be met with this shock of strange news (bad to her head, but perhaps good for her heart) after such a long time of dejection was enough to throw the finest daughter of Divine Science into some confusion as to all her organisms. But she fetched herself back from the precipice of sobs, with a deep draught of air, and spoke as she did not feel.

"If he is being treated like—like beef, I think I ought to have a voice in the matter. Will you let me come down, and do it for him—or see that it is done properly? My father has taught me so many things—"

"My dear," said my uncle, being truly thankful to her, for not even pulling out her handkerchief, "you are the sweetest young lady I have ever met. No, you shall not come down and nurse our Kit; not only because it is not the place for you, but also that it might be very bad for him. His mind must not come back with a jerk, however pleasant the jerk may be. He must come round slowly, and he has begun to do it, under Tabby Tapscott's scrubbing-brush. But you shall come and see him, in a week, my dear, if you think you can hold out so long here. And now tell me, what is going on, to urge your gentle nature so."

The young lady looked at Mrs. Wilcox, as if she could hardly tell what to do. She was very unwilling to refuse my uncle anything he might ask her; and yet she could not bring herself to speak of such matters to him.

"I will tell you all about it, when she is gone," said the lady of the shop, as if hurried for time; "but I know by her look that she is getting in a fright. What will they do, if they catch you out, dearie?" [158]

"I defy them. I defy them. They may do what they like. Now I know that Kit stands fast to me, after all he has suffered for my sake, am I likely to show the white feather? Uncle Corny, I will come away with you, and let them do their worst, if you will take me."

She pulled her hat down on her forehead, and drew her crinoline into small compass, as if she were ready to mount our spring-cart; and her manner had such an effect on my uncle—for very pretty girls do even more by attitude, than by words or looks—that he saw himself driving her away, and looking back with a whistle of defiance at the world. Moreover she had called him "Uncle Corny," which put him on his mettle to deserve it; and though there have been few men born as yet, with more gift of decision in their nature, he looked at her lovingly, and hesitated.

"It will not do," Mrs. Wilcox interrupted, as if she were once more in office as nurse. "Of law I know nothing, sir, and you do; as you was pleased to tell me yesterday. If her father was at home, and sanctioned it, no doubt it might be in your jurisdiction"—the good lady was proud of her law, and repeated—"it might be in your jurisdiction, sir. But without any sign of that, where should we be? Pulled up for conspiracy against the realm, and nothing for me, but to put my shutters up."

"I fear that you are right, ma'am," replied my uncle, "though I don't care twopence for the law sometimes, when I feel better law inside me. But it is the young lady we must think of first. We must let her do nothing to injure herself. Have patience, my dear. They may torment you in the house, but they cannot take you out of it, and marry you to anybody, against your own will and pleasure. Your will and pleasure is to have our Kit; and with the will of the Lord, you shall do so."

"I suppose I must go back. There seems nothing else to do;" Miss Fairthorn spoke very sadly, looking from one to the other, and trying to be cheerful. "But if the worst comes to the worst, will you find a place for me, Uncle Corny? I have got a little money my dear father gave me; and they shall take away my life, before they get it."

"Bravo, well said indeed, my dear!" This alone was needed to confirm my uncle in his high opinion of her. "What a wife you will make for a steady young man! Yes, my dear child, I will find you a place, and you shan't pay sixpence for it. And none but your father shall take you away, unless the Lord Chancellor comes himself to fetch you." [159]

"Thank you. Then I shall know what to do. I am not so much afraid of them, now I know that Kit is true. I shall say to myself—'What is this to put up with, after all that he has borne for me?' Give him my best love, and tell him to get well, and sit by the window, and look out for me. Good-bye, Uncle Corny; I will not attempt to thank you. Good-bye, nurse. I don't deserve such friends. They may do what they like now, and I shall only laugh."

"She deserves the best friends, and she shall have them too," Mr. Orchardson said, as soon as she was gone, with little Ted to see the way clear for her; "that's what I call a downright good girl, without a bit of humbug in her. A fig for their science! Will it ever produce such a fine bit of nature as that is? Now tell me, as far as you can, Mrs. Wilcox, what is it they want to do with her, why they torment her so, and what we can do to stop it?"

My uncle laid his watch on the table, because he wished to be home before dark, and the days, though drawing out nicely, were not very long. He knew that the lady with whom he had to deal, instead of putting things into small compass, would fetch a large compass about them, whose radius would only be lengthened by any disturbance or hurry on his part. So he merely placed his watch as a silent, or at least a comparatively quiet witness, and reproof; but the scheme failed, as it deserved to do. All he obtained by it was a lesson, which he often repeated afterwards—never set a watch to go against a woman's tongue; it puts her on her mettle to outgo it; and one wants

winding, but the other never does.

Mrs. Wilcox had not so very much to tell, but she found a vast quantity to say, and never said it twice to the same effect. Stripped of her embellishments, reflections, divergencies, and other little sallies, it was something as follows.

Captain Fairthorn had been called away to see to the fitting of some ship near Glasgow, with engines of a special kind, and large coal-storage, so that she might keep at sea for months together—seven years the lady said, but that looked like a lady's tale. And there were to be wonderful appliances, such as had never been heard of, on board her, as well as every kind of scientific instrument, all under the Professor's own direction. If ever a man was in his own [160] element, this was the man, and the time and place were there. No wonder that he forgot all other things below the moon; and it was much to his credit that before he started, he insisted on a promise from his wife and two step-daughters, that his dear child Kitty should be treated kindly, and harassed by none of them while he was away. Upon that condition only, would he send them every month a handsome sum out of the liberal payment he was to receive for his services. And he thought himself very firm, and most sagacious—even suspicious it might be—in providing that before he drew each cheque, he should have by post a line from his own daughter, to this effect —"I am very happy, and every one is most kind to me."

Unluckily his suspicions were not very shrewd; for he forgot that there were pens and ink and fingers at Bulwrag Park, quite apart from Kitty's, well able to afford him that assurance in her name, for the gift of forgery was in the family; and his daughter was not to distract him with letters, so long as he knew that she was comfortable.

No sooner was he off the scene, than that old rake, Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot, reappeared, having purposely kept away till then, for he dreaded the simple and calm man of science. He annoyed poor Miss Fairthorn with his odious advances, and coarse familiarity, and slangy talk, and he took a mean advantage of her gentle diffidence by perpetually assuming that she was pledged to him. This, and the contempt and spiteful hatred of her stepmother, seemed more than enough for the poor girl to have to bear; but soon a far greater distress was added. Donovan Bulwrag, the only son of the Honourable Mrs. Bulwrag Fairthorn—as she absurdly called herself —came home from the Continent, where he had been engaged on the staff of some embassy, after running from his debts; and the house, and the people, and the chattels therein were not good enough for him to tread upon. This would have mattered little to Miss Fairthorn (who was rarely favoured with the Bulwrag society, except for the purpose of insults if this divine Downy, as his mother called him), had not taken into his great yellow head the idea that he was in love with Kitty.

This dearly loved son of his mother was a strong young man of three or four and twenty, able to take his own part anywhere, either with violence or with fraud, but preferring the latter, when it would do the trick. Mrs. Wilcox said that he had three crowns to his head, which went beyond all her experience, although she had been in a hospital. She had known malefactors with two [161] sometimes, and you never could tell where their mischief began, because it started double; but she had combed the hair of this boy once, and nothing would tempt her to do it again. She was not superstitious, but afraid more often of being too much the other way; and she left it entirely to the future to prove her a fool, if she deserved it. Only let any one look at his head.

For it was not only that he was bad inside, but that he gave the same idea at first sight, to any one having any sense of human looks. It was not Mrs. Wilcox alone who said this, but my uncle as well, when he happened to see the young man, while going to look for his horse. He had notice that he might have the luck to meet him, and sure enough he had, if there was any luck in it. And my Uncle Corny, though a man of strong opinions, did not go so entirely by outward show.

Mr. Downy Bulwrag, as the grandson of a Lord, and likely enough to be a Lord himself, if people in his way died out of it, had a sense of being somebody, and liked the world to know that he was rather an important part of it. Not that he swaggered, or stuck out his arms, or jerked himself into big attitudes—as some bits of the human chip do—all that he left for fellows who had yet to prove their value, and knew much less of life than he did. His manner and air were of solid and silent conviction, that without him this earth would be a place unfit for a civilized race to inhabit. He prided himself, if he had any pride, upon his knowledge of human nature; and like most who do that, he attributed every word and every action to selfishness, spite, and cupidity. And like the great bulk of such people again, he was truly consistent in his own freedom from any loftier motives.

His mother's pet name for him had been confirmed by all who had the honour of knowing him. He was downy in manner, as well as appearance, and (according to the slang of the day) a "downy cove" in all his actions. No one could look at his bulky form (which greatly resembled his father's), enormous head furnished with bright yellow hair, soft saffron moustache, and orange-coloured eyelashes, without thinking of a fat, downy apricot, and fearing that he had none of its excellence. His face, too, was flattened in its own broad substance, as that yellow fruit often is against the wall, and bulged at the jowl with the great socket of square jaws. But the forehead was the main and most impressive feature; full, and round, and almost beetling, wider even than [162] the great wide jaws, but for its heaviness it would have looked like the bulwark of a mighty brain; and there was room for the brain of a Cuvier in that head.

My good Uncle Corny, meeting this man in the road, and knowing who he was from description received, clapped his keen gray eyes with emphasis upon him, as much as to say, "I mean to look

you through, young man.” Downy, with his usual self-esteem—which stands like a dummy at every loop-hole, when the garrison of self-respect is gone—gazed at the grower with a placid acceptance of rustic admiration. Little did he dream that another creak of his boots would have brought the crack of a big whip round his loins; for my uncle was a hasty man sometimes, and could prove it his duty to be so. And the heavy half-somnolent look of Downy—as if he were gaping with his eyes almost—was enough to put a quick busy man in a rage, even if he had no bone to pick with the man who was making a dog of him.

CHAPTER XXVII.
OFF THE SHELF.

I HAD missed "the enjoyment of that bad weather"—as one of our workmen called it, when he drew his wages *gratis*—through having too much at the outset. There had been at least six weeks of frost, some of it very intense; and it was said by those who make a study of such things, that Christmas Day, 1860, was the coldest day known in the south of England, since Christmas Day, 1796. And but for a break at the end of the year, when a sudden thaw set in before the steady return of low temperature, it is likely that the Thames would have held an ice-fair above London Bridge; as in 1814, and as threatened again in 1838. But the removal of old London Bridge has made perhaps a great difference in that matter.

One of the reasons why I could not get rid of the chill that struck into my system, was perhaps the renewed attack of cold every night through all that bitter time. For in old-fashioned houses like my uncle's, there was no fireplace in the bedrooms; and a frying-pan full of hot embers, our Tabby's device, used to set us a-coughing. Every now and again I seemed to hear, when I called [163] my wits together, the crisp light glint of the gliding skate, the hollow heel-tap of the gliddering slide, and the sharp, merry shouts of boys and men dashing at the hockey-bung in the jagged, slippery huddle. Then more snow fell, and the ice grew treacherous, and all was mantled in a white hush again.

But now the days were milder, and the ice had broken up, and the roads were full of quagmires as they always are, when a long frost has gone to the bottom of their metal; and everybody said that it was very brave of my good Aunt Parslow to pay a guinea for a fly, and come all the way from Leatherhead, to see if I was still alive. And it was not for the sake of being kept warm on the road—though that was the reason she assigned for it—that she obtained permission from Mr. Chalker to bring his pretty daughter on the visit she was paying. Miss Parslow was long past the age of lovemaking, and had made a sound investment of her affections among the grateful canine race; but none the less for that she felt an interest in watching the progress, or it might even be the backslidings, of her own species in the fine old game. And Sam Henderson had conquered all her prejudice against him, by riding over more than once in the worst state of the roads, when no wheels could pass over them, for no other purpose, as he positively avowed, than to comfort her kind heart about her dear nephew's illness.

"Don't tell me," she said, as soon as she had seen me, and cried over me a little, for I was desperately weak; "what he wants is warmth, and change of air, and particularly careful nursing. He will fall into a decline, if he stops here; and then what will become of his darling Kitty? What chance has he here in this wretched little room, like a frog, or an empty bucket hanging in a well? And here you are giving him gruel and tapioca! Has he ever had a pint of real turtle? Just answer me that, Mr. Orchardson."

"Well, no," replied my uncle, looking at her with surprise; "I never heard that turtle was for any but Lord Mayors. Kit has had everything regardless of expense, that our skilful Dr. Sippets recommended him. Perhaps you know better than he does, Miss Parslow. And the bottles of stuff, every two hours day and night, with half a pint rubbed in at frequent intervals, till he groans, and that shows that it has acted on his system."

"System indeed! There is no system in it, except to kill him, in spite of the Parslow constitution. The roads are very soft, but I shall send for him to-morrow, with a proper close carriage and a [164] pair of horses. And if you try to prevent it, let his death lie at your door."

"There is no doubt," said my uncle, after some consideration, "that your house is much warmer, and better fitted up than this with warm baths, and all that which he ought to have. And Sippets said that change of air would be a great thing for him. I will see him, before you go away, and if he thinks it would be safe, let it be so, ma'am. But you must not suppose that I have grudged him anything. And a very pretty bill there will be for me to pay."

Miss Chalker meanwhile had made a great discovery, to wit that she had never seen Hampton Court; and Sam Henderson, who happened to come in to ask for me, found out that he had business there that very afternoon. So after dining with my uncle, off they set together, and Miss Parslow undertook to call for her companion upon her way back to Leatherhead. Sam had gone up several pages in Mr. Orchardson's good books, by his rescue of me, and even more by his refusal of the handsome reward which he might have claimed for it. And now there were very few days when he did not come down, and offer counsel, and perhaps bring a hare or rabbit. And my uncle liked his stories of the lords and ladies, even when he was unable to believe them.

"Now, I am not going home without a little talk with you," said Aunt Parslow to her host, when the young couple had made off; "I must be rude enough to ask you just to spare me a little time. And I don't think you can do much on the ground just now. It must be quite unfit to work, after all the snow and thaw, and rain again coming on the top of it. And the land must be so cold that the spring will be very late. You see I know a little about gardening, too. Will you try to spare me half an hour, as I can come so seldom?"

"I am always at the service of the ladies, however busy I may be." My uncle's answer was truly polite, but not so true in other points. "The spring will be very late, and therefore summer will find us all behind. I mean, if we get any summer at all."

“It is quite as likely that we shall not, and that makes it unwise of us to be in any hurry. Mr. Orchardson, you have a special gift of never being in a hurry. We women always envy that way of taking things, because we cannot hope to attain to it. You know what we are, don’t you?”

“All that is delightful, ma’am; so far as I have had any opportunity of learning. And all that is [165]
reasonable, whenever there is nothing particular to interfere with it. I assure you that I have the highest respect for—for the way that you generally go on.”

“You pay me a very high compliment, sir, and I wish that we all deserved it. But I am sure you will admit that I am reason itself, in asking you one or two little questions. There was a little money that fell in, as a sort of windfall, or whatever you call it, to my niece, the mother of this unlucky Kit. I scarcely know what the exact sum was, though of course I could easily find out. But it must have been about two thousand pounds. I believe that it came into your possession as his next of kin, but in trust for him of course. And I conclude that as he has long been of age, you have handed it over to Kit himself.”

“Not I, ma’am;” cried my uncle, who was as honest as the day. “That would have been the worst thing that I could do. I have told him of it several times, and strongly recommended him to let me apply it for his benefit. Kit is a sensible and upright fellow, and he knows when he is in good hands, that he does; and he is capable of managing his own affairs, without anybody’s interference.”

“Without even his uncle’s?” asked Miss Parslow, with a smile.

“Yes, ma’am; and without even his great-aunt’s,” Mr. Orchardson answered, with a frown.

“I have no doubt that you have acted for the best;” the lady returned, for she wished to do no harm, and saw that it would cost me more than two thousand pounds to have Uncle Corny set against me. “And it is the best thing that could have happened to him, to come into his capital when he wants it, without having had a chance of making any hole in it. I dare say he has not the least idea what it is. It will be a nice little nest egg, when he wants a nest.”

“I have never let him know how much it is, and I do not mean to tell him, till I hand it over. I have never touched a penny of it, my dear madam; which I never would have told you, if you had shown a doubt of me. I have allowed it to accumulate at four per cent.; and the sum is now three thousand five hundred pounds, which will be transferred into the name of Kit, on the day that he marries Miss Fairthorn. I should have thought myself justified in deducting the twenty-five [166]
pounds reward, for his stupidity in losing himself in the snow; but Mr. Henderson will not accept it. I have kept Kit from a baby, and he was dreadful with his clothes, and broke the backs of nearly all the books he had at school. But I shall not charge him sixpence, ma’am. He has worked well for me, and he can lay in a tree very nearly as well as I can.”

“Mr. Orchardson, you are a gentleman,” cried my aunt, much impressed with the increase of money; “and I would ask you as a favour, in return for my inquiries, to allow me to discharge Dr. Sippet’s account.”

“With pleasure, Miss Parslow, for it will be very stiff, and the uphill time of the year is before me. I do not pretend to be a gentleman, madam; but I should not be a man if I wronged my brother’s baby. The only thing I ask you is to keep this from Kit’s knowledge, and leave me to tell him at my own time. I have hinted to him once or twice that he has something coming; but if I were to tell him he would go and tell his Kitty, and I wish it to be kept from all that lot.”

“He shall not know a word of it through me, I can assure you. And I shall consider what I can do for them. But the first thing is to set him on his legs again.”

At this very moment, I was being set by a happy little accident upon my legs, as well as enjoying a delight which no money (at the finest compound interest) can insure. In the corner of the room which my aunt had so decried, and where I had passed so many miserable weeks, an old wooden bracket with three little shelves was nailed against the yellow-ochred wall. I had often cast my weary eyes in that direction, and vaguely watched a spider, who was in a doleful plight, with his legs drawn together, and no stomach left between them; such a time was it since he had tasted a good fly. On the bottom shelf were bottles of a loathsome disposition, pill-boxes and galley-pots, and measures no less repulsive to good taste; on the middle shelf lay my mother’s Prayer-book, and some papers of directions, and orders, and powders and the like; but what was on the top shelf I could not tell, and had often wondered languidly in the wanderings of hazy speculation. And I might have been content to wonder still, without any guide-post of interest, if I had not heard Miss Parslow say—“Ah, that would do him a lot more good than those,” as she pointed to the top shelf, and then to the others.

For a time I forgot all about it, and fell into a little sleep of indifference; but being aroused by the sound of plates and dishes and the clinking of glasses down below, I longed to know what [167]
they were having for dinner, and what was the joke they were laughing at. Then a lovely smell of something came into the room, and my head went round with the effort of searching itself for the name of that fragrance, although it was nothing but fried calf’s liver, with which Mrs. Tapscott was skilful. “Shall I ever have that again, instead of filthy nastiness?” was all that I had sense enough to want to know; and then I thought somehow of the starving spider, and looked to ask whether he was dead yet.

Not only was he not dead, but clearly (after seeing rain once more upon the window-panes) he

had made up his mind that life was worth living, and a little activity might make it more so. Where he got his stuff from is more than I can tell, for any man would have vowed that his meagre body could never have supplied him with the hundredth part of the dreamiest film of a gossamer. However, he knew his own business best, and he was at it, as if he were paid by the piece.

Being hungry myself, I could sympathize with him, while detesting his bloodthirstiness, as every man must who lives on beef and mutton. And I saw that he was scheming to attach his tent cords to a coign of great vantage on the top shelf of the bracket.

“When spiders go thrumming, there is wild weather coming,” came clumsily into my half-saved mind; and then floated into it, like a gossamer adrift, those mysterious words of Aunt Parslow. Like the spider, I desired to be on the move, and partly perhaps through the very same cause—the yearning for a wholesome bit of flesh. At any rate, being left all alone, for the resources of the establishment were at full pressure upon hospitality, I resolved to know what was on that shelf, though it might be my destiny to perish in the attempt.

This was not at all an easy job for a fellow who had spent two months on his back; and my weakness amazed me, when I tried to walk, and I seemed to be twice my own proper length. Then I burst into a laugh at my own condition, and tried to move a little chair to help me get along, but found it made of lead, and had to coast around it. My sense of distance also was entirely thrown out, for the room was quite a little one, and yet it seemed a gallery. At last by some process of sprawling and crawling I laid hold of the corner bracket, and lifting myself with some difficulty, contrived to grasp all that was on the top shelf. A little pile of letters was in my right hand, and a light shot into my eyes, and a gleam of soft warmth flowed into my heart. [168]

Then I crawled back to my narrow bed, so nearly exchanged for a narrower, and laid my treasure on my shrunken breast, and turned on my side, that it might not slide away. I felt as if there were two Kits now—one who knew nothing about it, and the other who wanted it all to himself. And perhaps that other Kit was Kitty.

How long I continued in this crazed condition, it is impossible for me to say; but as sure as the goodness of God is with us, it saved my reason and my life. For by-and-by, a warmth of blood flowed through me, and a sense of being in a large sweet world; then memory awoke, and pain was gone, and I was like a little child looking at its mother. I did not read a word, nor care to read; but I knew whose hand was on my heart, and I would not disturb it by a stir of thought, but was satisfied with it, for it was everything. And so I fell into a long deep sleep; and when I awoke, I was a man again.

CHAPTER XXVIII.
OUT OF ALL REASON.

WORSE troubles than those of the troublesome body were visiting one worth a thousand of me. Captain Fairthorn was still in Scotland, while his fair daughter was being worried, as a lamb among playful wolves. Without any aid her step-mother was enough to supply her with constant misery; but even her malice was more easy to endure than the insolent attentions of two vile men. To these the poor girl was exposed every day; for if she took refuge in her own room, she was bodily compelled to come down again, and her gentle appeals and even strong disdain were treated as a child's coquetry. There are few things more truculent to a woman, even a very young one, than the jocular assumption that she does not know her mind, and perhaps has little of that article to know. Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot proceeded regularly upon that assumption; and though Kitty had the sweetest temper ever bestowed as a blessing to the owner and all around, this foregone conclusion and heavenly pity (from a creature by no means celestial) drove her sometimes towards the tremulous line which severs sanity from insanity.

For it has been said, and perhaps with truth, that the largest and soundest of human minds [169] could not remain either large or sound, if all the other minds it had to deal with combined to pronounce it both small and unsound. Under the hostile light, it could not save itself from shrinking; it would glance about vainly for a gleam to suit its own, and then straighten to a line with a cross at either end, like the pupil of a cat in the fierce light of the sun.

Left in this manner without any friends, with her heart and her soul among lions, my Kitty (although of strong substance) began to doubt whether there is any justice. Good as she was, and clear and truthful, and possessing that sense—which is now turned into folly by higher discoveries—of a guiding power beyond our own, she strove to believe that no harm could touch her, while she continued blameless. But it was a fearful battle for a timid maiden to have to fight.

Happily both for herself and me, her enemies, before they got her down, fell out about their lawful prey. When Donovan Bulwrag joined the hunt, at first he was content to turn the quarry towards the other hounds, and enjoy the distress unselfishly. But after a while, like an eager dog, he began to kindle towards the prey, and shot forth jealous glances, and resolved to have a nip for his own tooth. So far as such a hound could care for anything outside his own hide, he became enamoured of the charming chase.

His mother with her quick malignant eyes perceived it, and was furious. Her pet scheme was that her sweet Downy, her Golden Downy as she called him, should marry gold, and succeed to the title—which was not improbable—restore its impoverished glory, and set her on high triumphant. Then her proud sister at Halliford would come and sue to be reconciled, and her daughters with the lovely hair would shine and marry fortunes. She would cast the Professor and his grimy works behind her, and reign as she deserved to reign.

In furtherance of this lofty plan, she had already chosen for her son a most desirable helpmate, a lady of good birth, and yet sufficiently akin with commerce to redden her blue blood with gold. And a very quiet harmless girl, who would gladly fill the chest with guineas, and hand the key to her mother-in-law. To be a step-mother to gentleness had been a pleasant and refreshing task; but to be the mother-in-law of wealth would afford even finer occasions of delight. She had always been proud of her son's strong will, and resolute knowledge of his own mind, while they [170] moved in the course she had marked for them; but if they went astray, they must be crushed. With her usual promptitude she resolved to bring the matter to a point at once.

Downy had arrived at the same determination. He had no idea of doing what he disliked, and his mother had told him that she meant to call upon Lady Clara Voucher (the only child and heiress of the Earl of Clerinhouse), and expected his company that afternoon in the carriage she had bought, but not paid for. "Very well," he had said, "we will talk about it;" for his sisters were present, and he preferred a single combat.

Knowing that his mother was now alone, he came into the room with his quiet heavy tread, and sat down, and crossed his legs, and looked at her. Downy Bulwrag, even while he was a boy, had been able to earn a large competence of hatred; as a young man he had increased the stock, and throve upon it, and fattened on the butterine of his own slimy fame. Good and simple young fellows of his own age disliked him, from what they had heard of him; but none had the power to hate him properly, until they had seen him. But after that they knew what to do. They spat on the ground when they thought of him.

"What is it, Downy?" asked his mother, unwarily surrendering the weather-gage of silence. "You look as if something had put you out. I think it is I who have the right to be put out."

Downy began to roll a cigarette—that ragged mummy of the great king Nicot, which was then just beginning to cast its dirty ash about. He wetted his fingers with a little sharp smack of his lips, but made no answer.

"You will not smoke here," cried his mother, already discarding the superior maternal tone; "I never let your father smoke in my presence; and I am sure I shall never let a boy like you."

"Who was going to smoke?" asked Downy, with gruff contempt at this instance of feminine precipitance.

"You may smoke, by-and-by, when you have a house of your own, and a dear little wife to spoil you. But you are coming with me to see her, and you must not smell of tobacco yet. For a short time you must be on your best behaviour. Not that sweet Clara would ever object to anything you like, my dear; but that others might take advantage of it, to make you seem less devoted to her [171] than you are. She is the great catch of the season, you know, and there are so many young men after her. She will make the best wife any man could have—so pleasant, and amiable, and accomplished, and in spite of that so sweetly pretty. When I saw her, the night before last at Lady Indigo's, I thought I had never seen any one so charming."

"I don't think much of her good looks."

"Then you are most ungrateful, for she dotes on you. Her dear friend, the Countess, said—'Tell your noble Downy not to be frightened by sweet Clara's money. Her heart is entirely his. What a lucky fellow!' And then she sighed, for a little plan of hers has been quite upset by this romantic episode. Oh, you are fortunate indeed, my dear; and perhaps a little credit may be fairly due to me. Now put on the coat with the sable trimmings. You look so foreign, and distinguished in it. And it shows your broad chest in such a striking way. That dear Countess said that it made her quite jealous about her dowdy countrymen. And she thought it had something to do with your conquest."

"I don't mean to go at all." The dutiful son, as he pronounced these words, threw his bulky shoulders back, and planted one big elbow on the arm of his easy-chair, and gazed calmly through his yellow lashes, smiling slightly as he watched the colour rising on his mother's dark face. He knew that two stern wills were coming into clash; and the victory would be for the one that did not waste itself in fury.

"Do you mean to tell me," began the lady, trembling at heart, and her voice becoming tremulous, "that you intend to throw away all I have done? That you will not marry Lady Clara Voucher?"

"That is exactly what I do mean. I will never marry Lady Clara Voucher."

"And why? Perhaps you will condescend to give some reason."

"I mean to marry some one else. I mean to marry Kitty Fairthorn."

His mother arose, as she generally did, when her furious temper burst all bonds. Often enough, and too often, she had been in a tempest of wild passion; but never till now in such a hurricane of rage. At first she was stilled by her own commotion; and the lines of her face twitched as with palsy.

"Tell me again," she said, crossing her arms, and speaking with great effort, as she stood [172] before him, and he sat tranquil; "I cannot believe it, till I have heard it twice."

"Certainly, ma'am, to oblige you. I mean to marry, not Lady Clara, but your step-daughter, Kitty."

"You ninny, you rebel, you stubborn doll!" she had usually a fine store of these expressions, but they seemed to desert her in this great need, and he nodded his head at every one, as if to say, "Try something better than that"—"You—But it is useless; you are too base to care, you sit there, like a lump of yellow jaundice. Do you think that a beautiful girl like Kitty—the vile, designing, artful minx; I will throttle her, I wish I had her here. Go and fetch her, bring her to me; I don't blame you. But she shall pay for this, with her life she shall. If they hang me to-morrow—"

"Come, mother, come. You have let off a good bit of steam already. You'll be as right as a trivet, after a few more choice expressions. Don't spare them, if they do you good, you know."

"I shall never be right again. My heart is broken. I feel myself dying, and you have killed me. You, my own son, have murdered me. Oh, good God! What is this pain?"

She fell upon the floor, and moaned and gasped, pressing both hands to her leaping heart, and scared of all wrath by the dread of death; now and then she muttered prayers for mercy, broken with groans of agony. Downy was terrified, and ran for brandy, as she began to tear her hair, and clutch at the carpet, with shrieks growing weaker and more gurgling. And as he ran back, his sister Euphrasia met him, and snatched the bottle from his hand.

"You have done it," cried Frizzy; "I knew you would. One of these days she'll kill herself. You go away. You're not wanted here. She wouldn't take it from your hand, to save her life. I knew it must come. Get away, get away. Don't let her eyes hit upon you, when she rolls them; or she will go off worse than ever. She knows everything, when she is insensible."

"Well, you women are a cure!" said Downy, recovering his strength of mind. "I shall go to my own room, and have a cigar. You can come and tell me, when she is all right."

"I am not sure that she will ever be all right," said his sister, desiring to frighten him; "I have never seen her quite so bad as this."

But he only answered, "What a funk you are! She shall not beat me, with all this stuff."

He had very little conscience, and that little—to use a stock-word now in fashion—particularly [173] *reticent*. And the still small voice, if there were any, could not find much to say this time. In nothing but the rudeness of his manner had he offended against strict right, and he never even

knew when his manner was rude, because it was his nature. He could not help having a passionate mother, who flew into a fury when her plans were crossed. So he smoked his cigar, and considered his next step.

It was plain to him now, without need of thought—for he was not good enough to be a fool—that something decisive might be done at once. He knew what his mother was too well, to suppose that any arguments of his, or any regard for his feelings, would ever induce her to consent to his marriage with Kitty Fairthorn. And he knew that Kitty did not like him (although he had never ill-used her), and in her old-fashioned way would regard the relation of their parents towards one another as a bar to any marriage between them. And he knew that her money, through her father's neglect, had been placed out of her disposal. But in spite of all obstacles, he meant to have her, and her money afterwards.

Up to the present time, he had feigned to be the ally of Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot, and to forward his suit very warmly. At the same time he had contrived to earn some gratitude from Kitty, and to make her look upon him as her friend in need, by flying to her rescue now and then, and sometimes even carrying off her too insistent suitor. This he had been doing more and more, as his passion increased, and jealousy combined with pity on her behalf. Thoroughly despising the older villain, for his shallowness more than his villainy, he began to hate him also for his insolence to the fair one. Having now declared his own intentions, he must put a stop to all that stuff.

While he was thinking much more of these things than of his injured mother, he heard a gentle but hurried knock at his door, and in came Kitty. She was trembling and flushed, with some excitement, and her beautiful hair was disarranged.

"Oh, Donovan," she cried, for she never called him "Downy." "I have heard that your mother is very ill, and they are quite alarmed about her. Sarah came in such a hurry for some bottle of my father's; but I was afraid to let her have it, for they have no idea how to use it. Don't you think you had better run for Doctor Yallop? They won't let me in to ask them, and I am afraid to go for him without orders."

"No, Kitty, no. It is nothing more than usual. She would never see the doctor, if he came; and it [174]
would only set her off again. Frizzy knows best how to manage her. She has been in a great wax, even for her; and she is just a bit frightened, as she ought to be. It will do her a world of good, when she comes round, and teach her to take things easier. But you look quite startled, my dear child. Give me a kiss, and I will tell you all about it."

Kitty obeyed, though with some reluctance. One of her many charms was obedience, and she had often been told in the early days, that as they were now one family, to exchange the friendly salute was proper. But lately she had been surprised that Downy, after long indifference to its value, had returned to this form of expressing esteem.

The young man had meant to defer for a while a declaration which must be unwelcome at first. But he felt sure now that the first thing his mother would do, as soon as she was well enough, would be to fall on the poor maiden about it, and put it in the most outrageous way. Much better for his cause that he should speak of it himself, and win perhaps some credit for his defiance of Kitty's natural foe. He was always bold in word and deed, and now he spoke with as little fear as grace.

"You must have seen, my dear, that lately I have been growing very fond of you. You have seen that I always take your part when people go to bully you. And why do you suppose I do it? Why, because I am so fond of you."

"Thank you, Donovan. I have often thanked you in my mind, though not in words. Placed as we are, it is quite right that we should be fond of one another."

"Oh, I don't mean that sort of thing at all. My mother married your Governor; but that would only make it natural that we should hate one another. And there is no love lost between you and Frizzy, or Jerry either, so far as that goes. What I mean is that I am fond of you, as—as a fellow is of his sweetheart. And I mean to marry you, indeed I do, as soon—why, as soon as you like almost."

Poor Kitty looked at him, as if he must be joking; or if it were not that, he must have taken too much wine, as he did sometimes, especially when he had been much with Sir Cumberleigh.

"How provoking you are, Kitty! There, sit down. You will get used to the idea in about five
minutes. Why, there's nothing surprising in it, I should think. Though you may have thought that [175]
I was looking higher. But I have always had my own peculiar views. I can do without money, and rank, and all that. And I have taken a real fancy to you. This is enough to prove it, don't you think? Give us your flipper, as that old rogue says; for I mean business, upon my word I do. And I fancy it won't stick too much in your gizzard, that the old woman rages, like a tiger, against it."

"I can scarcely believe that you mean this. It is utterly impossible; I don't know how people take such things; but to me it is simply horrible. Never speak of it again, if you wish me to speak to you. Promise me never to speak of it again."

"Very well. Settle it so, if you like. At any rate, for the present. You have got hold of some queer ideas, I suppose. High Church crotchets, or some such rubbish. You will come to think better of it, by-and-by."

“And by the holy poker, she shall be glad to do so,” he muttered to himself when she was gone; “We will try a bold stroke, my pretty dear; and you shall come on your knees to me, to marry you.”

CHAPTER XXIX.
A FINE TIP.

THERE were many worse men in the world even then—and the number increases with population—than the gallant Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot. The principal source of the evil in him was that he knew not wrong from right. If he could have seen the difference, he might have been tempted by the charms of virtue; but as that pure lady had never found her way into his visiting list, it would be unfair to blame him for neglecting her. He came of good family—in one sense—and a very bad family, in another. For several generations, the Hotchpots had verified their names, by making mixture of all moral doctrine. And the air of a county, where the world is flat and oozy, may have helped to bring high and low to one dead level.

That speculation is beyond the mark; though as everything is material now, it may justly be accepted in plea for him. What is more to the purpose, and less of problem, is the plain truth that evil blood was in his veins, and there had never been anything to purify it. In his early days, the [176] influence of a strong, clear-headed, and resolute wife, lifting him into self-respect, and sweetening his paltry bitterness, might have saved him from his vile contempt, and made a decent man of him. And such a chance had once been his; but he cast it by through his own foul conduct, and it never came again. The lady married a better man, who was able to lead her, as well as be led; and the man she had escaped made a bitter grievance of his own miscarriage.

Now, he was one of that wretched lot—the elderly rakes, without faith in women, respect for themselves, or trust in God. Even the coarser advantages of life, the vigorous health, the good-will of the world, the desire to rise, the power of wealth—all these had failed him; and he was left with nothing but a feverish thirst for excitement, and a dreary desire to say spiteful things, which his meagre wit seldom gratified.

For this he was hated by Downy Bulwrag, who also despised him for aping the vices which are so much easier to youth. However, it was Downy's object now to ingratiate himself with this "old party;" and Downy had long acquired the art of quenching his sentiments in his object. So he took a cab, that very night, when his mother's hysterics were drowned in Cognac, and presented himself at Sir Cumberleigh's house, in a small square of South Kensington. He had not been encouraged to call here often; for the Baronet (who generally misplaced his shame) was shy of the fact that he had let the better part of his house to a fashionable artist, while he occupied the smaller rooms himself. The visitor found him just returned from his club, and by no means in an amiable frame of mind, for the cards had been adverse, and he could ill afford to lose. And he did not scruple to show his annoyance, at this late and unexpected call.

But Downy drew an easy-chair near the fire, gave a kick to the Hotchpot terrier (who with sound instinct had made a dash at him), and spread his fat legs along the fender, without saying a word, till his host had done the grumbles. And he had his revenge in his own crafty way, for he gazed round the room, noting everything, and lifting his yellow eyebrows now and then, or pursing up his big lips, and stroking his moustache, as if he were conning how much—or rather how little, the pictures, and furniture, would fetch.

"Been any auctioneers in your family?" Sir Cumberleigh's temper was never very good, and this appraisement of his chattels made it very bad indeed. His intention had been to have a quiet [177] smoke, and his nip or two of cordial by the fire, while he went through his tablets by the latest lights. He had thrown off his wig, to cool his brain, and had no time to clap it on again. Frank and cheerful baldness is no disgrace to any man, and sometimes adds a crown of goodness to a pleasant face; but this gentleman had not that reward of gentle life; and his bulbous pate, when naked, was what ladies call "horrid." His restless and suspicious eyes, and sneering mouth with lines that looked as if nature had constructed channels for the drainage of foul words, and the sour crop of blotches on his welted cheeks, were more than enough to countervail expansive brow, and noble dome of curls, if there had been any. There were none; and even Downy Bulwrag thought—"What a bridegroom for a lovely girl!"

"You are inclined to cut up rough, old boy;" said Bulwrag, after listening long to much that never should be listened to. "Something disagreed with you? It must be so, as we get on in life. Well, tell me, when you are certain that you have done exploding. No hurry. Pleasure first; business afterwards."

Sir Cumberleigh carried on a little more with his condemnation of all mankind, just to show that he was not at all impressed with this aspect of the younger man. Then his temper prevailed, as the other kept quiet; and he said—"Out with your business, if there is any!"

"I don't suppose it matters much to you. You are rolling in money, after going down to your audit, and all that sort of thing. You might like to invest a cool five hundred in a loan to me, at five per cent. Do it, and earn my everlasting gratitude."

"You have something good to tell me, or to put me up to. Upon my soul, Bulwrag, I shall be glad to know it. I have three bills falling due to-morrow. I am on my last legs, and that makes me so grumpish."

"You have been uncommonly grumpish, Pots; and I am not at all sure that I shall tell you anything. I like to do a kindness to a friend; but you hardly seem to be quite that, just now."

"My dear fellow, you never go by words. You have seen too much of the world for that. The real

friend is the man who shows you his rough side. I do that to you, Downy, because I like you."

"Then you can't have much left for your enemies, my friend. But my rule is to take things as I [178]
find them, and the same is the golden rule, according to the law and prophets. I will render good for evil, Pots; I will tell you of a nice little windfall for you, if you have the pluck to keep up with luck."

"Downy, I am up for anything. All has been against me for the last ten days, and I should like to have my revenge of it. It would take a big fence to pound me."

"There's a big pot of money the other side," said Downy, counting slowly on his fingers; "eighteen and sixteen make thirty-four, and twelve makes forty-six, and Chilian eight thousand four hundred, with the market down, should be worth another twelve, when they go up. But put it at present quotations, and you have between fifty-four and fifty-five thousand pounds, payable on the nail, and no trustees. It would come in pretty well to start with, Pots, after paying the fellows that know no better. And you might lend me the odd four thousand upon good security. I would give you eight per cent., old fellow, and pay you like a church."

"What is it, Downy? Or are you trying hocus? Nothing of that sort ever comes my way now. I have been on the wrong horse ever since last Goodwood. And now again at Lincoln. Those cursed tips have tipped me over."

"It has nothing to do with turf, or tips. What do you think of our little Kitty coming into sixty thousand pounds, for it's worth every penny of that, they say, and nobody to look after it, but the lucky cove that marries her?"

"Sweet Kitty! My sweet Kitty Fairthorn; I adore her for her own sake, without a crooked sixpence. But it sounds too good to be true, my boy. Take a suck, and tell us all about it."

"The beauty of it is that she doesn't know a word of it;" Bulwrag began to unfold his roll of fiction very recklessly, which gave it the crackle and flash of truth. "And if we can keep her in the dark, for another ten days or fortnight, why, a bit of pluck and gumption, and there the job is done! You know that my excellent mother considers it one of her strictest duties to open all the letters that come to the house for the younger and feminine branches. She keeps the key of the letter-box, and no one else is allowed to go near it. When I first came back, she began to open mine; but I stopped that, quick sticks, I can tell you."

"She is a strong party, and no mistake. I hope she won't want to come and cock over my crib, [179]
when I am spliced to the heavenly Kitty. I should get the wrong side of the sixty thousand pounds."

"Well, this morning there came a little billet for our Kitty, sealed, and got up, and looking no end confidential. The Ma wasn't going to stand that, of course; it set up her hackles that any one should try it. She took it to her own room, and found it so important that it was not right to let the owner know a word about it, at least until the subject had been well considered. But she called me into council, and my advice was to keep it dark, and make the most of it. And here is all there is of it.

"It seems that the old scientific bloke had a sister in the wilds of Northumberland, to whom he gave fearful offence, years ago, by blowing her cat up, or something of that sort, and she vowed he should never have sixpence of hers. But being better off for cash than kindred, which is not the usual state of things, she has left all her belongings to his daughter, straight away, in the lump, with nothing to pay but duty. Her father will be her trustee by law, I suppose, until she is of age or marries. But if she marries, without having it settled, which her father of course would insist upon, why, there you are—the happy man is master of the money, though she may go in for a post-nuptial, or what ever they call it, kind of settlement."

"Downy, my boy, it sounds too good to be true," said Sir Cumberleigh, looking at him doubtfully, but the young man's great bulky face and round forehead were as tranquil as an orange; "who are the lawyers? It came, of course, from the old lady's men of law. Was it a London or a country firm? I don't want to be too inquisitive, you know. But in a manner of this sort—"

"The less you know the better, so long as you are convinced. You were eager to marry the girl without a penny; and what motive can I have for deceiving you? In fact, I think I have been a fool to tell you. We could let her get the money, and what chance would you have then? Plenty of young swells, with rhino of their own, would be after such a pretty girl with sixty thousand pounds. And I will tell you two things, since you seem to doubt me. In the first place, I shall insist upon ten thou. advanced upon my note of hand at five per cent. And again for your comfort, my mother since she heard of it won't hear another word of you, beloved Pots, unless I can bring her [180]
round to it. She would naturally prefer a young soft fellow, with a fine place of his own, where she can go and govern, when she wants a little change, as she governs everywhere. So that will be all you get, old chap, by doubting yours truly. Good-night, my boy. I am sorry that I ever told you."

"Don't be so hot, my friend. I never doubted you. All that I doubted was my own good luck. And upon my soul, Downy, if you had had such luck as I have, you would never place any more faith in it. Here, my dear fellow, have a Don Pintolado; there's not such another weed to be got in London. And here's a rare drop of old brandy, such as perhaps you never tasted. It's as old as the hills, and as soft as oil. You must never put a drop of water with it. It stands me in two hundred

and forty shillings a dozen, and I have never let any one see it but myself. What do you think of that now? Roll it on your tongue. The best liquor you ever nosed is not a patch upon it. You are a good judge, give me your opinion."

"I never tasted anything like it, Pots. Where the devil do you get it from?"

"Ah, I'll put you up to that some day. But now let us have a little quiet chat. You need not be afraid of it. Have another glass. You see I always take it in a very thin dock-glass, made on purpose for it. If it had not been for that I should have gone to the dogs long ago with all my troubles. However, let us hope for an end of them soon. Fifty thou. would set me straight, and I could get back the old place, and give up fast life, and turn quiet Country Squire. It is time for me to get out of all this racket, and stick to one or two solid friends like you. Now tell me, old chap, exactly what I am to do. I'll give you any undertaking you think fit. Only, of course, we must keep it dark."

"Ah, and not be in any over-hurry;" Donovan Bulwrag breathed rings of blue serenity from the grey-edged auricula of his fine cigar, and then said slowly, "I remember some little box you used to have, about two miles beyond Hounslow."

"Yes, and I have got it still, because nobody would have it. They wanted to turn it into a poultry-breeding place when that craze was on, but they could not pay deposit. At any rate they didn't; and I have it still on hand."

"All right. Have it aired. It will be very pretty, now that the broom and all that is coming on again. In another week or so the nightingales will be about. Could you have a snugger place on [181] earth to pass your honeymoon in?"

"Twig," said Sir Cumberleigh, "twig's the word, with a little quiet prodding, and a special license. But won't she cut up rough, my boy? We must not have abduction. It has been done in my family; but the times were better then."

"Kitty is not the one to cut up rough. My mother has drilled her a lot too well for that. And if I come with her, and you are not seen till the last, there can be no talk about abduction. All little particulars must be left to me. You can let me your crib, if it eases you down, and produce the agreement, if there is any row. But there won't be any row. You know the rule with women—smoothe over everything, when the job is done."

"I should like to think over it a little, Downy. I am not like a boy who has the world on his side, when he does a rash thing in his passion. The world has been very hard on me, God knows; and I am rather old to give it another slap in the face. Why shouldn't I marry the charming Kitty, with her mother's consent, and all done in proper trim? Then we could go down to my old house, and have bonfires, and bells, and roast an ox, and all that. And she could have a settlement, why not? My lawyers could do it, so as to leave me the tin?"

"Try it on that way, if you like. How can it matter to me, beloved Potts? There are two little stodges for you to get over. Would Kitty ever look at you if she knew she had this money? And my mother will not hear of you, since she saw that letter."

"That devil of a woman!" cried the other rather rudely, forgetting that her son received the statement of the fact. "She has always had her own way, and she always will. Thank God that she never married me. Perhaps she would have done it if she had seen me soon enough. If she has turned against me it is all up, without some such lay as yours, my boy. Not a dog can tuck his ear up without her knowing why. You could never get your sister down there, without her knowing it."

"She is not my sister," said Downy very hotly; "or do you think I would let her marry such a man as you? But the devil of a woman, as you politely call her, goes down to my Grandfather in Wales next week, and takes my two sisters with her."

"Oh, then the coast will be clear, my dear boy! That makes all the difference. You might have told me that, half an hour ago. I see my way out of it now, clear enough. The main point will be to [182] keep the country lawyers quiet. Unless they get an answer to their letter pretty sharp, they'll be sending up a junior partner, or their London agent, for fear of some other lawyer's finger in the pie. That would upset your pot. How are you to help it?"

"Nothing easier. For a few days at any rate. And that is why the job must be tackled pretty smart. We shall send an acknowledgment in Kitty's name to-morrow, saying that she wishes to consult her father's lawyers—name of the firm of course omitted—from whom Messrs. So-and-so will hear very shortly; and that will keep them quiet for a bit. Those fellows make a point of never hurrying one another."

"Capital! I know what they are too well. By-the-bye, did you tell me the name of the gang in Northumberland? I might make a note of it. Though I must not let them guess that I have heard of them, of course."

"You would cut your own throat, if you did, Pots. I can tell you, if you like, and get the letter perhaps to show you. But you had better be able to swear, if there should be any rumpus, that you had never so much as heard of them. And then, if you were pressed, you might admit that you had heard some vague rumour, but paid no attention to it, as it came from a source you had very little faith in."

“Certainly. I could swear that without much harm. Don’t show me the letter; I don’t want to see it. Have another drop of this wonderful stuff. It wouldn’t hurt a child. It is as soft as milk.”

“No, not a drop. I am too late as it is. You had better keep away from our place for the present. It would not be so well for you to receive the sack, you see, before the great stroke comes off, next week. And the mother might be apt to administer it, in her hasty way, you know. Send a line to say you have got a cold, or something. And then run down to the cottage, and begin at once to get it into spick and span. I shall come to you every night, and report progress. Sixty thousand is a good stake to run for.”

“But when is it to be, Downy, when is it to be? My nerves are not what they used to be. And I shall not get a wink, till the race is pulled off.”

“Oh yes, you will, if you go in for hard work. How can I tell the day, till I have seen the mother off? The sooner the better, when she has made tracks. There’s an old buffer coming to see the [183] house, and keep our Kitty in order. But I can do what I like with her. She’s smashed taters after the real thing. Be of good cheer, Pots; I should say next Wednesday, or Thursday, would see you a reformed and happy character. Ta, ta, and remember me in your prayers.”

“I say, Downy, just one little thing,” said Sir Cumberleigh, recalling him with some hesitation. “You must not be offended, old fellow; but I should be so much obliged, if you would drop your habit of calling me ‘Pots’ so frequently. It sounds so personal; although of course it has no application to me as yet. Why, you might even do it before your sister, and then it would be so—so unromantic. You see what I mean; no offence, you know.”

“I tell you I won’t have her called my sister. She is no sister of mine, nor in any way connected. If you call her my sister any more, I shall look upon it as an insult.”

“A very great compliment, I should say,” Sir Cumberleigh pondered, when his visitor was gone; “what the deuce makes him get in such a wax about it? A fellow with such a batter-pudding face might be proud to call such a girl his sister. Oh, I see why it is, what a thick I must be! If she were his sister, he would be ashamed to be a party to this little plant. I don’t like the look of it, and that’s all about it. But such a poor devil must not stick at trifles. Sixty thousand pounds would set me on my legs again. And it is not to be had by lying down and rolling. And the sweetest girl in London, too without any cheek or high faluting. I can soon break her in to any pace I choose. I am not a bad fellow, only so unlucky. If this comes off, I’ll go to church every Sunday. But I’ll take uncommon good care all the same that Master Johnny Dory does not collar too much of the rhino. I hate that young fellow, he is just like a yellow slug crawling in a mop.”

CHAPTER XXX.
BASKETS.

There are ever so many kinds of baskets used in Covent Garden Market, some of good measure, and some of guess, and some of luck altogether, like a Railway's charges. They come from every quarter of the globe; and the pensive public may be well pleased if it gets a quarter of its bargain. [184] A bushel may hold a peck more or less, according to the last jump made upon it. The basket-makers are by no means rogues, because the contents can make no difference to them. They turn out strong ware, at a very high price, so many inches in width, and so many in depth, according to tradition. Then they pat it, and pitch it down, and paint the name upon it; and their business ends, except to get their money. And of this they never fail; for the grower, as a rule, grows honesty as his chief, and often only crop. But after that basket's virgin fill, how many meretricious uses does it undergo! The poor grower, who has paid half a crown for it, never uses it again perhaps, until it is worn out, and comes back to him, with a shilling demanded for his name; when it has spent all its prime in half the shops and trucks of London. Here it has passed through a varied course of fundamental changes, alternately holding three pecks and five according to its use for sale or purchase. At first it was gifted with a slightly incurved bottom, not such a deep "kick" as a Champagne-bottle has—which Napoleon III. vainly strove to abolish—but a moderate and decent inward tendency. Here the rogue spies his vantage ground. Before filling it for sale, he lays it flat upon its rim, mounts upon the concave eternal, and with a few heavy jumps of both heels produces a bold and lofty internal dome. Then he stuffs up the cavity round the side with a tidy lot of hay, or leaves, or paper, and lo you have three pecks as brave as any four! But is he going to buy by that measure? He lays it firmly upon its base, gets inside, and jumps with equal vigour. The accommodating bottom becomes concave, and he brings home five pecks running over into his bosom.

As honest producers, we know nothing of all this—except by the mark of hobnails on our wicker, when it comes home with no integrity left—our business is to fill our baskets, whenever the Lord permits us, keeping the top fruit certainly not worse than the bottom, for that would be Quixotic, but not a bit better than human nature, and the artistic sense, demand of us. And there have been few greater calumnies of recent years—though the world grows more and more calumnious—than to call my Uncle Orchardson "Corny the topper," as if he covered rubbish with a crown of red or gold! A topper he was; but it was only thus—he topped all his customers in honesty.

This explanation was necessary, and should have been offered long ago. But I thought it as [185] well to let people see first from his character, as given by himself and me, that he required no such vindication. If ever there was a man who gave good change for sixpence, ay, and took good care to get it, too, you will own it was my Uncle Corny.

However, he used for inferior fruit, such as windfalls, or maggoty, or undersized stuff, a cheaper and commoner form of basket, such as the dealers call "Sallies." These are of no especial measure, but hold on the average about half a bushel, some of them much more, and some a little less, and there is no name marked upon them. They come, for the most part, with foreign fruit in them, and are often thrown by, when emptied; and there are men about the market who collect these, perhaps for nothing, or at any rate for very little, and sell them to the fruit-growers, or the dealers, at prices which vary according to their quality and the demand for them, etc. They can often be had at a shilling a dozen, at which price they are cheap for any use; and at times they are not to be got under sixpence apiece, but perhaps the average is twopence. They are deeper than baskets of measure, and not so wide, also made of much lighter wicker, and often full of stubs inside, which would never do for best or second fruit; in fact, they are like a waste-paper basket, such as one often sees under a table.

When I had been gone, at least a fortnight, I should say—though I could not be certain about dates just then—to my Aunt Parslow's at Leatherhead, my uncle having done all his grafting by himself, for there always was some to do every year, took a general look at his trees, and found that the buds looked as promising as ever he had seen them. He was rather surprised at this, not at all on account of the long hard winter, but because of the very cold wet summer and autumn which had preceded it. The trees would be full of unripe wood, and sappy shoots shrivelled by the frost, and scurfy bark, and perished boughs, and general discomfort, and sulkiness. At least everybody said that was how they ought to be, and my uncle had never contradicted them, preferring a little pessimism, because it is always the safer side. And probably upon cold, wet soils, all the evils predicted had succeeded, which would make it all the better for the places where they failed. So that my uncle, while sympathizing warmly with all his brother growers in their bad look-out, shook his head about his own, and smoked his pipe, and would not speak of his chickens, much less count them.

But, when the sun began to get the upper hand of the days again, and the spring was looking [186] through the hedge and into the hearts of the trees almost, and the earth seemed ready to lift its breast, as a maiden does for her flowers to be fixed, and every shrub that showed a leaf had got a bird to sing to it—for a time, the best man found it hard to make the worst of everything; and even the often frozen grower hoped not to be frozen again this year. For the later an English fruit-tree is in showing its white or pink challenge to the sky, the less is the chance of unheavenly heaven descending with a white blow, and smiting all to utter blackness. The ground had been frozen to a depth of twenty inches by the rigour of enduring frost; and after that the push of

spring takes a long time to get down the line.

“Tompkins,” said my uncle, who was poking about with a spade, to kill snails in some Iris roots, for no sort of winter makes much difference to a snail; drought in their breeding-time is all they care for much—“Tompkins, it is high time to be looking up our baskets. In another month, those fellows will be sticking it on again.”

“That ’em will,” the long man replied. He was short of tongue, as a very tall man, by some ordinance of Nature, almost always is—perhaps because his fellow-creatures’ hats have endangered it while it was tender.

“You had better go over and see old Wisk, at three-quarter day to-morrow. You can have the tax-cart, and just see what he has. He is bound to have a good stock now, after all the long frost and snow, on hand. And he is pretty sure to be hard up. In June he begins to grin at us. Get the figure for bushels, and halfs, by the gross, but don’t order any, until I know. But if he has picked up any Sallies, you might bring a gross at a shilling a dozen. I will give you twelve shillings; and I’ll be bound the old rogue will be glad of a bit of ready money.”

“All right, governor.” Selsey Bill offered up one gaunt knuckle to his hat, which had no brim to accept it; for he had improved in sense of manners, since his wages were advanced. He had been put on, when the days pulled out, to twenty shillings a week, with a title, not conferred, but generally felt, of foreman of the outdoor work. He had a shilling apiece for his children now every week, and another for his wife, and two to think about all Sunday. And my firm belief is that if he could have earned another by wronging us, he would have made the tempter swallow it.

“But mind one thing,” said my uncle strongly, for he found it ruinous to relax; “your wife’s [187]
brother I believe it is, that keeps the *Crooked Billet* beyond the heath, not a hundred yards from old Wisk’s place. You need not pull *Spanker* up, to give Mrs. Tomkin’s love, you know.”

“Right you are, governor. What wicked things you do put into a fellow’s head!” My uncle grinned, and so did Bill, but with his long back turned, and his hand upon his spade.

On the following afternoon, Bill acted with the truest sense of honour. As he approached the *Crooked Billet*, the wind (for which he was not to blame) brought him the burden of a drawling song, drawled as only a Middlesex man—who can beat all the North and even West at that—can troll his slow emotions forth. “Oh, I would be a jolly gardener, I would be a jolly gardener; with my pot and my pipe, for my swig, and my swipe; and the devil take the rest, say I!” Bill knew every nose that was singing this, and every fist that was drumming on the table. But such were his principles, that instead of pulling up, he let the reins hang loose, and even said “Kuck” to old *Spanker*.

Although we had owned him so long, this horse had never forgotten his ancient days, when he may have belonged to a brewer perhaps. For he never could pass any hostelry of a cool and respectable aspect, with a tree and a trough in front of it, but that he would offer a genial glance from the corner of one blinker, and make a short step, and show a readiness to parley. He did more than this now, for he pulled up short, and tossed up his nose, and accosted with a whinny a horse of more leisure, who was standing by the door.

“Wants to wash his mouth out. So do I. But I’ll be hanged if I’ll go inside all the same.” Reasoning thus, Selsey Bill got down, for he saw a wisp of hay by the trough just fitted to dip in the water and cool the muzzle. But before he could hoist his long legs into the cart, as he positively meant to do, a buxom short woman had his arm enclasped with two red hands, and was looking up at him, with words of reproach, but a smile of good will.

“It ain’t no nonsense, I tell you, Bill,” she exclaimed in reply to his soft remonstrance; “come in you shall, and have a word or two inside. I’ve got something particular on my mind. And you’ll never forgive yourself, if you goes on like this.”

What could Tompkins do? His wife’s brother’s wife was Godmother to nearly half his children, [188]
and she had a bit of money of her own, and no children of her own to leave it to. “Well, only half a minute then,” he said, to ease his conscience; “and not a drop of beer, you know. Leastways, not till I’ve been to old Wisk, over yonner.”

“Why, the old chap’s inside! Seems a Providence to me, because now you be bound to come in and see him. But I want to talk separate to you, Bill. You have got such a head you know, such a way up!”

The landlady took Bill to her own room round the corner of the house, so that no one saw him, while Spanker was linked to the post and had some hay. And she told him such a story that his little black eyes, which tried to look at one another over his great nose, twinkled, and flashed, and were full of puzzled wrath. Then she brought him a pint of mild ale, for she knew that his mind worked slowly, and required to be refreshed.

“Never heered tell of such a job in my born days. Couldn’t ’a believed it, if it wasn’t you, Eliza. You was always truth itself. But how can you be sartin the young girl as told you is quite right in her mind?”

“Well, I can’t be certain, Bill, for she is a stranger about here. But she looks right enough, and she was genuine flustrated. And more than that, there’s several things that comes to back her up like. What shall we do, Bill? That’s the point.”

“Sure enough, so it is. What does Teddy say to it?”

“Well, you know what he is. If he see a murder doing, I believe he’d shut his eyes and ears, and whip round the corner. And besides that, he is never no good after two o’clock; and I only heard of this about an hour ago. So, to tell you the plain truth, I haven’t said a word about it. And it’s no good to tell him nothing till to-morrow morning. Not that he takes so very much, you know. But his constitution is that queer. If you had not come by, I was just making of my mind up to put on my shawl, and step off for the police. Though it’s three miles to go, and then most likely never find them.”

“And if you did, I don’t believe they’d take a bit of notice. Leastways, not, if they was disposition’d same as ours. Got never a Justice of the peace round here, some countries they calls them a Magistrate?”

“Nobody nearer than Colonel Bowles, and Ted was saying yesterday that he was gone from home. No, Bill, for all I can see, there’s not a soul to move a finger, unless ’tis you and me.” [189]

“But what can us do? I can’t see no call for us to meddle if policemen won’t. Enough to do with my own kids, sister ’Liza, and nobody but me to help ’em. Well, I must be jogging.”

“No you won’t be jogging, and you’ve got to see Wisk. Where’s your common sense, Bill? Can’t you see that he’ll stick a shilling on to everything, if they send down here to fetch him for you. No man can abide to be disturbed with his glass, and he expects a lot of money if he gives it up. That’s the way all those ranters thrive; their beer would cost three halfpence, and they gets sixpence for not having it, and has it on the sly in their own beds. Go and see old Wisk, but not a word of what I told you. Only you must come back to me when you have done what you want with him. No business of mine any more than yourn, and perhaps the best way to let things go by law, and not be called up and lose your time, and have to pay for it, and think yourself lucky if they don’t fine you too. That is all one gets for not winking at a thief, Bill.”

The truth of this was too manifest to require any acknowledgment; and Tompkins went to see Mr. Wisk in the taproom, and after much discussion drove him to his premises, there to see and deal about the wicker stuff. But he only got half a gross of Sallies, which proved a very lucky thing afterwards, for Wisk had no more, or at any rate said so, not liking the price perhaps, for they were good substantial stuff, which also proved a happy thing before very long. Then Selsey Bill touched *Spanker* up, for it was getting on for dark; but he did not like to pass the *Crooked Billet* without calling, because he was proud of being a man of his word.

CHAPTER XXXI.
THE GIANT OF THE HEATH.

THERE is, or at least there used to be, along the back of Hounslow Heath, a lane, which leaves the great Western road on the right-hand side, and goes off alone. The soil is very poor and thin, and nothing seems to flourish much except the hardier forms of fir, and the vagrant manner of mankind. The winter winds and the summer drought sweep over or cranny into it; and a very observant man is needed to find much to talk about. [190]

But wherever a man or woman is, and whatever may be the season, one earnest cry arises in the bosom, and it is for beer. Those nobler beings who oust their British nature with foreign luxury, and learn to make belief of joy in the sour grape or the stringent still, are apt to forget, as perverts do, the solidity of the ancient creed. If a good or evil genius had stood by Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot, or even Downy Bulwrag, and whispered, "Have a firkin there of treble X, or Indian Pale," there might be now no chance for Bill to tell the things he had to tell.

When Tompkins, with his cart half full of Sallies piled like flower-pots, pulled up again at the wayside inn, he found it dark and lonely. The four jolly gardeners were gone home, or at any rate gone somewhere; Teddy, the landlord, was fast asleep by the kitchen fire, and would so remain till roused by the music of the frying-pan; they kept no barmaid, and the man who generally lounged about the stable was gone to have his lounge out somewhere else.

"Good-night, 'Liza," Bill shouted up the staircase, on the chance of the landlady hearing his voice; but instead of any answer her step was heard, and she turned the corner on him with her shawl and bonnet on.

"I couldn't leave it so," she said; "I don't know what come over me. But after you was gone my heart fell all a pitter-pattering. And such bad ideas come into my head—I never did! I could no more sleep this blessed night, without knowing more about that there business, than I could stand on my head and strike the hours like a clock. I may be a fool for it, and have to go before the Justices; but ease my mind somehow I must."

"'Liza Rowles," replied Selsey Bill, standing nearly two feet above her, but looking down with true deference, "if you feels that sort of thing, who am I to go again it? You are bound to have summat in your own mind, as was never put there for nothing, ma'am; and if it comes to that, why, so has I."

"Do you mean to say, Bill," asked Mrs. Rowles with awe, not of his height, for she was used to that, but of his thoughts coming just to her level, "that you has had queer ideas too, about what the little girl was a-telling me?"

"You have put it, 'Liza, in the very words as I should have put it in, if the Lord give me the power. But I leaves all that to my wife now. She can fit it up to meanin', and no mistake." [191]

"Very well, Bill, there's no more to be said. Off I goes with you, and you drives round by Struck-tree Cottage, as we calls it; not that we means to make tantrups, you know; but just to see how it looks, and ease our minds."

Mrs. Rowles cast a glance at the high step of the cart, for she was not so tall as she was tender; and Selsey Bill cast a glance at her, balancing in the fine poise of his mind, whether or no he should venture to offer, as it were, to lift her. But he saw that it would not be just to his wife, who might come some day to hear of it—for you never can tell what those women will let out,—so he whipped forth his knife, and cut the cord which bound a dozen Sallies into one spire, and fetching out a basket, set it down upon the rim; so that Mrs. Rowles (though of good weight and measure) taking that for her first rung went up without a groan.

"You take next turn towards Harlington, and go along quiet as you can, Bill;" these were her orders, when she had settled down with a clean sack beneath her on the driving-board. "And now shall I tell you what I believe? It may be wrong, of course; we all are liable to horrors. You feels that yourself, Bill, though a man with such a family get'th more opportunities, so to say?"

"And a wife," answered Bill; "her comes first to begin with."

"In course, her comes first in the regular way. A good and faithful wife, and the mother of seventeen. But without such luck as that, I knows what men is; and I say to you, Bill Tompkins, that they differs very much. I makes the very best of them, as is the duty of a woman, and leads to their repentance, when they has it in them. But most of them has not, without a word against my Teddy. And I say that this Lord Hopscotch here—if such is his name, being very doubtful—is up to some badness, having no belief of any one down this way to right it. Therefore you take that corner, Bill, and go on slowly till I tell you when to stop. Mind, I don't say I know what it is; but I can guess. We have had a many gay doings down this way, for all it looks so innocent, and perhaps for that same reason."

"What can 'em want with more childers, if that way inclined?" But the quiverful Bill dropped his essay on that subject; for there is much more bashfulness among poor people, than among their betters, on such topics of discourse. [192]

Presently they came to a dark, quiet elbow of the road, or rather of the track across the turf; for they had passed all stones and hedges now, and the wheels went softly upon the grass and

peat. A clump of Scotch firs, bowed by the west winds, overhung the way, and made it sombre as the grave. About a hundred yards before them was a low square building, on the verge of the heath, and surrounded with bushes and something that looked like a wooden palisade.

“That’s where it is. That is Struck-tree Cottage; the lightning come down and scorched the old oak.” Mrs. Rowles spoke in a whisper, as if herself afraid of it. “You see there’s a light in the parlour, Bill. That’s where the villains is, I do believe, and the poor lady locked away upstairs, maybe. Now you go forrard, and just peep in. They’ll never be capable of suspecting nothing; and everything will be black to them outside.”

It was quite dark now, without moon or stars. Spanker and the cart, which was painted brown, could scarcely be descried even twenty yards away, and the Sallies were of unpeeled osier. Bill handed the reins to his sister-in-law, and got down in his usual lanky style. Although he was a very hard-working fellow, nothing could drive him into quick jerks; for his joints were loose, and were often heard to creak, when the wind was in the east, and the air too dry.

“But if them cometh at me?” he asked with proper prudence, and a sense of his importance to three crowded rooms at home. “Why, I ain’t got so much as a stick to help me?”

“No fear, little Billy. Guilty conscience makes a coward. You need not let them see you. And if they do, why, they’ll take you for the Giant of the Heath—the old highwayman as was hanged in chains, not a hundred yards from here. My father seed him often; and when he fell down, he took to walking through the fuzz.”

“Oh Lor’, no more of that ’Liza! All my teeth be gone a-chatterin’. Give us a sack at any rate, if I meets he.”

Mrs. Rowles, who was not very happy herself, handed him a spare sack from the cart; and Bill Tompkins, with many glances right and left, and heartily wishing himself at home, set forth towards the cottage, walking very slowly, and carefully shunning every stick and stone that was visible on the brown, inhospitable earth. As he passed beneath the shattered tree, he looked up [193] with a shudder at the jagged fork, and naked stubs, and contorted limbs, expecting the dead highwayman to clank his ghostly chains. Then he stole on with more courage, for he was tolerably brave, at least as regarded fellow-beings in the flesh.

When he came to the fence, a low palisade of fir, he just lifted his long legs over it, without casting about for any gate or door. As he groped along the fence towards the house, he discovered a gate which appeared to be locked, and observing that the palisade was much higher there, he very wisely lifted this gate from its hinges, and left room for himself to slip through at the back, if pursued, and obliged to retreat in a hurry. Then he made his way stealthily through some low shrubs to the corner of the cottage, and considered things.

It was quite a small building, with only four windows in front, and a door with a little porch between them. Two windows were on the ground floor, and two above; the windows of the downstair rooms had outer shutters, or rather framed blinds of lattice-work, such as carpenters call “louvres.” These were closed and fastened; but from the one on the right of the porch a strong light came through the interstices of the blind, and streamed in narrow slices on the misty gloom outside. The horizontal laths were turned at such an angle, that a man of common stature could only see the floor between them; but Selsey Bill was almost a giant, and hearing loud voices in that lower room, he approached the window stealthily, and standing on tiptoe, applied one eye to the top of the framework of the blind, where he found a wide slit between the beading and first lath. Through this he could see nearly all that was inside, for the curtains hung back at the end of the pole. Also he could hear pretty well what was said, for the window-glass was thin, and the ceiling low.

There were only two men in the room, both lounging in shabby armchairs near the fire, and smoking, yet not looking peaceful. Tompkins was surprised at this, because he could never have his own black pipe, with the cheapest and strongest tobacco to puff, and his own bit of fire to dry his sodden feet, without feeling as if he could stand anything from any one, even to the theft of his very last halfpenny by his youngest boy Bob, who was bound to know better, with so many rascals in front of him. And these rich gentlemen (for so they seemed) were smoking a fine blue curly cloud, such as a poor man can only put his nose to, when the putty is gone from the glass [194] between him and his true superior.

Bill became deeply curious now. That gentlemen of such tip-top style, too grand almost for the world to carry, drinking rare stuff like the sun through church windows, and smoking (as if it was so much dirt) cigars such as Bill knew by memory—for he had picked up a pretty fair stump sometimes—that they should be hob-nob in this little room (no better than his own Uncle Tompkins had), yet not at all hob by nob soft and pleasant, and looking fit to fly at one another, for two peas—all this must mean something as was natural for police, if only they could be persuaded to do more than flap their white gloves in view of tricks that were nobby. Mr. Tompkins applied a dry rasp to his lips with his knuckles, well fitted for that operation, which had many times saved the mouth from evil issue. Then he listened and gazed intently; as no man can do, who has had his powers spoiled by the higher education.

“Then it quite comes to this,” said the gentleman whose face was in full view to Bill, though by no means a fair view; “that you mean to throw me over, after all my risk, and take the fair spoil for yourself. I have known a good many cool things in my time; but this by long chalks is the coolest.”

“Take it at that same temperature,” answered the larger and younger man, who was lolling back, with the roof of his system exposed to Bill, who perceived therein a likeness to the back of a yellow Skye dog who has not been combed very lately; “you have let yourself in for it, for the sake of filthy lucre; and, alas! it proves that I was entirely misinformed. Make the best of it, old man. You have rushed into a scrape. There is too much proof, I fear, that it is all your own doing. The law will be down upon you, and where is your defence? There is one way, and only one, to hush it up. The girl must marry one of us, after what has happened. She has not got a sixpence, and she is wild with rage. Disappoints me there, after all my mother’s lessons. Don’t think you could tame her, Pots; but feel sure that I could. Then here I step in, like the deuce from a machine, and magnanimously offer to make amends for my mistake. And instead of being grateful, you set to and slate me! Consider what a lot of that I shall have from the mother.”

“You can stand anything,” said the other, with a sigh; “but I am not as tough as I used to be; and a row in the papers brings the duns in by the dozen. The girl is as sweet a woman as ever [195] looked through a bridle. And I had set my heart upon her, when I thought she would have money. But I could not marry her like this, and be laughed at ever afterwards, for eloping with a pauper. Can’t you take her back to-night, and nobody the wiser? Then perhaps I can have her, in the proper course of things.”

“Impossible, you thick old Pots. She has not tasted bit or sup for four and twenty hours; and her face it is a show, as the old women say. No, it must be reeled straight off this time. You can hear her moaning now; that old woman is a fool, and the little girl a rogue, who would betray us, if she could. But we are all right here; and to-morrow the fair Kitty will accept me as her deliverer. We shall make short work of it, and you retire blameless.”

The other man began to growl, but Bill stopped not to hear him. His righteous soul was wild already, and his mercy flowed unstrained. Now and then there had come, as from an upper window, the sound of low sobbing, and the weariness of woe, when some human creature finds the whole world set against it, yet cannot get out of it to seek a better. Bill stepped quietly round the little porch, and stood beneath the window whence the sound appeared to come.

The window was over the kitchen, as it seemed, and the sill was about twelve feet from the ground. But the kitchen blind was down, and the firelight dull within. Tompkins laid his sack along the kitchen window-sill, and stepping on it softly, could just reach the stone at the bottom of the bedroom window. With a little groping he contrived to get one foot upon the branch of a pear-tree, which was trained against the house, and lifting his tall frame warily, he got his chin upon the level of the window-sill above. The whole aperture was barred with stout wire-netting; but the lower sash had just been lifted to throw something out, something white like an eggshell, that flew by as Bill drew back.

“Oh, you won’t have it, won’t you?” said a cross and cracky voice; and Bill saw by the light of a guttering tallow-candle, an old woman going towards a young one who lay on a low iron bed with brass knobs at the corners. “Well, you knows your own business best, and pretty airs you gives yourself. I tell you there ain’t nothing in it, but new-laid egg and good sherry wine, and you see me mix it up yourself. A pretty one you’ll be to go to church to-morrow, wi’out a bit of colour in your cheeks, or a bit of victuals in you. Cry, cry, cry, all the blessed day long, ’stead of being [196] proud to stand up with a rich gentleman! My patience with you are pretty well worn out, and a pretty dance you led me all last night! But I’ve got something in the kitchen as will force you for to swallow, something come a purpose this very day from Lunnon, and directions with it for the fractious folks. Now I try you fair once more, miss, if miss it is; and after that I try you foul, you see if I desn’t.”

But the lady, who lay with her face to the wall, and a mass of curly hair shining down her black dress, would not even look round, or make any reply, but just lifted one elbow, and then let it fall again.

“Very well! We’ll see. Just you wait ten minutes, while I has a bit to eat myself; and then we’ll try the little tickler. Nobody to thank but yourself, you know. If ever there was a cantankerous, sulky, self-willed young minx, and ungrateful to boot—”

The wicked old woman, went muttering from the room, leaving the window still open, and the candle flaring and smoking on the chest of drawers, but locking the narrow door behind her with a rusty squeak of key.

“Now or never,” thought Bill, who would have liked, deeply respectful as he was to the fair sex, to have taken that old hag by the throat. With one hand he got a good grasp of the sill, while he passed the other through the wire grating, and raised the sash a little higher, to attract attention. But the fair prisoner was too far gone in distress and despair to heed any light sound, or even a creak and rattle.

“Miss, Miss, if you please, young Miss!” Bill put his mouth, which would open as wide as almost any cottage window, as far in as ever it would go (for the wire was much in his way) and blew his voice in. But whether it was from the “wealth of her hair”—as all our best writers express it—or the action of the throat upon the ears (which may have been sobbed into deafness), there she lay like a log, and as if no Bill Tompkins had his heart throbbing only for the benefit of hers.

“Rat they women!” thought Bill to himself. “If you want ’em to hear, can’t make ’em do it. If you wants to keep a trifle from ’em, cut both your feet off, and walk upon your fanny-jowls. Here

goes, neck or nort!”

He had pulled out a big wall-nail with a heavy shred attached, and choosing a wide space of the wire-netting, he flung it so cleverly at the head oppressed with sorrow, that the owner jumped up, and looked about, and rubbed the eyes thereof.

“Hush, miss, hush, for the Lord’s sake hush!” whispered Bill, as if the first effect of feminine [197] revival must be the liberation of the tongue; “it’s only me, miss,—Bill Tompkins from Sunbury. Please to come nigher, miss, till I tell you.”

“I don’t understand. I seem lost altogether. They have locked me up here, and they may kill me, before I will do a single thing they want of me. What are you come for? And what makes you look at me? There is nobody to help me—not a person in the world.”

“Lor’ bless me, if this don’t beat cock-fightin’!” As she tottered towards the window, with both hands upon her head, the light of the candle shone into her dazzled eyes, weak and weary as they were with floods of tears; and she waved her fingers over them with a strange turn of the palm (which was deeply cupped), a turn quite indescribable, a bit of native gesture which was most attractive, and certain to be known again, though it might have seemed to pass unnoticed. “Miss, if I ever see two ladies in my life, you be Miss Kitty, our Kit’s sweetheart!”

“What is the good of a sweetheart to him? Don’t tell me anything, I can’t bear it. I was going to his funeral—his funeral, yesterday; and they put me in a carriage for the purpose; and they lost their way, so they said, and they brought me here. And instead of going to his funeral, I am to marry some one else. But I won’t do it. I’ll never marry any one but Kit; and Kit is dead, and gone to heaven.”

“The d——d liars! Did they tell you that?” cried Tompkins, as if that would never be my destination. “Our Kit, miss, is as alive as you be; though he have had a bad time of it, and be gone to Ludred now. We expects him home next week, we does. And proud he would be, Miss, to see you there afore him. There never were such a chap to carry on about a gal, leastways beg pardon, Miss, I means a fine young lady.”

He was talking thus, because she could not speak; which he had the human kindness to perceive. “Is it true?” she was able to ask at last; and he answered—

“True as Gospel. S’help me Taters, miss, it is!”

Then she knelt for a moment, to thank the Lord. But Bill said—“No time now, miss. Out of this you comes, this very minute, and home with me to Sunbury. Can’t get out of window. Took good care of that. Come out of door, and slip downstairs.”

“But she has locked me in,” cried Kitty, “and there are two dreadful men downstairs. I don’t [198] care what they do to me now, now I know what you have told me. Go away, while you can. They will kill you.”

“Just you go to that there door, and drive back the catch with this here knife. It’s nothing but a gallows staple; and a rap with the butt end will send it back, ten to one it will, miss. Put your handkercher over the lock, while you does it, and back it goes, if I know them locks. Have the can’le handy, to see where to hit. Then down to front door, and away to our cart. But don’t lose my knife, for the Lord’s sake. A sensible gal has always got two pockets.”

Kitty, with her strength revived by spirit, took the big knife with an iron butt, and easily drove back the bolt, for the staple was an open one. Then Bill descended, without any noise, while she slipped gently down the stairs, and in the porch he met her. The front door had been bolted, but she drew back the bolt, and Bill took her hand, and she stood outside.

“Halloa! What’s up?” cried a voice from inside, for the catch had closed again with a loud snap.

“Run, miss, run; while I stop these chaps,” shouted Bill, and she ran like a hare from a dog. For a moment or two Bill was able to hold the brass knob of the lock against the two from within; but presently it slipped from his hand, and the door flew open, and two men prepared to rush out. But Tompkins threw his sack at full length over the head of the foremost; and striking wildly down he came on his knees, and the other fell across him. Bill made off, like a shot, while they cursed one another; and before they were afoot again, he had slipped through the opening of the unhinged gate and pulled it after him. Then using his long legs rather slackly, but to great effect through the length of their stride, he took the struck tree for his landmark, and without thought of the ghost, soon had Kitty at his side, and they made off, hot foot, for the cart and Mrs. Rowles.

“Here you be, here you be!” shouted that good lady; “mind the ruts. The villains are after you.”

This was too true. Though they might not have owned that description of themselves, two hasty men, without even a hat on, were rushing about, bewildered by the darkness and their own excitement, and taking the wrong way more often than the right. They fell among the furze, and got patterns on their faces, and showed no gratitude to Nature for one of her best gifts. But presently they spied the white nose of Spanker, which was hanging down with wonder if he ever [199] should get home; and then they saw two figures in a hustle by the cart, and one was being helped in by the long stretch of the other.

“Stop thieves!” cried Sir Cumberleigh, who was dreadfully out of breath; and therefore perhaps he let the other form go first to stop them.

Then Bill turned round and faced them, and he said—“You get away! You ain’t got no right with this young leddy. And so help me God, I’ll smash you, if you offers for to touch her.”

He advanced with his great fists revolving like a windmill, that being our accepted view of the “art of self-defence.”

But Mrs. Rowles cried, “No, Bill!” while the other stood amazed at the height of his antagonist and his uncouth look; “don’t soil your hand with him. Clap this upon his poll.”

Before Downy could guess what was meant, he was basketed. A big taper Sally, full of sharp stubs inside, was clapped down upon his yellow head, and fixed there staunchly, by a heavy rap from Bill’s great hand upon its bottom. Roars of pain and stifled oaths issued from it faintly, and the wearer fell down upon the grass and rolled, like a squirrel in his wheel, or a dogfish in an eel-cruive.

“Little one for t’other!” cried the clever landlady; and in half a second Hotchpot was in the same condition.

“Good-night, Gen’lemen both,” shouted Bill, as he drove off. “You goes to trap Miss Kitty, and you gets trapped, by Miss Sally.”

Mrs. Rowles laughed so loudly at this piece of wit, that her husband vowed he heard her plainly at the *Crooked Billet*.

CHAPTER XXXII.
A DREAM.

"Come and see who we have got here," wrote my uncle, not quite grammatically; but the relatives are enough to puzzle any one who has not had Latin antecedents—if on the strength of good spirits I may venture upon a very ancient joke. I knew who it was; there could be no suspense or doubt. With those very brief words of his came a little note, in the hand that always made my hand shake.

"Darling Kit," it said; "I am so sorry to hear of your long and fearful illness. [200] But thank God you are getting better now, and will soon be as well as ever, I do hope. I cannot tell you what has happened, till you come, for it would only excite and worry you. It really seems as if there was something always to keep us from one another. But we must try to get over it, my dear; and if we keep our trust in a Good Providence, we shall. Your uncle is the kindest of the kind to me; and I am ever so much better, though I only came last night. I feel that I could wander all day long in these lovely gardens, with the blossoms, and the birds, and be as happy and as free from care as they are. But I am not to stay here, as your uncle thinks it better that I should have two pretty rooms at Widow Cutthumb's, which are to be let very reasonably indeed, and I mean to write to ask my father for the money. You must not come back one day sooner, on account of my being here; mind that, or I shall be very angry with you. This is not because I do not long to see you, for you know better than that, dear Kit; but because I want you to get quite well, which is a great deal more to me than my own health. And so it always should be, if people love one another. Give my best regards to your aunt, Miss Parslow, and tell her that I love dogs quite as much as she does. And I once had a dear little dog of my own, but he was taken from me. Now, mind what I say; for I will be obeyed; at any rate until I have to swear to the contrary, which is never carried out by the ladies nowadays. My dear dear, I shall be afraid to look at you. They tell me you are so different from what you were. And I get long wrinkles up and down my forehead, if I ever allow myself to think of it; and though I try not to do it, it will come back again. But never mind; you will be as strong as ever when you have a good kiss from

"Your own Kitty."

"Well, I call that something like a true love-letter;" my Aunt Parslow said, when she had contrived almost to compel me to show it to her, which I did not feel sure that I had any right to do. "That's a true woman, though I never saw her. She thinks of you ten times as much as of herself; and no man can pretend to say that he repays it; even when he happens to deserve it; which has never happened to any gentleman I knew. You write, and you talk, and you go on with fine words, till people who listen to you believe, that you mean to give up your own ways [201] altogether. And perhaps you do believe it, at the time, for you never know your own minds at all. But about three days of it—that's all there is. I know it from friends of my own; though, thank God, I had sense enough never to try it myself. And then it is, 'Mary, could you fill my pipe? It would be so sweet, dear, if you did it!' Or—'Louisa, I must have left my handkerchief upstairs. Did you happen to notice where I put it, dear?' And she is fool enough to run for it, and kisses him on the bottom step; and her life is a treadmill afterwards. Your Kitty is quite of that sort, mind. I can see it in every word she writes."

"Well, Aunt Parslow, and you would have been the same, if any gentleman had had the luck to offer you upon his altar."

"I believe I should," she answered, with a snap at first; and then she smiled slowly, and said, "No doubt I should, Kit. But try to be no worse than you can help with her."

If anything can rouse a lover's indignation—and there are too many things that do so—such a calm assumption of his levity and ferocity is the first to set it boiling. "What are you thinking of?" I asked, without even adding, "Aunt Parslow."

"I am pleased to see you in that state of mind," she continued; when gratitude alone preserved me, without even a half-glance at her twenty thousand pounds, from the murderous speech that was on my tongue. "But you are very young, Kit. You will come to know better, when you have had enough of this sweet Kitty. Enough very soon becomes too much. And then what do you do? You neglect them, and think that you are very good indeed, if you do no worse."

Miss Parslow was not at all a spiteful woman; even too much the other way, if that can be. And of such things she could have no experience, because she had never risked it. But being deeply hurt, I said—"You know best."

She turned back into the house, with all her dogs at her heels; for none of them cared a bit for the air of heaven, in comparison with their own food and footstools. And I rather hoped that she would come out, and say—"You have been very rude to me; get you back to Sunbury."

Being in a fine large frame of mind—though the frame was too large for its contents, I trow—what did I do, but pull out my Kitty's letter, and begin it all again; just as if every word of it were

not in my heart already? But it adds sometimes to the satisfaction of the heart, to be assured once more by the eyes and brain, that they knew what they were doing, when they brought it the good news. [202]

The valley of the Mole was very lovely, in this flush of the fair Spring-tide. Bend after bend, bud after bud, tint upon tint, all as soft to the eye as the sense of them is to the spirit within; with the twinkle of the sun stealing through them shyly, as a youth, in the morning of his love, quivers as he glances at the beauty of his maiden. All these delights double their enchantment to the weak, as the lights of heaven multiply, when the eyes are full of tears.

Jupiter (who was the greatest light, at least of the earth, to Miss Parslow) ran up and sniffed at me, and said "Look out!" as clearly as the dog of a most observant and genial writer has learned to say it—up to the last advices. And after him came his mistress, no longer didactic, but deprecative. The beauty of woman is that they change so rapidly. Who does not love a Kaleidoscope?

"I have been thinking over your affairs," she said, that she might seem consistent; "and I find my first opinion quite confirmed. The moment I knew what your condition was, I said—as you must remember, Kit—'There is only one thing to do, and the sooner we get it done the better.' I will not place myself under any obligation to Mr. Henderson, though I feel that he has behaved very well, in not coming over to bother me. I have sent down and ordered the fly with a pole—I forget what they call it, I daresay you know—and I have ordered the green room to be got ready. She must not think at all of her complexion in the glass. It will be as right as ever, when she gets downstairs."

"I have no idea what you mean, Aunt Parslow. But you must not be put out, because I was always slow."

"And they talk of the masculine mind! Oh dear, any girl of your age would have known in a second. There is such a place as Leatherhead. Isn't there now?"

"Beyond a doubt. And you the first lady in it."

"Very well. And there is such a place as Sunbury, and a road between them, though not at all a good one. Well then, at Leatherhead there is a young man, crotchety, grumpy, whatever you like to call him, but horribly stubborn, and possessed with one idea. And at Sunbury there is a young lady to be found, very little better, I daresay, and possessed with the same idea, only upside down, as women are supposed to see everything. They have got it into their stupid heads, that they cannot live without one another. It would cost more to take the young man to her, and perhaps he would never come back again. It is cheaper to fetch the young lady to him; though it can't he done under a guinea. And the fly with two horses will start in half an hour." [203]

I told her she was the best woman in the world; and she answered that I was a hypocrite, yet seemed pleased with my hypocrisy. Then we had a debate whether Kitty would come, in which I maintained the negative, for the sake of being convinced, not against my will.

"You are a perfect stupe," said my aunt, with sound judgment; "you don't know what a woman is, half so well as *Jupiter*. Not to talk of affection, or any of that stuff, a woman thinks ten times as much as a man does of the wickedness of wasting money. If I went myself, she would think I came for a drive, and her conscience would be easy. If I sent one horse, she would hesitate a great deal, if she did not want to come. But when she sees two horses and an empty carriage, do you think she would let the man get all the money for nothing? It would take four horses going the other way, to prevent her jumping in and saying, 'Well, I suppose I must.' I shall write her a very pretty note, of course. You had better not be well enough to send anything but your love."

I was only afraid that Uncle Corny might take it as rather a slur upon him, to have his new visitor stolen like this. But Miss Parslow (who was always extremely desirous to have her own way, when her mind was made up) declared that she would make that all right with him. And so she did by reasoning which I did not try to penetrate, and which she put vaguely in her note to him. For it was something about clothing, and deficiency of wardrobe, which men cannot understand, and are impressed with readily, when the duty of paying for it falls on some one else.

"Not that I intend to pay," said Miss Parslow, in confidence to me, though my uncle was led by her letter to a contrary conclusion; "but my credit is good in Leatherhead. I shall get a few things of a becoming style and tone for her, and have the bill made out to Professor Fairthorn. Messrs. Flounce and Furbelow may have only got one window, but they get their goods direct from Paris; and I see from their circular they expect a large consignment of very chaste articles, and the latest mode, to-morrow. It will be most fatiguing at my time of life. But if I like the girl, as I know I shall, I can scarcely refuse her the benefit of my judgment." [204]

"I think I shall go down the hill a little way, and see what they have got in the window now," I answered, for the two horses now had been gone some four hours; "and then I shall know the old stuff, if they attempt to mix it with the latest mode. You can scarcely be too sharp in these little places. It is not that they want to cheat anybody, and they would rather not do it to a native. But I should just like to see how much they have got now."

"Ah, there is a fine view from the pavement there. You can see right into Middlesex, and even Berkshire, I am told, when the day is unusually fine. But I never knew it fine enough to see five miles. You might as well go and play with the dogs, my dear."

To play with the dogs was very well in its way, and had lightened many a listless hour, when the body was slack for its to and fro of action, and the mind could take no food, except as a dog bites grass. Then the tricks of the doggies, their sprightly flashing eyes, and perception of one's meaning almost before it knew itself, as well as their good nature and enjoyment of a joke, and readiness to time their wits by the slower pulse of mine—take it as I would or might, here was always something to teach me that one is not every one.

But I could not see the beauty of this lesson now. Selfish love had got me by the button-hole, and there never is much humour in the tale he tells. It is all about himself, and the celestial one who sent him; and he is so much in earnest that he cannot bear a laugh. Even the crinolines in the little narrow window of Messrs. Flounce and Co., where they had to hang alternate, one high and one low, not to poke each other's ribs, although they reminded me of what I had seen in church, suggested it without a single smile to follow; for my mind, in the reverence of love, was able to people them with the sacred form inside. And yet at any other time I must have laughed, recalling as it did the ingenuity of ladies, who contrived in our narrow pews to reconcile their worship of a Higher Power with that of their own frocks. And the ladies who now go limp may be glad—when fashion comes round in its cycle—to remember how their mothers made the best of it. Each lady alternate stood on a high hassock, each lady intermediate upon the church boards; and so their cages underlapped or overlapped each other; and when it came to kneeling one [205] could hear them all contract. There were quite as clever women then in balloons, as those who end in serpents now.

Vainly I looked down the hill, and vainly back at the crinolines. The only way to get the thing desired is to leave off hoping for it. When the sun was gone, and the silver mist was gliding like a slow-worm up the vale, and all the good people of Leatherhead had lit their pipes and come out to talk, I went back slowly to Valley-view, with many a futile turn of head, and ears too ready to be deceived. But the only wheels I heard were those of the fishmonger's cart going quite the wrong way, for I knew that he had been with a middle cut of salmon to the hospitable gate of Miss Parslow.

"You had better go to sleep. Here is Betty, nearly wild," my aunt cried as she pushed me in; "that blessed butcher has only just sent the lamb, and the boy let it fall in the middle of the road. I hope to goodness she won't come for two hours. If she does, she will want sandwiches; and there is nothing in the house to make them of. Go and lie down, Kit; don't you see you are in the way? What a lucky thing I told the man to rest the horses for at least two hours at the *Flowerpot*. When he gets into the tap, he is pretty sure to make it four. You look as white as a ghost, poor boy! Bother that love, it spoils everybody's dinner! I haven't got a bit of appetite myself; and the first bit of salmon for the season, except one! Go in, get in; lie down there and roll. Why, you couldn't even tell where to find the mint!"

This was all the sympathy I got in my distress; and when she had poked me into the little room, or lobby, with a horsehair sofa, where to roll meant to roll off, she locked me up, as if I had been a pot of jam; and all I could hear was the rattle of the dripping-pan, or the clink of the plates in the warmer. It was worse than useless to repine; so I turned my back to everything and went to sleep.

In sleep, as it has been said of old, the fairest and sweetest gifts of heaven descend upon helpless mortals. Then alone is a man devoid of harm, and gone back to his innocence, and the peopling of his mind is not an array of greed and selfishness. Then only is he far away from malice, and corrupting care, and small impatience of the wrongs (which only sting, when they strike himself), and bitter sense of having failed through the jealousy of others. And only then—if his angel still returns, though seared and scouted—does he know the taste of simple joys, and [206] smile the smile of childhood. What wonder, then, that his Father comes, with returning love to him, while he sleeps?

Then if the greatest gift of God to man, that he can see and feel while in this lower world of life, is that which was the first vouchsafed,—the love of one, who thinks and tries to make him nobler than herself—though she generally fails in that—how can it come more gently to him than as it came, the first time of all, when he has been cast into deep sleep?

It seemed to be no time for words, and even thoughts found little room. Without a whisper or a thought, my cheeks were wet with loving tears, and gentle sobs came to my heart, and faithful hands were locked in mine. A sweeter dream never came from heaven; and if sleep were always so endowed, it would be well to sleep for ever.

CHAPTER XXXIII.
URGENT MEASURES.

Miss Parslow, although she pretended to be rough, and to love dogs better than the human race (for which she could give fifty reasons), was as truly soft of heart as the gentlest woman that ever shed a tear. She kept her own history to herself; and it never struck me that she had any. That is to say, as concerning us men; who are always supposed to be, but are not always, the side to be blamed, when things go amiss in the matter of sweethearting. She had passed through some trouble in her early days, as I found out long afterwards; but had not been soured thereby, any more than a river has been poisoned by its tumbles in the hills.

The spell of Kitty's beauty and true goodness fell upon her. At first she strove hard to make light of her, and then pretended still to do so, when the effort was in vain; but in three days' time it was all over; and I felt that with all my claims of kindred, and the proud Parslow extract of tea in my veins, I was chiefly regarded as Kitty's sweetheart. It was—"Where is Kitty? What would Kitty like for dinner? Did Kitty tell you what she thought of this parasol? Tell Kitty that I am waiting for her down the garden." And so on, until I began to smile, and to fear that I should never have my Kitty to myself. And the beauty of it was that Miss Parslow seemed to think that I [207] was not so attentive as I should be to Miss Fairthorn.

"What did you mean, by carrying on as you did with that girl, Sally Chalker?" she inquired one day in a very stern voice, when I had only asked Miss Chalker if she was fond of roses. "Are you such an oaf as to think that Sally Chalker is fit to wipe the shoes of Kitty Fairthorn? And if it is her money that tempts you, remember that her father is a most determined man. And there used to be such a thing as honour among young men. What will Mr. Henderson say, when I tell him, as I shall at the first opportunity, that you take advantage of being on the spot, to try to cut him out with his precious Sally? And I believe that he really is attached to her."

There is no end of the bubbles that ladies blow, when they once begin to dabble in love-affairs. They never can let well alone, and they have such a knack of setting one another's hackles up, that when I hear now of any match being off, where I knew that the young people loved each other, I never inquire about stern parents, but ask who the sisters and female cousins are.

Even Kitty, the best and most sensible girl that ever wore a bonnet, began to think at last that there must be something in all this rubbish. I observed that she coloured, and glanced at me, whenever Miss Chalker's name came up, as it did pretty often, entirely through my aunt, who would toss it about, as a dog throws a bone, when he has exhausted all its grease. And I used to look down, as if I were thinking very deeply. Perhaps she would love me more, if she grew jealous.

Then she began to sigh, softly at first, and not enough for me to be sure of it; but by-and-by more deeply, as she found me too polite to be aware of this exertion of an undoubted private right. And she used to say—"Oh, I do admire her, so much! I think she is so lovely. Don't you quite agree with me, Kit?" And I used to say—"Most perfect. Can there be any doubt about it?" And then she would not look at me, perhaps for half an hour.

I know that this was very wrong of me—as wrong as well could be. And I used to steal a glance at Kitty, when she was not watching, and ask myself if any man with two eyes in his head could turn them twice on Sally Chalker, after such a view as that. However, I did not say so; for I felt that my darling should know better, and if she chose to be like that, why she must, until she came [208] to reason; and that was her place, more than mine. But I could not bear to hear her sigh.

Miss Parslow rather enjoyed this business, which was a great deal worse of her than anything that I did. For she herself had set it going, with no consideration for my feelings, and no right whatever. And I think that she ought to have healed the mischief, which she could have done at any moment; whereas she pretended not to see it, although she was much too sharp for that.

However, it could not go on long, and I had made up my mind to clear it up, when I was saved the trouble. For as I sat in my favourite place, with the lovely valley before me, and the sun sinking into a bed of roses far beyond the Surrey hills, I heard the little pit-a-pat that was dearer than my pulse to me, and down the winding walk came Kitty, carrying an ugly yellow book. She had no hat on, and her hair was tied back, as if it had been troubling her; and as soon as she saw me she turned away her head, and hastily passed her hand over her cheeks, as if to be sure that they were dry. Then she looked at me bravely, though her mouth was twitching, and said—"Oh, will you do it for me, if you please?"

"Do what?" I asked very reasonably, though I began to guess what she was thinking of; for the ugly book was a Railway Guide.

"Miss Parslow told me to ask you. She cannot make it out any more than I can. It is very stupid, of course; but she says that she never met a woman who could make out Bradshaw, and she would strictly avoid her, if she ever did."

"But what is it I am to make out? We can't get to Sunbury, by any line, my darling." When I called her that, her dear eyes shone; but she went on, as if she were correcting them.

"What I want to make out is a good quick train, without any extra fare to pay, from London to Glasgow; and it must arrive by daylight, though I suppose it would have to start at night for that.

But I am not at all afraid.”

“What on earth has got into this lovely little head?” I made offer to take it between my two hands, as I had been allowed to do, once or twice, when apparently falling back in health. But it seemed to prefer its own support just now.

“You must be aware, if you will take the trouble to think for a minute about it, that I cannot [209] remain here in this sort of way, living upon a perfect stranger, although she is goodness and kindness itself; and running into debt in a country place like this, just because I have got no money. The only thing for me is to find out my father. He may be delighted to receive me now, and I may even be able to help him there. Miss Parslow has promised most kindly to lend me quite money enough to get to Glasgow. I must write to my father by this evening’s post, and then I shall be able to start to-morrow; only I must let him know what train I am likely to arrive by, for his time is always occupied.”

“A very nice programme!” I exclaimed, as she smiled, or tried to smile, at her own powers of arrangement. “But if you please, Miss Fairthorn, what am I to do?”

“You must not ask me,” she said, turning away; “there are so many things for you to do. Soon you will be able to be at work again. And if you don’t like that, you can marry some one with plenty of money, and keep racehorses. I dare say it is a nice life, for those who like it.”

“I cannot make out a word of this,” I answered; “people with money, and racehorses! And going to Glasgow by the train all night! Do try to tell me, dear, what it is all about.”

“It is only natural that I should go to my father, when nobody wants me. I am not blaming any one. You must not imagine that. I have only myself to blame, for believing that I was a great deal more than I was.”

“When nobody wants you! Oh, Kitty, Kitty, I must be gone off my head again; and that is why you want to run away from me. Look at me honestly, and say that it is so. I would rather give you up, dear, and go mad by myself; than marry you, if that has once got into your mind.”

She looked at me with terror, and deep amazement; then fell into my arms, and threw her own around me, and put up her lips as a cure for every evil.

“How can you say such wicked things?” she whispered, as soon as I allowed her sweet lips room. “You can have no idea what I am, if you suppose that I should ask whether you were off your head, or on it, when once I had given all my heart to you. But you must not have anybody else in your head.”

“As if I ever could!”

“Oh, but yes, you might.”

“I should like to know who it could be then. As if there were any one in all the world fit to hold [210] a candle to my own Kitty.”

“There’s a much prettier girl in this very place, if she did not stick her elbows out so sadly, as she walks, and put her heels on the ground before her toes. And if she had not got—well, not quite green eyes.”

“Somebody else has green eyes, I should say, if they were not as blue as heaven. Sally Chalker? Why, I would not touch her with a pair of tongs. And if I did, Sam Henderson would take the poker to me.”

“Oh, Kit, can you assure me, upon your word of honour, that there is nothing between you and Miss Chalker?”

“No, I can’t. Because there is the whole world between us, and what is more than ten times the whole world to me, a certain little Kitty, who has no fault whatever—except that she is desperately jealous.”

“Jealous indeed! You must never think that. I hope I have a little too much faith in you,” she said, as she came and coaxed me with her hand, making me tremble with her love and loveliness.

But I said, “Confess, or I will never let you go;” and she looked up and laughed, and whispered, —

“Well then, perhaps—but only ever such a wee bit.”

Miss Chalker’s ears must have tingled after that; for I called her a vulgar and common-place girl—which was not at all true—and a showy dressy thing, and I know not what, until Kitty came warmly to the rescue; for she seemed to like her very greatly, all of a sudden, and found out that she walked quite gracefully. Then I took the hateful Bradshaw, and tied a flat stone in it, and flung it over the tops of the trees into the Mole. And when we went in, as the dinner-bell rang—for Miss Parslow kept fashionable hours now—that good lady looked very knowing, and asked with a smile which was meant to be facetious, whether I had seen Miss Chalker lately.

“I saw her sticking her elbows out down the street, and putting her heels to the ground before her toes,” I answered; and true enough it was, though I had never observed those little truths before. Miss Parslow stared, and Kitty gave me such a glance, that I resolved to have honourable

amends, or do worse.

"You won't have much more chance of running down our local belles," said my aunt, as she handed me a letter; "Mr. Henderson passed in his dog-cart just now, to see the young lady who [211] does such dreadful things, and he kindly brought this letter from your uncle to me. He seems in a great hurry; how unreasonable men are! I think he might have come and paid his respects to Miss Fairthorn, even if he did not think me worthy of that honour. Read it aloud. He is a diamond, no doubt; but I think he should be treated as the Koh-i-noor has been."

Knowing Uncle Corny's style, I read without surprise:—

"Dear Madam,

"Kit has had quite time enough to get well. I am tired of being here all by myself, and I want him in the garden, for at least three weeks before he is married, which I mean him to be then, if Miss Fairthorn will kindly agree to it. Placed as she is, she will see the sense of that; for it is the only way to make her safe. And I wish her to be married here at Sunbury, in our old church, where I have always had a pew. I shall send the tax-cart for Kit to-morrow, and he will arrange with the lady to come before Sunday to Widow Cutthumb's, where I will take uncommonly good care that nobody molests her. On Sunday the banns will be read for the first time, with Miss Fairthorn's full permission, and nobody else's so far as I care. We shall hope for the honour of your presence, when the young people are joined together. Thanking you, Madam, for your kindness to my nephew, and with my best respects,

"I am faithfully yours,
"Cornelius Orchardson."

"Well, my dear Kitty," said my aunt, when I had finished; "he disposes of you as calmly as if you were a bushel of apples, or a sack of potatoes. I thought it was the lady's place to fix the auspicious day."

"You cannot expect a bachelor to be at home among such questions;" I came to my love's rescue, for she knew not what to say, and was blushing, and looking down, and wondering what to make of it. "But I must go to-morrow, if he sends for me. If old *Spanker* came for nothing, I should never hear the last of it. My uncle has heard something, which we do not know of. He is prompt, and to the purpose; but I never knew him rash."

"I see, I see;" Miss Parslow's voice was much subdued, for she loved a bit of mystery, and saw tokens of it here. "Don't let us talk about it now, until we've had our dinner. Kit's last bachelor [212] dinner here! We'll have a bottle of champagne, to make us laugh a little at this peremptory wedlock. Your uncle is a curious man; but if it comes to that, all men are very curious beings."

"And ladies are so, in the other sense, and the active one of the word; but we are never known to complain of that."

"Of course you never have any secrets. Take your everlasting in to dinner, and I will follow you. All the world will have to do that by-and-by, if you only keep up to this high mark of constancy and devotion."

Kitty smiled at me, and I smiled at Kitty; for we knew that any lower mark might do for other people.

Lofty and good as she was, my aunt could scarcely be expected to see things thus. A lady who has never been up a ladder, is afraid of her skirts, even more than of her head. Aunt Parslow was not at all strait-laced—for she had given up caring about her figure now—but she did think that Kitty and I were almost too much wrapped up in one another; and perhaps that was why, in her feminine style, she had brought Miss Chalker, or vainly tried to bring her, in between us.

On the following day, the spring-cart arrived, with Selsey Bill's biggest boy sitting up to drive; and away I went, with nothing truly settled, but everything left elastic; as happens nearly always, when the women have their way. I promised to bring Uncle Corny to reason (as the ladies viewed that substance), and to come back the next day but one, if wet bandages enabled the old horse to do it again. He was wiry enough, but his wire was stiff, and some of the connections rickety.

"Kit, you are a fool," Mr. Orchardson said, as soon as he had done the outside talk; "do you mean to have that girl, or not?"

I assured him that I hoped quite as warmly and wholly to marry my beautiful darling, as I did to be alive for the purpose of doing it, now that the Lord had restored my health.

"Then look alive," he answered, "or you will never do it. She is not safe even where she is. I am not going to tell you what I know, because you would think me fanciful! only I say that if it was my case, I would not lose a day that is not demanded by manners and decency. You have her father's consent, and hers. You are surrounded by wily foes. I have explained everything to Mr. Golightly! he is a sensible man, and he does not care twopence for Miss Coldpepper, for she [213] never gives a sixpence she can help towards the church. Widow Cutthumb will take fourteen shillings a week including coals and candles. Two weeks done properly will make three Sundays,

and you will be both in the parish. I have got an old door, which I mean to put up, to keep people from landing in her garden, and I defy them to get into the house from the street. I believe they don't know where your Kitty is at present; but they will find out; and what can that old maid, with all her lap-dogs, do to protect her? If you mean your Kitty to be ever Mrs. Kit, you must look sharp, and no mistake."

I was much surprised at his urgency, but could get no more reasons out of him. Being equally urged by love, and strong distrust of coming dangers, I did not lose a single day, but wrote to Miss Parslow by the very next post, because she required, and indeed deserved, to have a voice in all we did. Then I took the young horse on the following day, for old Spanker found himself a little stiff, and brought back my darling to her beloved Sunbury, where she had made up her mind to dwell. Widow Cutthumb received her with curtseys and smiles, and a very strong sense of her own importance. For the whole village now was on tiptoe about us, and everybody seemed to take our side.

But if I stopped to tell a thousandth part of what was said, I should never get married, which is the main point.

It must not be supposed that my Kitty all this time had neglected her dear father. She had written to him several times from Leatherhead, enclosing a note or two from Miss Parslow, as well as a few little bills for soft goods. And he had replied in the most affectionate manner, and enclosed some cash. This encouraged her now to write for more; and he behaved most handsomely, considering how the other party had been making boot upon the products of his brain. But he was a true philosopher, and money to him was not the motive power of life, nor even the shaft, but only the lubricator. He promised to be with us, if he could; and his wife being still away in North Wales, there seemed to be no sound reason why he should fear to come to London. Indeed it seemed natural that he should come, before leaving England upon his long cruise, for the *Archytas*—as the ship was called—had now been completed in every detail, and was trying her engines at Greenock. And so we hoped to see him upon the blissful day.

CHAPTER XXXIV.
TWO TO ONE.

[214]

"NEVER wur any luck in a wadding, as wur put off from app'inted day. For why? Why, because it be flying in the vace of the Lard, as hath app'inted 'un."

Knowing that Tabby was very often right in her prophecies, and could prove them right—even when they were wrong—as most prophets can, I begged her not to say a word about that to my darling; because she was a little superstitious, although sprung from the very highest form of science. But science very seldom keeps its dates; and to make them tally, we had postponed our day from Tuesday even till Thursday. For Captain Fairthorn had written again, to say that he could not be with us on the Tuesday, but was almost sure that he could manage it, if we would only leave it till two days later. My uncle had frowned and said—"Not a single hour. If his wheels and his wires are more to him than his only child, let him stop with them. But you must leave it to Kitty. Such a question is for her."

Vexed as I was, I could not deny this. And she pleaded so well, though with reason on her side, that we vented our anger on the absent man, and only our affection and good will on her.

But the one who made the greatest grievance of it was my aunt, Miss Parslow. She had hurried her dressmaker to the verge of mutiny, and made her sit up (either in person, or by deputy) two whole nights, and she felt that she would have to pay deeply for this, and now here it was all needless! "I have the greatest mind not to come at all," she wrote; "and if it were for anything but pure compassion, you may be quite sure that I would wash my hands of you. Men manage everything in this world, even the things that they understand least; and you will see what comes of it. If I come on Thursday, I shall be quite unprepared; though I should have been in perfect readiness on Tuesday."

This was a hard saying; but we agreed that she knew what she meant, and could explain it to her liking. And seeing that the ladies were now so full of reason, I thought that I would have another try at Miss Coldpepper.

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I had ventured to call upon that lady once, while the preparations were in full swing; but she had said that she was not at home, and of course she must know best, though I had seen her walking in her great Camelia-house. My Uncle Cornelius had been of opinion that, even if she would not honour our church with her presence, she could scarcely escape from the duty of sending her former visitor and favourite something very handsome as a wedding present. A silver tea-service was the least thing he could think of, but unluckily the last thing that occurred to her as needful. She had made it a grievance, as she wanted one, that Miss Fairthorn should have dared to go to Widow Cutthumb's, when everybody in the village knew how shockingly the widow had behaved to Mrs. Marker.

But all this appeared to me to be very small talk now; for I was in a generous and large condition, such as is only too apt to credit all fellow-creatures with the like expansion. It should never be said of me, that any petty pride had prevented me from holding out the olive-branch—whether to be gilded, or even to be peeled—at a time when I was hoping to be crowned with myrtle. Scorning all considerations of a silver teapot, I went to Coldpepper Manor, and rang gently.

"Missus will see you this time," said my friend Charles, who had tasted our strawberries many a time, when he durst not steal any more at home; "she is all agog about you, sir, though she shams to know nothing. Happiness to you and dear Miss Kitty, sir!"

The least I could do was to give him half a crown, for he had always appeared to me to be a worthy fellow. He slipped it into his hornet-coloured waistcoat, and bawled out, "Mr. Christopher Orchardson," as if I had come in a coach and four.

"I am pleased to see you, Mr. Orchardson," said the lady of the Hall, as I made a low bow; "take a chair, and tell me what you are doing. I never hear anything that happens in the village."

I am not at all certain what reply I made, being fluttered by the force of habit in her stately presence. But she was better pleased by this, than she would have been by any assumption of ease and self-command.

"Although I hear so little, a report has reached me," she went on with a smile which was not at all disdainful, "that you are about to marry Kitty Fairthorn. If so, you are a wonderfully fortunate young man."

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"It would add very greatly to our happiness, madam," I ventured to say, though with some misgivings, "if you would be kind enough to give us your good wishes. Miss Fairthorn has not been to call upon you, because—because she was not sure that you would wish it. And she is acting entirely without the consent of her step-mother, who is your sister. I hope you will not think the worse of her for that. The lady has never been very kind to her."

"Kitty was quite right in not coming here; it would have placed me in an unpleasant position. I have not seen much of my sister for years. But I cannot enter into such matters. And you have done right in coming to me thus. Certainly you both have my good wishes. And though Kitty might have looked for a much higher marriage—I may say that without any disrespect to you—I

believe that she will be happier in a very simple life. You will understand that I cannot be present —under the peculiar circumstances. Neither will you expect me to receive Kitty here, when she is Mrs. Orchardson; she is no relative of mine, and she has chosen her own path. But I like her none the less, and you may tell her that. She has plenty of proper pride, and would resent my patronage. I was told that the wedding was to be to-day. Why have you put it off? You are unwise."

She looked as if she knew something which would alarm me, if declared; but I did not presume to ask about it, and simply told her the cause of the delay.

"You may expect him; but you will not see him," she answered, as if she knew more than we did; "don't put it off another day, if you wish it to be at all. But it is no affair of mine. Good morning to you."

I returned in an anxious state of mind, for she had clearly dismissed me, that I might ask no questions. And instead of going straight to my uncle's house, I hurried to that of the widow, to make sure that my darling was safe, and all due care observed. After what had been already done to Kitty, how could I tell that there was no plot yet in store? My bodily strength was restored by this time, and I felt myself a match for almost any man; and surely intense and incessant devotion must vanquish unholy pursuit and vile designs. All we knew of our enemies at present was that they had retired from the scene of their defeat, and locked up the cottage where they had felt so sure of victory. But my Uncle Cornelius had good reason for believing that his premises were watched; and a couple of his men had been tempted to drink by some mysterious stranger, who [217] showed the greatest interest in our ways, and works, and manners. And the worst of it was that the river (being almost at our doors, and not frequented then as it is now) afforded such a space for roguish travel, that there ought to be a paling put up against it, with tenter-hooks, and wire-netting on the top, if any man desired to keep his garden to himself. For the people who come up, as they get away from London, seem to claim the country more and more, and to think that it was made for nothing else except to be a change for them; and they reason that as a river must have banks, those banks are a part of it, and the whole belongs to them.

My beloved (who was both my banks, and the channel of all my life as well) had not been left alone all this time, with only Widow Cutthumb to amuse her. Otherwise she would have had a sorry time; for that widow had but two subjects of discourse—the merits of her late husband, and the scarcity of all vegetables. But a very sharp young lady, Miss Gertrude Triggs, about three years older than my Kitty, being in need of country air after an attack of nettle-rash, had kindly consented to come and occupy the best room at Widow Cutthumb's. At first I was uneasy, for if Kitty were to catch that complaint, after all her other troubles, was she likely to look well upon the bridal day? But Dr. Sippets said that he would warrant no infection; and so Miss Triggs came and occupied. And certainly she helped to set off the complexion, upon which it was impossible to imagine any rash. At first, I was not fond of Miss Triggs, for she had too much sting in her words and ways; and I made no allowance for what she had been through. And to my mind women should never try to sting, being apt to get the worst of it (as even do the bees), and intended more by nature to do the honey-making. But my poor ideas have always been old-fashioned; and I am sorry (for the sake of others) that it should be so.

But when I came to understand Gerty Triggs, and to value her real friendship for my dear one, I acknowledged (as a man should do) that I had been a gaby. Not only had she protected Kitty at school, and even lent her under-clothing when she got no supplies from her step-mother, but she had actually made an inroad into Bulwrag Castle, to try a round with the great lady herself, on behalf of the innocent captive. She was rapidly discomfited, of course; she had resolved to show the truth, but she was quickly shown the door; and though she maintained that she had [218] triumphed, it may have been in logic, but it was not so in fact; and the result to herself had been this nasty nettle-rash. However, as she got over that, and put the air of our garden upon her cheeks, I began to esteem her, and to find her rather pretty.

It was settled by the laws of nature that she should be bridesmaid; and Uncle Corny found another not connected much with trade, yet able to provide her own outfit. My uncle said, though not to Kitty—for he was quite a gentleman to her throughout—that he could not discover any call on him to fit everybody up with gew-gaws. It was her father's place, if he wanted things to be done in proper style, to come and see to them himself, or at any rate to send directions, and the money to have them carried out. Instead of that, he had left everything to us, kept us in trouble about the day, and perhaps driven off Miss Parslow and her twenty thousand pounds. It was plain that he thought it a higher duty to fit out his ship than his only child. Considering all this, Uncle Corny was only surprised at his own generosity; but when I joined him in that surprise, he cut me very short, and asked what I knew about him. It was natural enough that he should be cross; and I told him so, which only made him worse.

Nevertheless when the true day came, which I always recall with gratitude and wonder at a grace so far beyond my merits, everybody behaved as if there were nothing but peace and good will in the world. We received a telegram quite early that the ship was ordered to sail that day, and the Captain could only send his blessing. Kitty shed some tears, but all the rest of us were pleased, because it fulfilled our predictions. And my uncle was proud to give the bride away, and at the same time to keep her, as he neatly said.

Miss Parslow came over in style, with a mass of white flowers piled high on the seat before her, and wearing her silver gray silk dress, which set her off to great advantage. And she presented the bride with a silver basket, fit either for flowers or fruit, and containing a very neat

cheque for a hundred guineas. Sam Henderson acted as my best man, and did everything better than I did, for I scarcely knew my right hand from my left. Mrs. Wilcox was present, and so was Mrs. Rowles, without whom we should never have been there, and Selsey Bill of course, and every man who possessed a top hat in the parish. And to our amazement, Miss Coldpepper was sitting in her curtained pew, although she had said that she would not come. And after the [219] service she kissed my Kitty, and said that she would give her something by-and-by.

What my darling wore I have not the least idea, or at least I had not on that day, though I came to know too well afterwards. But all the men said, and nearly all the women too, that she was the fairest, and sweetest, and most lovely of all the brides ever seen in Sunbury, which was no little thing to say; for our village is celebrated in that way. And she behaved with such grace and goodness, that it seemed as if those blessings must be multiplied upon her.

Several women cried to think that she should look so Christian after all the treatment that she had received—for Mrs. Rowles declared that she had been in a wire cage—and if I were to try to straighten half the crooked tales they told, I never should find any time for a separate word with Kitty.

Only I remember that when she came and kissed me in her simple, and loving, and bewitching way, I saw the gleam of tears in her deep blue eyes; and when I asked (without words) what it was, she answered,—

“I should have liked to have one kiss from father.”

This proof of her tenderness increased my adoration; for an affectionate daughter must become a loving wife. Then I took away my treasure to be mine alone; and Kit and Kitty, for the time, are one.

CHAPTER XXXV.
UNDER THE GARDEN WALL.

NOT much time could we have together in the land of Goshen, where the boils and blains of the ungodly world are not yet sprinkled in the radiant air. Uncle Corny gave us for our honeymoon one week—which has often proved much longer than the silver cord would stretch—but we, intending all our lives to be of sparkling sweetness, cared very little where we spent the hours, if only with each other. And perhaps we scarcely deserved to be in a place so calmly beautiful, not so far away as to take a cliff of money to get there, and yet having fine brave crags of its own. Perhaps it may be found in ancient charts as Baycliff, although it is such a quiet, homely place, without any railway to advertise it, and I have seen some maps which were too good to give the [220] name. But they could not annihilate it by such petty silence; and a pleasant seaside village is like a pleasing woman; the less it is talked about the more it keeps its charms.

For my part, I could not see the need of going back in such hot haste to Sunbury, dearly as I loved that desirable village. For here were many things that we could never have there, the level space and leisure of the many-coloured sea, the majesty of cliffs white-browed with centuries of tempest, the gliding of white sails across the gleaming ruffle of the cove, and the crisp, elastic sands that kept the fairy trace of Kitty's feet close to my great clumsy prints.

"Let us steal another week," I said; "it is but a fleeting holiday, and we shall never know such a time again."

But my beloved, growing dearer every day, if that could be, gave good advice, against her own delight, that we should not begin our married life with selfishness. We had been so kindly treated that we must not slur our gratitude, and forget our duties in our joys.

"And I want to see our little home," she said, to make the best of it; "the house that is to be all our own; where I shall keep you in order, Kit, and make you as happy as the day is long."

So with many a backward glance, we left that bower of bliss, and returned to the world of work and action. And when we found what had been done, to welcome and to please us, we could not help confessing that our virtue was well rewarded. For Honeysuckle Cottage looked as bright and fresh as sunrise, and the first half of May is not the time to find much fault with nature. The earth was damp and clammy yet, in places where the wind and sun could not get fairly into it; and the spring was late and shivered still among the gaps it had to stop. For one might look through a big tree yet, and see a lamp in the road beyond it; and many of those that were being scarfed wore spangles rather than patins. And people, who pay little heed, might stop in doubt—if they stopped at all—and wonder if what they saw coming might prove in the end to be a blossom or a leaf.

In our little house I had the bud, the blossom, and the fruit combined. The bud of youth scarce come to prime, the blossom of fair womanhood, and the fruit of sweet and golden peace, not sleepy, but sprightly flavoured. It was a fair view from the window, but inside ten times as fair, without the chance of adverse weather nipping hope and bright content. [221]

An ancient writer (whom I had just been scholar enough to understand, when he is easy, in his native tongue) assures us that this perfect state is never long allowed by Heaven. According to him, and others whom he considers wiser than himself, all the powers that govern man are stung with envy when they see him happier than he ought to be. Generally they take good care to have no occasion for this grudge; but when, by any slip of theirs, a mortal has attained such pitch of comfort and prosperity, there is no peace in Olympus, till this robber of delight is crushed. And the more he has flourished and rejoiced, the deeper shall his misery be.

Having only thirty shillings a week, without counting our presents which had been put by, and paying five and sixpence out of that for the rent and rates of our small Paradise, we scarcely can have affronted Heaven by any gorgeous insolence. And without daring to impugn the wisdom of true philosophers, I venture still to hold by that which we find in larger and nobler Writ, that when the Heavenly Power stoops to cut off our brief happiness, it is to make it more abiding, where there is no brevity.

But we did not think of such things then; and who would be sad enough to say that we were bound to do so? Care would come quite soon enough, we did not care to beckon him. He must have been a doleful wight, and born with black crape round his eyes, who could have looked at my merry Kitty, without catching her bright smile. In the morning, when I went to work, I carried it with me like a charm, and whenever I came back at night, it put my memory to the blush.

For we had settled with one accord, that until I had overtaken the large arrears of work which had lapsed behind through my long illness and absence, there should be no time lost by any return for early dinner. And this was better for my wife too, inasmuch as she had only Polly Tompkins to assist her, the eldest daughter of Selsey Bill, a very clean and tidy girl, but of small experience in cookery. I was busy at a long peach-wall, not the red-brick one, but further down, and the trees being large and sadly out of order, patient as well as skilful hands were required urgently. There was a very fine crop yet unthinned, feeble wood to be removed, robber shoots to be docked or tamed, green-fly to be dipped or dusted, and all the other crying needs of neglected trees to be made good. And Kitty used to appear exactly as the old church clock struck one, with [222] a basket of bread and meat, a pint of ale, and a pipe filled by her own fair hands, which she used to light for me, and then trip home, singing merrily among the trees, to see to the business of the

afternoon.

Dare anybody tell me that a wife like this would leave her dear husband of her own accord, without a word, without a letter, leave him to wonder, and mourn, and rage, and despair of his own life and hers? Yet this is what all the world believed, and impressed upon me, till my spirit failed.

"Now this is all very fine," exclaimed my uncle, as he came round the corner of the wall one day, and caught me in the very act of hugging Kitty, as she was preparing to light my pipe. She was looking up and laughing, and pretending to pull my hair, when the deepening of her blush showed that an enemy was nigh. "This is all very fine; but how long will it last? How many quarrels have you had already? I suppose you are making up one of them now."

"Uncle Corny, you are a disgrace," cried Kitty, "a disgrace to the name of humanity. Mayn't I even whisper in my husband's ear, without being accused of quarrelling? We have never had a single word. Have we, Kit?"

"Then perhaps you will now. Here's a telegram for you. I was going to send Kit home with it. But as you are so uncommonly close together, why, it saves the trouble. Hope some of your enemies are dead, my dear."

"Hush! Don't be so wicked," she said, as she handed it to me, and I opened it with my pruning-knife, and held it for her to read first. But this required our united efforts, for it was badly written, as so often happens, and some of the words were run together. At last we made it out as follows:—

"Spoke *All Kites* off Scilly May 7th. Captain Fairshort desires love and best wishes to his daughter. Will be away two years perhaps. From Jenkins, s.s. *Hibernia*, Falmouth."

"*All Kites!*" said my uncle, who had read some of the Georgics, as rendered by Dryden with lofty looseness, but never a line of Horace; "what a name for a ship, if it is a ship! Kitty, my dear, is that the proper word?"

"No, Uncle Corny, it should be *Archytas*. I am not sure who he was, but rather think that he must have been a king of Sparta."

"I know who he was," I said, to show how much I had learned at Hampton, though I never was much of a hand at Horace, and had only found this out in the dictionary; "a great man of science, [223] who measured the seas, and the sand, and all that, but could not get to heaven, because nobody would throw a pinch of dust upon his body. And he lay upon the shore, imploring somebody to do it."

"If he could call out, he could have done it for himself," replied my uncle, who was not poetical. "Serve him right, at any rate, for having such a name. But I hope that your father won't do that, my dear."

"I think it was very kind of him, when he could not help going, and was far away at sea, to get this kind captain of a ship they met, if we understand it properly, to send me this farewell message from the deep. And it makes my mind ever so much more comfortable, because I shall have another message by-and-by, I dare say. If he meets one ship he must meet others: and I shall always have a good idea where he is, and have my mind relieved, when there has been a stormy night. Thank you, Uncle Corny, you have brought me pleasant news. Kit, it is high time for you to go on with your wall."

In this sort of way, by making the best of everything, and thanking everybody, even if they did not mean to do her any good, she established in a week a sweet dominion, not over us, but within us. My uncle, though he liked to have his little cut at her—for old men treat young ladies as chicks to be carved—got into the habit of coming up every night of his life to have his pipe at Honeysuckle Cottage. It may seem very ungrateful of me, and I now feel ashamed when I think of it, but after being hard at work all day, and having a bit of cold duck under the wall, I thought that I might have been allowed when I came home to tell my dear wife all my thoughts about her, and how many times I had hammered my thumb-nail through that. But there Uncle Corny sat, carrying on, as if I had cut off my tongue with my pruning-knife!

Kitty used to laugh, and ask me who was jealous now. But I answered, with good reason, that the case was widely different. Miss Sally Chalker never crossed her legs, and sat with a long pipe blowing over a supper-table, neither did she go on talking, as if I were nobody; but rather put me foremost, even when Kitty herself was present, and asked what my opinion was, before she gave her own almost.

However, I made the best of my uncle's conduct at our cottage; for it was not only my duty, but my important interest to do so. What was to become of us if Uncle Corny (who might be called a [224] huffy man, and stuck to a huff, whenever he contracted it) should take it into his head that I was not what he used to take me for? I know that he was full of truth and justice, according to his own view of them; but if anything went against his liking, so did truth and justice. So I had to sink my opinions often, even when they agreed with his, for he never liked to have them put into any other language than his own. Kitty was clever enough to see this, and she always praised me afterwards; but it went against one's sense of right, that she might say exactly what I had said, and from her lips it became true wisdom, when it had been simple silliness from mine. But Kitty smiled at him, and laughed at me, and went into his heart more deeply every time she filled his

pipe.

Then a new anxiety arose, and Uncle Corny had more than he could do to lay down the law for his own affairs. The wind went into the east, with a hard blue sky, and not a cloud in it. We had passed the date of the “icy Saints,” as they are called in Germany, when a cold wave of air is said to flow over hundreds of leagues of smiling land, and smite it all into one dark frown. If I can remember, without an almanac, that date is about the seventh of May; but I have never found it quite so punctual here; and according to my observation, the bloom of England hovers in nightly peril, from the middle of April to the very end of May. It is one of the many sad things we meet, but can only fold our hands and watch, that for nearly six weeks of the year, and in early seasons even more, through all our level southern lands, the fruit-crop trembles on the hazard of a single night’s caprice. The bright sun and the lovely day delude the folk who know no better; these are the very things that lead to the starry night, and the quiet cold, and the white sheet over the grass at five a.m., and the black death following. The barren grower walks between his rows of wounded blossom; there is little harm to be seen at first, some of the petals are as fair as ever, others are just tipped with brown; and perhaps his wife runs up and says—“Oh, you need not be in a fright, my dear; why, they all look as well as ever.”

But he, with deeper wisdom, and the smile of prophetic silence, pulls out his budding-knife, and nips the fairest truss he can find of bloom. Then he lays it in his palm, and haply with keen edge bisects the pips. A keener edge has been there before him; a little black line passes up from the baby stalk to the pistil. The ovary is dead and shrunken, though the anthers still may be [225] tipped with pink. Never shall a fruit grow there, to swell and stripe itself with sun, to flood a plate with sprightly juice, and in its dissolution hear some sweet voice say—“Oh, I never did taste such a lovely pear!”

All these horrors threatened now, in spite of the lateness of the spring. In a forward spring, they more than threaten, they come down and smash everything. But being now so late, we began to have some confidence, misplaced as it might be, in the meaning of the sky. And now for the wind to go back to the east (after living there so many months, that it ought to be downright sick of it), and the sun to go down red and clear, like a well-grown turnip-radish, and the stars to come out small and sharp like a lot of glaziers’ diamonds, and the mercury in the thermometer to drop, as if the bulb had been tapped about six o’clock, and scarcely a breath of wind to stir the fans of radiation—it was more than enough to make any grower fetch a groan at the day when himself was grown.

But my uncle was not of the groaning order, neither did he even hang himself; as one of our very best neighbours did, when he saw his thermometer at twenty-two degrees, one radiant May morning; but his wife, who could enter into his feelings, cut him down with a gooseberry-knife, and enabled him to grow out of it. My uncle used to read the gardening papers; which always bloom with fine advice; and one of them had lately been telling largely how, in Continental vineyards, these cold freaks of heaven are met by the sacrificial smoke of earth. To wit, a hundred pyres are raised of the rakings and refuse of the long vine-alleys, and ready for kindling on the frosty verge. Then a wisp of lighted straw is applied to each, when the sparkling shafts of frost impend, and a genial smoke is wafted through, and Sagittarius has his eyes obscured. I told my uncle that this was rubbish, at least as regarded our level lands; though it might be of service upon a hillside. That if there were wind enough to spread the smoke, there must also be enough to prevent the hoar-frost, which alone need be feared at this season. But he told me to stick to what I understood; for these scientific things were beyond me, and my business was to tend the fires.

But in spite of all this brave talk, he was afraid of casting a slur upon his old experience by a new experiment. For the British workman disdains new ideas, and there was not a man upon our [226] place but would say that the governor was turned cranky, if he got any inkling of this strange scheme.

“I shall have all the stuff put there,” said Uncle Corny, “ready for lighting, when they are gone. Those thick-heads will never suspect that I want to do anything more than burn up the weeds, as we generally do at this time of the year. Then as soon as we see the danger coming, you and I will go out and attend to it, my boy. Not that I place any great faith in it, although it seems very sensible, to those who understand the principles, which young fellows cannot be supposed to do. At any rate, I mean to try it. It can do no harm, if it does no good. You need not say another word; but do just what I tell you. I wasn’t born yesterday, as you ought to know by this time.”

I knew that well; for it takes many years to root a man into such obstinacy. As a rule, I was much more inclined to give fair trial to anything new than he was, and much more ready to risk money on it. But this would cost nothing, except a little work, and that I could not grudge him. So I told my dear wife not to be uneasy, if I did not come home till after dark some night, for our doings depended of course upon the weather; and the quarter of young pear-trees, which my uncle meant to smoke, was the furthest part almost of all the premises from Honeysuckle Cottage. Kitty smiled, and said she would come down and see it, and roast a potato or two for our supper, and we would go home together, when the work was done, and make Uncle Corny come with us. Alas, how differently it all turned out!

CHAPTER XXXVI.
FROST IN MAY.

It was on Wednesday, the fifteenth of May, as fine a day as ever shone from heaven, that my Uncle Corny came up to our cottage, soon after we had finished breakfast. I had done my two hours of early work, according to agreement, and was ready to start for the long day now, and do my best among the trees, until it should be "blind-man's holiday." It had been arranged between my wife and me that I was not to expect her with my noonday meal, but should carry it with me, because she was to be busy at home with a grand turn-out. We had now been home from our [227] bridal trip, for ten days of bliss and perfect peace, and Kitty had declared that it was high time to give our little rooms a thorough cleaning. So far as I could see, they might go another month as they were, and be all the better for it; but in all such matters the wife is supreme, and the wise man never attempts to gainsay, but only hopes to find some of his property surviving. I had always been most particular about scraping my shoes and then rubbing them on the mat, not as some men do, like a dog's feet scratching, but attending to the welting, and the heels, and toes, until they were as clean as a dinner plate. This trifle I mention, because some women said that we had a misunderstanding about the mud I brought in.

Now as Kitty had declared that there must be a turn-out for she was wonderfully fond already of our little home, I had never even asked whether it would not do next week—as many men do, and get a sharp reply—but feeling quite certain that she must know best, made up my mind accordingly. Only I suggested that she ought to have Mrs. Tompkins in to help her, instead of her daughter, our Polly, who was as nice a girl as could be, but scarcely knew the door-knocker from the boiler-tap. I suspect (perhaps basely) that my darling was afraid that she would have to play second fiddle, if Mrs. Tompkins came; but be that as it may, she would not have her; and simply asked, "How much did I give you back on Monday, dear?" The sum had been ninepence halfpenny, a handsome residue of the fifteen shillings, which under her own scheme of finance, she had drawn from our revenue for the week's consumption. I had said that she ought to take a pound at least, but she stuck to her figure, and would have shown a balance even more considerable, if Uncle Corny had not dropped in with such geniality for supper. "Your frugality is beyond belief," said I.

"Halloa!" cried Uncle Corny, as he came in after breakfast, without even scraping his boots, and carrying a suckering iron, which he poked into a rose—or at least we had determined that it must be a rose—of our new and artistic paper—"signs of it already! I expected it last week. Going to have a turn-out, and knock everything to pieces."

"But we don't carry long iron hoes," answered Kitty, pointing to the rose which he had suckered off the wall; and he laughed and shook hands, and said, "I had better hold my tongue."

I quite agreed in this, for he always got the worst of it, when he attempted to make light of [228] Kitty; she never said anything rude, but contrived to roll him up in his own rudeness. And perhaps it was the liberty of saying what she pleased, after so many years of snubbing—for the freedom of their voice must be fresh air to women—which had now set her up in a liveliness of health, such as no one had ever seen her show before. For instance, she had always had a soft, clear colour, not to be quenched by her step-mother's slaps, nor even by anxiety about her own Kit; but now ever since she had married me, there was a richness of bloom on her cheeks, and a delicate gloss you might almost call it, such as may be seen in a Tea rose only, when it has been thoroughly well managed. And now she was wearing her pink chintz wrapper, which showed the perfection of her form, with little sprigs of flowers climbing up it, just as if they vied with one another, for the honour and delight of clinging closer into her. I thought that I had never seen her look so lovely; and she knew what I thought, and her soft eyes sparkled.

"Can't stop while you look at one another; should have to stop all day, if it came to that." Uncle Corny was crisp in his style, this morning, because of the frost he expected; "Now, Mrs. Kit, don't expect him, till you see him. He will have to keep the fires up, till ten o'clock, for all I know; and Tabby will have something good for supper at my place. If you can come too, it will be all the better; but after all this kick-up of dust, you will be tired. I never can understand why women are always dusting; they only make more."

"We are not going dusting; that shows how little you know about it, Uncle Corny," my Kitty replied with proper spirit; "we are going to have a fine good cleaning, such as you give your wall-trees with the engine. You insist upon keeping your trees clean; but you don't care how dirty your boards are."

"Boards don't grow," my uncle replied, as if that shut her up altogether.

"Yes, they grow dirty," she answered in his own short style; and he only said, "Come along, Kit."

But he turned back, and kissed her; for he loved her dearly. And both he and I were glad of it, when we talked about it afterwards.

Then, as he started with his swinging walk, for he was proud of his flat back and sound joints, my dear wife came to the door, and threw her round white arms about my neck. She had turned [229] up her sleeves, to show the earnest purpose in her figure, and her scolloped apron, trimmed with pink, came nestling into my waistcoat.

“We have never been apart so long, my pet, since our wedding-day,” she whispered, and her eyes looked wistful; “don’t expect me down there now; for I don’t think that he wants me much. And I shall have something ready for you, and your new pipe filled, my dear, the one I gave you at Baycliff. I shall be lonely, I dare say; but I shall have the clock to tell me when you are certain to be home again. And it is high time for us to learn to do without one another.”

People talk of presentiments, as if nothing could happen without them. I only know that I had none; but it almost seemed as if she had some, being of a quicker mind than I. And I was glad for many a long day that I kissed her with true tenderness, and looking back caught one sweet smile from the corner where the white lilac stood.

All that day I was hard at work, attending to what I had in hand, with enough of mind to do it well, or at least as well as in me lay. And these things, when they suit the nature both enlarge and purify it; so that a man who takes delight in all these little turns of life, although he may be tried and harassed by the pest of plaguesome insects, and the shifts of weather, yet shall do his own heart good, by doing good to what he loves. Neither shall he find himself in the humour to believe half the evil that he hears of his old friends; or even to be sure when he goes to his letter-box, that the bill which he finds there a month after he has paid it, may not have been sent in again by pure mistake.

“How you are mooning!” said my Uncle Corny, who often pretended to be rougher than he was; “that bottom branch should be at least three inches lower. And do you call that leader straight? Why, I call it a ram’s horn. How often must I tell you, that to make sure of your work, you must step back, and see how it looks across the border? And here’s a great batch of scale left to hatch at its leisure. A pretty wife spoiled the best gardener I ever knew. You have been thinking of Kitty, all the blessed day, I see. But put away your nail-bag, and let the net down from the coping. What do you suppose the thermometer is now?”

“Well, perhaps about forty,” I replied, looking round, for the sun was gone down in a rich red sky, and the air was very shrewd, and my fingers getting cold.

“Thirty-six already, and will be thirty very soon; and twenty-two at four o’clock, as sure as I’m [230] a sinner. If we only pull through this, we shall be all right. There’s a change of weather coming within twenty-four hours. Come and have a glass of ale; and then we’ll go and do the bonfires. When we have done, Tabby will give us a hot chop, and then you will be home, before Kitty breaks her heart.”

I knew that our bloom, which was now beyond its prime, had escaped very narrowly the night before, and would be in still greater peril to-night; for these frosts always strengthen, until there comes a change. So while he set off with his five-tined fork, I ran to the house for my glass of beer (which I really wanted after that long day), and another box of matches, for he thought that his were damp. And when Mrs. Tapscott handed me the ale, she asked in a tone which made me feel uncomfortable—

“Have’e got the gearden door locked vast?”

“What garden door do you mean?” I inquired. “There are two gates, and there are three doors, Tabby. And what makes you ask, in that ominous voice?”

“Dun’now what hominous manes,” she replied; “but I knows what door manes, and so ought you. Old lead-coloured door, to the back of your ouze.”

“Well, I suppose it must be locked. It always is. None of our men go that way, you know. But what makes you put such a question to-night?”

“Dun’now, no more than the dead,” she answered, “only come into my head, as such things will. Heer’d zummat down town, as zet me a-thinking. You zee her be locked, when you goes home.”

Before I could ask her what she had heard, the sound of my uncle’s impatient shout came through the still air; and I hurried off to help him, for he had more than he could well do by himself.

It was deep dusk now, and the night was falling fast. Venus, on duty as the evening star, shone with unusual size and sparkle, above the faint gleam which had succeeded the yellow glow after the red sundown. And a little white vapour was rising here and there, where the low ground leaned into the gentle slope; but there was not enough of air on the move to draw the slow mist into lines, or even to breathe it into any shape at all.

“Now look sharp!” exclaimed Uncle Corny, who was not at all concerned with Nature’s doings, [231] except as they concerned his pocket.

“I understand things; and you don’t. You will see, if you know north from south, that I have arranged all this in a most scientific manner. Here are fifty piles on the eastern side of all these Bonlewin, and fifty on the north. The wind must be either north or east, when it freezes. We light up, according to the direction of the wind.”

He wetted one finger at his lips, and held it up according to some old woman’s nostrum for discovering what way the wind blows. And I said—“But supposing there is no wind at all?”

“Very well. It doesn’t matter what way it is;” he had made up his mind, and meant to have it

out. “You are full of objections, because you know nothing. There is no cure for that, but to do as you are told. You begin at that corner, and let the air go through. I shall take this line, and see who does it best.”

“You could never have smoked that Old Arkerate out, in this sort of weather,” I said; and he laughed, as he always did, when that triumph was recalled.

“I heard something about him, the other day,” he shouted, as he was going down the row of piles; “but I can’t stop to tell you now. Remind me at supper.”

In spite of all that we both could do, and of all his long preparations, not a whiff of smoke would go near the trees, but all went up as straight as the trees themselves. And I laughed very heartily—the last hearty laugh I was to enjoy for many a day, at the excuses Uncle Corny made for the fume that would only come into his mouth. But he would not confess himself beaten; too genuine a Briton was he for that. He stamped about, and used strong words, and even strove with his broad-flapped hat, to waft the smoke, which was as stubborn as himself, into the track it should take; till I told him that he was like the wise man of Gotham, who shovelled the sunshine into his barn. Then he laughed, and said,—

“Well, it will be all right, by-and-by. As the frost draws along, this blessed smoke must come with it. You never understand the true principles of things. Just come in and have some supper, and we will have another look at it. You must never expect a thing to work at first. Other people have done it, and I mean to do it. It is nothing but downright obstinacy. Ah there, it begins to go right already! All it wants is a little common sense and patience.”

“I shall go home first,” I said, “and see that all is right. Kitty has got a bit for me to eat; and [232]
perhaps she will come down with me, in about an hour’s time, if she is not too tired. You go and have your supper, uncle.”

With this, I set off, having long been uneasy, partly perhaps at what Tabby had said, and partly at having been so long from home. But I whistled a tune, and went cheerfully along, for the night was beautiful, and the trees, still piled with blossom, rose against the starry sky, like cones of snow.

Our door was wide open, which surprised me just a little, for my wife was particular about that. Then I went into the passage, and called—“Kitty, Kitty!” but heard no sweet voice say, “Yes, dear!” Neither did any form more sweet than words of kindest greeting come. And my step rang through the passage with that hollow sound which an empty house seems to feel along every wall. With a terrible thumping in my breast, I turned into our little parlour, and struck against a straggling chair. There was no light burning, the window was wide open, the curtains undrawn, the room felt like a well, and the faint light from the sky upon the table showed that no supper-cloth was laid. Shouting for Kitty, in a voice of fear which startled myself, I groped my way to the mantelpiece where the matches stood. They were in a little ornament which we had brought from Baycliff; my trembling hand upset it, and they fell upon the rug. I picked up half a dozen, I struck them anyhow on the grate, and lit a small wax candle which we had considered rather grand. The room was in good order, there was nothing to tell any thing; but I knew that it had not been occupied for hours.

“She is gone,” I exclaimed, though with no one to hear me; “my Kitty is gone. She is gone for ever.”

I lit the fellow-candle, and left it burning on the table, while I hurried to the kitchen, though I knew it was in vain. The kitchen fireplace was gray with cold ashes; there was not a knife and fork nor a plate set out, and the white deal table had no cooking-cloth upon it. Then I gave up calling “Kitty,” as I had been doing all along, till I ran upstairs to our pretty bedroom; and there I called for her once more. When there came no answer, I fell upon the bed, and wondered whether I was mad.

All my wits must have left me in the bitterness of woe. I seemed even to accept it as a thing to be expected, not to want to know the reason, but to take it like death. Who I was, I knew not for [233]
the time, nor tried to think; but lay as in a blank of all things, only conscious of a misery I could not strive against. I did not even pray to die; for it seemed to make no difference.

Then up I got, with some sudden change, and the ring of my heel on the floor, as I struck it without measuring distance, now echoed in my brain; and anger sent anguish to the right-about. “This is the enemy’s work,” I cried; “it serves me right for not wringing their necks, for their cursed tricks at Hounslow. So help me God, who has made them and me, I will send them to Him, this time.”

My strength was come back, and the vigour of my limbs, and the iron control of every nerve. Until the sense of wrong had touched me, I was but a puling fool. I had felt that all my life was gone, with her who was the spring of it, and that nothing lay before me, but to put up my legs and moan. But praised be the Lord, who has given us that vivid sense of justice which of all His gifts is noblest, here I stood, a man again; ready to fight the Devil, and my brethren who are full of him.

CHAPTER XXXVII.
COLD COMFORT.

In the calm May night, I left my desolate home, to learn the cause and meaning of its desolation. Some men might have doubted whether it was worth their while to trace the dark steps of their own reproach. From what I had seen even now, I knew that my wife had left me of her own accord. There was not the smallest sign of struggle, or disorder, anywhere; nothing whatever to suggest that any compulsion had been used, or even that any stranger's foot had crossed our humble threshold. Of this I should learn more by daylight; and I took care not to slur the chance, by even treading the little path that led to the old door in the wall. There was a grass edging to that path, betwixt it and a row of espalier apple trees in full bloom now; and along that grass I made my way, with a bull's-eye lamp in my hand, as far as the leaden-coloured door, of which old Tabby had asked a few hours ago. Without stepping in front of that door, I threw the strong light upon it, and perceived at once that it had been opened recently. It was now unbolted and [234] unlocked, and kept shut only by the old thumb-latch. This I lifted, and stepped outside, keeping close to the post, so as not to meddle with any footprints, within or without. Then I cast my light on the dust outside, for the weather had lately been quite dry; and there I saw distinctly the impress of my darling's foot. I could swear to it among ten thousand, with its delicate springy curves; for her feet in their boots had the shapely arch and rise of a small ox-tongue; and ladies did not wear peg-heels then, to make flat feet seem vaulted.

By the side of that comely footprint were the marks of a coarser and commonplace shoe, short and square, and as wide as it was long, probably the sign pedal of a clod-hopping country boy, or lad. Of these there were some half-dozen, as if the boy had stamped about as he entered, and repeated the process when he returned. "I will examine these carefully, when the sun is up," thought I; "I must see to other matters now."

So I hurried at once, by the shortest track, to the lower corner of the gardens, where my uncle Corny lived. Tabby Tapscott was gone home, and the house all dark and fast asleep, for I must have lost an hour in my agony on the bed, besides all the other time wasted. At last my thunderous knocks disturbed even the sound sleep of the grower; and he flung up a window, and looked out, with a nightcap over his frizz of white hair.

"It is no time for anger," I replied to his hot exclamations; "come, and let me in. I want your advice. I am ruined."

My uncle was thoroughly good at heart; when he came down with a light, and saw the ghost he had let in, he was very little better than his visitor. He shook, as if old age were come upon him suddenly, while I tried to tell my tale.

"My Kitty gone, and gone of her own accord!" he cried, as if he, and not I, had lost her. "Man, you must be mad. Are you walking in your sleep?"

"God send that I may be! But when shall I awake?"

The old man's distress, and his trembling anguish, let loose all the floods of mine; I fell against the wall, where he hung his hats and saws, and sobbed like a woman who has lost her only child.

"Come, come," he said; "we shall both be ashamed of this. Your darling is not dead, my boy; but only lured away by some d——d trick. Don't blame yourself, or her. I will answer for her, sooner than I would for myself in this bad world. You shall have her back again, Kit; you shall [235] have her back again. There is a God, who never lets us perish, while we stick to Him."

"I have not stuck to Him. I have stuck to her." The truth of my words came upon me like a flash. It was the first time I had even thought of this.

"Never mind. He knows; and He meant it so," my uncle replied with some theology of his own; "no man will be punished for doing what the Bible orders. You'll see, my dear boy, it will all come right. You will live to laugh at this infernal trick. And I hope to the Lord, that I shall be alive to grin with you. Cheer up, old fellow. What would your Kitty think, to see you knock under to a bit of rigmarole? You must keep up your spirits for poor Kitty's sake."

To see an old man show more pluck than a young one, and to take in a little of his fine faith, set me on my pins again, more than any one would believe; and I followed him into his kitchen, where the remnants of the fire were not quite dead.

"Now blow it up, Kit," he said; "and put a bit of wood in. Tabby always leaves it in this cupboard. Ah, that was a fine tree, that old Jargonel! It lived on its bark, I believe, for about a score of years, and you helped to split it up, when you were courting Kitty. You shall court her again, my boy, and have another honeymoon, as they've cut yours short in this confounded way. Now, make a good fire, while I put my breeches on. You look like a ghost, that has never had a bit to eat. And I don't suppose you have touched a morsel to speak of, since breakfast. 'Never say die' is my motto, Kit. We'll be at the Police-office, by three o'clock. We can do nothing till then, you know."

Even as he spoke, his ancient cuckoo sang out one o'clock; and I obeyed his orders, and even found a little comfort in the thought, that Kitty would have smiled to see my clumsy efforts; for she was very knowing about making fires up. When I had contrived to eat a bit of something,

which my uncle warmed up for me, though I never knew what it was, he gave me a glass of old ale, and took a drop himself; and we talked of our calamity, until it was time to go. He asked me whether anything within the last few days could be called to mind that bore at all upon this sudden mystery. Whether any jarring words, however little thought of, had passed between my wife and me, as is sometimes the case, even when a couple are all in all to one another. But I could remember none, nor any approach to such a thing; and I had never seen a frown upon my darling's forehead. [236]

Then he told me what he had heard about his former tenant, Harker, the man whom he ejected by a fumigating process, much more successful than the ejectment of the frost. It was nothing more than this, and even this perhaps a piece of idle village gossip. Old Arkerate had taken much amiss his tardy expulsion, for he meant to live rent-free through winter, and had been heard to say that he would be—something anticipatory perhaps of his final doom—if that blessed young couple should be in his house very long. For he knew a trick worth two of that. And if he had been smoked out, hang them, they should be burned out.

I agreed with my uncle that such stuff as this was not worth repeating, especially as nothing of the kind had come to pass; and yet again it appeared suspicious that the door through which my dear wife had vanished should be the very one which old Harker had used for his special entrance and exit; while he had even been jealous of any attempt on the part of the owners to use it. But my uncle and myself were uncommonly poor hands at anything akin to spying. Our rule had always been to accept small fibs (such as every man receives by the dozen daily) without passing them through a fine sieve; which if any man does, he will have little time for any other employment.

"Take this big stick, Kit; I brought it for the purpose," said my uncle, when I had knocked a dozen times in vain, at the door of Sergeant Biggs, our head policeman; "it is the toughest bit of stuff I have ever handled. It will go through the panel of the door, before it breaks. Don't be afraid, my boy; take both hands; but let me get out of the way, before you swing it. Ah, that ought to bring him out. But we must make allowance for the strength of his sleep, because he has such practice at it, all day long."

Our police force at that time consisted of two men, Sergeant Biggs the chief officer, and Constable Turnover; very good men both, and highly popular. They were not paid by any means according to their merits; and we always got up a Christmas-box for them, which put them on their honour not to make a fuss for nothing. It is wise of every place to keep its policemen in good humour; otherwise it gets a shocking name, without deserving it.

"Coming, master, coming. Don't you be in such a hurry," we heard a very reasonable voice reply at last. "Got one leg into these here breeches, and can't get in the other, 'cos they wasn't made for me. Ah, there goes that blessed stair into my bad leg again! They promised to mend it, last Lady Day twelve-month; but mend it they won't, till I've got a running sore. Now, gents both, what can I do for you? Always at the post of duty. That's the motto of the Force. Why, bless me, if it isn't Mr. Orchardson! Any delinquents in your garden, sir?" [237]

"Ever so much worse than that," replied my uncle; "Biggs, are you wide awake? A dreadful thing has happened. Where is Turnover? We shall want you both at once."

"On duty, sir; patrolling—unless he have turned in. But he's very good for that, when I looks after him. Which I do pretty sharp, as he knows to his credit. A very active constable is Turnover. But come inside, Mr. Orchardson. Don't stand out in the cold, sir."

There was a streak of dawn among the trees towards Hampton, and the white frost-fog had rolled up from the river; and I saw that a dark cloud was gathering in the south. The change that my uncle had foretold was coming even sooner than he had expected it.

We went inside; and Sergeant Biggs, who had a light, pulled on a coat, and sat down in state before a railed desk, on which a square book was lying. Then he turned the brass cover off the ink, and squared his elbows.

"Now, sir, the particulars, if you please. We must make entry, afore we does nothing. You were quite right in coming to head-quarters, Mr. Orchardson. Let me see; May the fourteenth, isn't it?"

"No, Biggs, no. It is morning now; and yesterday was the fifteenth of May."

"Quite right, sir. Here it is upon the *Standard*. May 16th, 1861, 3.30 a.m. by office clock. Information received from Cornelius Orchardson, of the Fruit-Gardens, Sunbury. Everything ready, sir. Please to go ahead."

"Kit, you tell him. You know most about it. Scratch out 'Cornelius;' and put 'Christopher,' Biggs."

Sergeant Biggs did not like to disfigure his book. However, he was a most obliging man. "Stay, sir, stay," he exclaimed: "I can do it better and neater than that is. 'Cornelius Orchardson, of the Fruit-Gardens, Sunbury, and his nephew Christopher Orchardson.' That meets the point exactly. Now then, gentlemen, fire away. And I will reduce it into proper form." [238]

Chafing at all this rigmarole, which was sending another good hour to waste, I poured out my tale in a very few words, and had the satisfaction of seeing at last an expression of amazement gathering and deepening on the large fat countenance of Sergeant Biggs.

“Why this beats everything as was ever done in Sunbury, since Squire Coldpepper’s daughter ran away! And in the same family, too, as you might say! How long ago was that? Why, let me see.” He was going to refer to some books, and took off his horn spectacles first to consider where they were.

“Come along, Biggs. No time for that,” cried my uncle impatiently; “we want you to come and examine the place at once. It was useless for us to go up, till daylight. There are footsteps for you to examine, and the doors.”

“Now this here will be all over London, afore the clock strikes twelve to-day. Ah, you may stare, gentlemen; and we don’t tell how we do it. But such is our organization, and things are brought to such perfection now—”

“Come along, Biggs. Why, it’s pouring with rain! I knew the white frosts were sure to bring it. But I did not expect it till the afternoon. And it sounds like hail—shocking thing for all my blossom.”

“I’ll be with you, Mr. Orchardson, in about ten minutes. But I must put my toggery to rights first, you see. Sergeant Biggs does not think much of himself; but Sunbury does, and it would stare to see him go on duty without any waistcoat or stock, or even a pair of braces on. By-the-bye, gents, have you been to Tompkins’ house?”

This was about the first sensible thing he had said; and I answered that we had not been there yet; but would go there at once, as it was not far out of our course, and we would rejoin him at the cottage. I had thought more than once in the long hours of that night of going to see the girl Polly, but was loth to knock up a hard-working household for nothing, and felt sure that Polly could throw no light upon the matter: as she always left our cottage about five in the afternoon.

And so it proved when we saw her now. For she could only stare, and exclaim, “Oh Lor’!” having most of her wits, which were not very active, absorbed in hard work, and the necessity of living. And the more I examined her, the more nervous she became, fancying that she was [239] undergoing trial, and perhaps likely to be hanged for the loss of her young mistress.

“I never see nawbody take her away: nor nawbody come anigh the house, all the time as I were in it. Mother knows I didn’t.” This she said over and over again.

“Nobody says that you did, Polly,” I answered as gently as possible; “but did you see anything to make you think, that your mistress meant to go away, when you were gone?”

“I don’now what she was athinking of. She never told me nort about it. No, I never see nawbody take her away. It isn’t fair, nor true, to say so.”

“But, my good child, nobody supposes that you did. Nobody is blaming you in the least. Nobody thinks that you saw her go away. But can’t you tell us whether you saw anything to show that she was likely to go away?”

“Yes, I saw a big black crow come flying right over the roof about one o’clock; and then I knowed as some one was agoing, ’live or dead. But I never told her, feared to frighten her. Lord in heaven knows I didn’t.”

“And did you see anything else go by? A cat, or a dog, or a man or a woman, or anything else that did not usually come? Or did you hear any steps, anywhere near the house, or see anything more than usual?”

Polly shook her head, as if I was putting a crushing weight of thought on the top of it. And then she began to cry again, and her mother came up to protect her. She had cried when she heard that her mistress was gone; and she must not be allowed to cry again, or no one could tell what would come of it.

“Sweetie, tell the whole truth now. Got no need to be frightened. If perlice does come, they can’t do nothing at all to you, my dear. Seventeen children have I had, and none ever put thumb on the Bible.”

Mrs. Tompkins did not mean that her family failed to search the Scriptures, but that they had never been involved in criminal proceedings; nay, not even as witnesses.

“Well then, I think as I did see summat,” replied Polly under this encouragement. I would not have pressed her as I did, unless I had felt pretty sure that she was keeping something back. “It worn’t nothin’ to speak of much, nor yet to think upon, at the time.”

“Well, out with it, deary, whatever it was. All you have to do, is to speak the truth, and leave [240] them as can put two and two together, to make out the meaning of it.”

Thus adjured, Polly, after one more glance to be sure that no policeman was coming, told her tale. It was not very much, but it might mean something.

“’Twur about four o’clock, I believe, and all the things was put back again after mucksing out the rooms, when missus said to me, ‘You run, Polly, and pick a little bit of chive down the walk there. I don’t want much,’ she says, ‘but what there is must be good, and just enough to cover a penny-piece, after I’ve chopped it up and put it together. I wants to have everything ready,’ she says, ‘just to make a homily when my husband comes home. I have got plenty of parsley in that cup,’ she says, ‘but he always likes a little bit of chive, to give it seasoning. And be sure you pick

it clean,' she says, 'and it musn't be yellow at the tip, or dirty, because if the grit gets in,' she says, 'it's ever so much worse than having none at all.' So I says, 'All right, ma'am, I knows where it is; and you shall have the best bit out of all the row.' 'You're a good girl,' she says, 'don't be longer than you can help, and you shall have a cup of tea, Polly, before you go home, because you've worked very well to-day; nobody could 'a doed it better,' says she. Well, I took a little punnet as was hanging in the kitchen, not to make it hot in my hands, you see, and I went along the grass by the gooseberry bushes,—you knows the place I mean, mother; and there was the chives, all as green as little leeks. As I was a-stooping over them, with my back up to the sky, all of a sudden I heer'd a sort of creak like, as made me stand up and look to know where it come from. And then I seed the old door, as used to be bolted always, opening just a little way, in towards me, though I was a good bit off; and then the brim of a hat come through, and I sings out, 'Who's there, please?' There wasn't no nose or eyes a-coming through the door yet; nor yet any legs, so far as I could see; but only that there brim, like the brim of a soft hat; and I couldn't say for certain whether it were brown or black. 'Nothing here to steal,' I says, for I thought it wor some tramp; and then the door shut softly, and I was half a mind to go and see, whether there was any one out in the lane. But it all began to look so lonely like, and I was ordered not to stop, and so I thought the best thing was to go back, and tell the missus. But something came that drove it out of my mind altogether. For when I got back to the house she says, 'Don't you lose a minute, Polly, that's a good girl. Run as far as Widow Cutthumb's, and fetch half a dozen eggs. I [241] thought I had four, and I have only got three,' she says, 'and I can't make a homily for two people of three eggs. And my husband won't eat a bit, unless I has some,' she says.

"So I was off quick stick to Widow Cutthumb's; and there, outside the door, I seen that Bat Osborne, the most owdacious boy in all Sunbury. 'Halloa!' says he, 'Poll, you do look stunnin'. Got a baker's roll a-risin', by the way you be a-pantin'! Give us a lock of your hair, again' the time when we gets old,' he says. And afore I could give him a box on his ear, out he spreads his fingers, some way he must have learned—for I never could 'a doed it myself, no, that I couldn't—and away goes all my black-hair down over all my shoulders, just the same as if it was Sunday going on for three years back. That vexed I were, I can assure you, Mr. Kit—well, mother knows best how I put it up that very same morning for the cleaning, and our Annie to hold the black pins for me—but get at him I couldn't, to give him one for himself. He were half across the street, afore I could see out; and he hollered out some imperence as made all the others grinny. But I'll have my change, afore next Sunday week, I will.

"When I got back, Mr. Kit, you may suppose, all about the door and the hat-brim was gone clean out of my mind, as if it never was there; and I come away home, without a word about it, and never thought of it nother, till I lay awake in bed and heered our own door creak, when father went to spy the weather. But oh, if I had only thought about it, Mr. Kit, perhaps missus mightn't never 'a been took off!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.
NONE.

At this beginning of my great trouble, I used to be worried, more than common sense would warrant, by the easy way in which other people took my distress, even while I was among them. If anything occurred to make them laugh, they laughed with all their hearts at things, in which I could perceive no joke at all. I dare say they were right, and I was wrong; but I felt that I should not have laughed at all, if the tables had been turned upon them, as I wished they had been. That [242] is to say, if they had been in bitter grief, and I had been standing outside to help them. For the policemen I could make all allowance, because they must get seasoned by their profession, even as the lawyers do; but it did seem a little bit unnatural at first, that some men, to whom I would gladly have lent my last shilling but one, if they had wanted it, should be ready to put their hands into their pockets, not to feel if there was anything there for my good, but to enable them to enjoy a broad grin at leisure, if the least bit of laughable nature turned up. But one thing I will say for the women, there was scarcely so much as a smile among them; they could understand what I had lost, and they knew (perhaps from self-examination) that a good wife is not to be got every day.

The heavy cloud had been pouring down rain in volumes and hail in lines, when with Selsey Bill, and Mrs. Bill, and Polly lagging after us under a broken umbrella, my uncle and myself came to Honeysuckle Cottage and found Sergeant Biggs and Constable Turnover, with their oilskin capes running like a tiled roof, and their faces full of discipline.

"Wouldn't go inside, gents, till you came; no warrant being out, and no instructions received. Always gets into trouble, when we acts on our own hook."

We led them inside, for there was broad day-light now, and the cloud began to lift, and the rain came down in single drops, instead of one great sheet. As they stamped about and shook themselves in our little passage, scattering grimy wetness like a trundled mop, I wondered, with a bitter pang, what Kitty would have thought after all her neat work, if she could only have seen this.

"Turnover, you come after me. We makes this inspection together, mind. And what I sees, you sees, and corroborates. Though it ain't a case of murder, so far as we know yet, we must keep our eyes open, the same as if it was. Everything comes to us, and nothing comes amiss to them that does their duty."

This sentiment was much admired by Constable Turnover; and my uncle whispered, "Let them do exactly as they like, Kit. They are a pair of fools; but we need not tell them so. We shall have them on our side, at any rate. And if they don't do any good, they can do no harm. Leave them entirely to their own devices."

This quite agreed with my own view of the matter. When a crime has been committed, we call [243] in the police, as in dangerous illness we invoke a doctor, for the satisfaction of our own minds, rather than from any hope of being helped. And in the former case, we have this advantage—the thing becomes widely spread, and distant eyes are turned on it.

"All in order, gents; not a lock been forced, not a door broke open, so far as we can discover." Sergeant Biggs was beating his hands together, from the force of habit, as he came to us in the kitchen, where we were sitting drowsily. "Two windows open, and some rain come in; but no signs of entrance by them. The young lady have gone of her own accord, and left no sign for any one. Time of disappearance not exactly known, you say, but somewhere between five and ten o'clock supposed. Please give particulars of dress, height, and complexion. We know the young lady well enough, of course, but we like to have those things from relatives. And the dress is beyond us; ladies always are so changing. Mr. Kit says her gray cloak is gone, and brown bonnet. White chip hat hanging on the peg. Looks as if she meant to go a goodish way. But not much preparation for travelling. There was a little black bag, sir, you said you could not find. Very sorry to trouble you, sir, when you are so down-hearted. But I must ask you just to look into them drawers in the lady's bedroom. And specially to see if any cash is missing. Excuse me, sir, I meant no rudeness."

For I had leaped up, and was ready to strike him, at the suggestion that my darling could have robbed me.

"He is doing his duty, Kit; don't be a fool;" cried my uncle, as Biggs threw his arm up in defence.

"Must give up this case, sir," said the sergeant, without anger; "unless you allows us to conduct it our own way. We are bound to know all that can throw a light upon it. And nine times out of ten, when a woman—beg pardon—a lady runs away from her husband on the sudden, she collars all the cash, and all the trinkets she can find. Don't mean to insinuate for a moment that this young lady done anything of the kind. But for all that, I am bound to put the question; and Mr. Cornelius can see it, if you can't, sir."

"Very well; I will go and see," I answered, having sense enough to know that he was right; "and you can both come and see for yourselves, if you like. Perhaps you won't believe it, unless you do. At any rate, you come, Uncle Corny."

I ran up in haste to our little bedroom, as pretty a room as one could wish to see, for its [244]
cheerfulness, airiness, and fair view, between the clustering climbers, of the broad winding river and the hills beyond, all to be seen either over or amid a great waving depth of white and pink, where the snow of the pears put the apples to the blush. Very plainly furnished as it was, our little room looked sweet, even in its desolation, and as lively and delightful as the bride who had adorned it. My Aunt Parslow had given us a pretty chest of drawers, of real bird's-eye maple-wood, which she had bought at a sale somewhere; and we kept all our money, that was not at the bank, in one of the top drawers, which had a tolerable lock. This was the proper place for Kitty's purse and mine; although I never had one, so to speak—at least it was always empty. Whenever I had any money, fit to spend, it was generally always in my waistcoat-pocket; and it never stopped there long, if I came across anybody who deserved it. But I never went out with too much at a time; for it is not safe to have nothing left at home. The key was not in the drawer, of course; but I knew where Kitty kept it, and there it was, as usual.

I could have wept now, if I might have made sure of nobody coming after me, when I found all the balance of this week's allowance for housekeeping uses in a twist of silver paper—such as used to be common, but is seldom seen now; and my darling had not made much boot upon the store, ever since last Saturday. For our butcher, who wanted her to run up an account (being in love with her, as everybody was, although he had a wife and seven little butchers rising), had made believe that he could not stop to weigh the last half-leg of mutton he sent up. Kitty had told me of this, and lamented, while unwilling to appear distrustful of him. For an honest tradesman dislikes that, though he often has to brace up his mind to it.

I put this residue of our fifteen shillings into one corner, as a sacred thing; and then I went to the brown metal box at the back of the drawer, where we kept our main stock, with a dozen of my wife's new handkerchiefs piled over it, to delude all burglars. I had bought her a dozen, at less than cost price, as the haberdasher vowed, at Baycliff; and we had been reluctant to be so hard upon him; but he said that he was selling off, and we must have the benefit. And I lifted them now with a miserable pang; for my love had kissed me, for this cheap but pretty present, and she had marked them all with her own sweet hair.

I have often been astonished in my life, as everybody must be, almost before his hair begins to [245]
grow; but mine (which was now in abundant short curls) would have pushed off my hat, if I had worn one, when the money-box came to my eyes, half open, and as clean as a spade on a Saturday night. Every bank-note was gone, and every sovereign, too, and even the four half-sovereigns, which we had meant to spend first, when we could not help it!

I have never loved money with much of my heart, though we are bound to do as our neighbours do; and perhaps it had been a little pleasure to me, to have more than I ever could have dreamed of having, through the great generosity of Aunt Parslow, and the timely assistance of Captain Fairthorn. But now my whole heart went down in a lump, and I scarcely had any power of breath, as I fell once more upon my widowed bed, and had no strength to wrestle with the woe that lay upon me. That my own wife, my own true wife, the heart of my heart, and the life of my life, should have run away from me, of her own accord, without a word, without one good-bye, and carried off all our money!

"Come, Kit, how much longer do you mean to be?" my uncle's voice came up the stairs. "Let him alone, Biggs. Perhaps he is crying. Those young fellows never understand the world. Some little thing comes round a corner on them, and they give way, for want of seasoning. He was wonderfully bound up in his Kitty. And however it may look against her now, I will stake my life that she deserved it. You Peelers see all the worst of the world, and it makes you look black at everything. I would lay every penny I possess, which is very little in these free-trade times, that he finds every farthing of his money right. Though I have often told him what a fool he was to keep so much in his own house."

"He seems an uncommon time a-counting of it." Sergeant Biggs spoke sceptically, and retired to the kitchen; for it did not matter very much to him.

Getting no reply from me, my uncle came up slowly; for a night out of bed tells upon the stiff joints, when a man is getting on in years. Then he marched up bravely, and laid one hand upon my shoulder.

"What are you about, Kit? Breaking down, old fellow! You must not do that, with these chaps in the house, or the Lord knows what a lot of lies will get about. Money all right, of course. No doubt of that, my boy."

I could make no answer, but pointed to the drawer, which was still pulled out to its full extent. [246]
With a little smile, which expressed as well as words—"What a fool you must be, to keep your money there!" he looked in, and saw the empty cash-box, and turned as white as his own pear-blossom. Then he took the brown box in his thick right hand, and turned it upside down, as if he could not trust his eyes.

"How much was there in it? But perhaps you did not know? Oh, Kit, Kit, is it come to this at last?"

He spoke as if I ought to have been robbed by my own wife, a long time ago, and was bound by the duty of a husband to expect it. But my spirit rose, and I jumped up, and faced him.

"Every farthing of it was her own," I said; "and she had a perfect right to take it. It is part of

the hundred pounds Aunt Parslow gave her, on our—on her wedding-day. There was forty-five pounds in that box; and the other fifty-five was invested according to your advice. I would send her that also, if I knew her address. It was all her own money; you may ask Aunt Parslow. I have no right to a farthing of it."

"Kit, you are a very fine fellow after all, though you do take things so lumpily. But answer me one little question. Why did your aunt give her that hundred pounds?"

"Because she loved her, as everybody does—or did. Because she was so kind, and good, and loving."

"No, my boy, not at all for that reason. But because she married you, Aunt Parslow's nephew. The money was yours, in all honesty, not hers. Or at any rate it belonged to you together. She had no more right to take that money without your consent, than I have to walk into Baker Rasp's shop, and walk out of it with the contents of his till. You must look at things squarely, and make your mind up. Expel her from your heart. She is a light-of-love, and a robber. Oh, Kit, Kit, that I should have brought you into this! And I did think that I knew so much about women."

My uncle shed a tear, not on his own account, or mine, and perhaps not even for the sake of women; but because he had loved Kitty as his own daughter, and he could no more expel her from his heart, than I from mine; at least without taking a long time about it. I was moved with his grief, for he was hard to grieve; and my wrath at his injustice was disarmed. I put back the empty box, and locked the drawer; for I knew that it was useless to argue with him.

"This is the second great grief of my life," he said in a low voice, as if talking to himself; "over [247]
and above those losses which are inflicted on us by the Lord, as time goes on. And the other was through a woman too. I will tell you of it, when we have more time; for it may help you in your own grief, Kit. But now we must quiet those fellows downstairs. I wish we had never called them in. I would rather lose every penny I possess, and start in the world again, as a market-porter, than let this miserable story get abroad. We must take your view of the case before the public, and tell them that there is no money gone, except her own. The Lord knows that I am not a liar, and He will forgive me for stretching a bit this time. Or perhaps you had better do it; because you believe it, you know, and so there won't be any lie at all. You go down first; and I will come behind you grumbling, which no one can say is an ungrateful thing now."

This seemed the proper course, although in my misery I should never have thought of it, until I wished that I had done so. The question as to the right to that money lay between myself and Kitty; and as she had doubtless considered it hers, to brand her at large as a robber, without allowing her chance of explanation, would be most unfair, and would only add another pain to a story too painful already. So I went down and told Sergeant Biggs that my wife had taken a few clothes in her handbag, and a part of some money she had lately received as a wedding-present, but had left the balance of her cash for housekeeping, as well as most of her trinkets, in the bedroom drawer.

He was much disappointed at this, and shook his head, to disguise the blow received by his sagacity.

"Beats me for the present, at any rate," he said; "but time will throw more light upon it, before we are many years older. You hold on, sir, and not go about too much. Half the mischief comes of that. A party comes to us, and he says—'Look here, I leave the whole of it to your care, sergeant. You understand these things, and I don't. Anything as you do I will back up—magistrates, witnesses, lawyers, dogstealers—whatever you find needful, up to a five-pound note, or more.' And after that, what do we feel? Why, ready to go through with it, on our best mettle, you might say, and come down with cash out of our own breeches' pocket, for love of nothing else but duty. And then we gets crossed, like two dogs a-coursing, by the other party's track, with his nose up in the air the very same as if he never come anigh us. So I says to Turnover, 'Now one thing or [248]
the other; either they must let us do it all, or nothing. And if we do it all, in a hunt-the-slipper thing like this, we must know all the ins and outs, first from the beginning. Then,' says I, 'we can give our minds to it, Turnover.' And he answers—'Yes, sergeant, but do they mean to tell us everything?' And now that's the question before you, sir."

"We will think about that, and let you know by-and-by," said my uncle, who had listened to this long oration; "not that you ever find out anything, Biggs. Still it is a comfort to believe that you are trying. And now come and do what you ought to have done long ago—make a careful examination of the footprints by the door. It has been raining pretty sharp; but it all came from the south, and the important marks are on the north side in the lane, according to what my nephew saw last night, and the shower won't have touched them, with the door shut to. Bring some paper and a pencil, and your old joint-rule, Kit. Not that we shall ever make out much."

He was right enough in that last prediction. For although I had fastened the door—in strict keeping with the moral of the proverb—and no rain had pelted the ground outside it, yet a greater effacer than rain had been there. For the spot being on a sharp slope, and below the crown of the road, or the lane I should say, a strong rush of water had taken track there, and washed away all the dust, and then the heavier substance, leaving rough pebbles with sharp edges sticking up, as clean and unconscious as before they saw the world.

"Nothing to be made of that," said Biggs; "nor of any footmarks anywhere else, after all the rain as have fallen. Only one thing to do now is to inquire of the neighbours, and folk as were about last night."

CHAPTER XXXIX.
ON TWO CHAIRS.

For as much as three weeks I had been full of pride, in taking my Kitty about everywhere—even by the seaside, where I knew very little, but luckily she knew less, in spite of her scientific origin —and asking her to look about and see things with her own eyes; and if she could not make them [249] out, to call me in to help her. This had been rash on my part; for a man may be gaping about, for his lifetime, and die after all with his mouth wide open; and not a word come from it, to help the people left behind, but only to unsettle them, and put them in a flutter; as gnats skip into another dance, at every new breath across them. But Kitty had really put some questions far outside my knowledge (as a child may, who hangs on his grandfather's thumb), and I had promised to look up those points and deliver an opinion, when I had one. All this came into my mind, like a chill, when I had to trace her dear steps, away from me, away from me.

Let seventy times seven wise men say that no man with a grain of wisdom could have a spark of faith in women, because they never know their own mind—little as there is of it to know—I still abode in my own faith, and let them quote old saws against the sturdy holdfast of true love. I felt as sure of my Kitty's heart, as I did of my own, and more so; for she never would have borne to hear a hundredth part of the things against me, which I had to listen to against her. And the cowards, who vent their own craven souls in slander of those who cannot face them, had a fine time of it now, and rejoiced in the misery they were too small to feel. Such things might sour a weakling, who depends upon what other people think; but I found enough of manhood coming up in me, as time went on, to make me stick to my own trust, and let outer opinions touch my home, no more than the shower that runs down the glass.

At first, however, it was dreadful work. Everybody seemed to be against me, not with any unkindness, but by way of worldly wisdom. "Don't you dwell too much upon it." "A runaway wife isn't worth running after." "Never you mind; but get another; try the people you know, with their friends in the place." These were the counsels I received, with a nod of my head, and no reply.

But I could not see things as others saw them. I spent the first day of my lonely life, in wandering through the crooked lanes, and working out every track and turn which my darling could have taken, in the dark mystery of her flight from me. Very often I thought that she must come back; and there was scarcely a hill that I did not run up, persuading myself that when the top was gained, there I should descry her in the distance beyond, weary, and dragging her feet along, but eager at sight of me to make a rush and fall into my longing arms. How many a corner [250] I turned, believing that it must be the last between her and me; and how many a footpath stile I sat on, hiding my eyes that she might catch me unawares, as at blind-man's buff, and throw her warm arms round my neck, and kiss me into shame of my mistrust, and tell me that she never could have doubted me, whatever I had done, or whatever people said!

And then, when it grew too dark to see even my own love in the shadow of the lanes, and the last note of the wedded thrush (who sings to the sparkle of the stars in May) was hushed by a call from his nest, and followed by the first clear trill of the nightingale—

"Who tells the deeper tale of night
With passion too intense for light,"

—weary, and with little heart for loneliness and doubt and woe, yet I could not be quite sure that when I opened our own door some one might not run out hotly, and give me no time to speak, but hold me lip to lip, and breast to breast, with scarcely room for a tear between us.

It is the emptiness that follows such full hope that does the harm to the powers of endurance. When no one came to meet me, and the cold rooms showed grey lines of shade, with no dear life to cross them, I used to fall away, and feel my heart go down, like the water of a sink, when the plug is taken out of it. There was nothing more for it to do. My wretched life was not worth the fuss of pumping and of labouring; better to give in at once, and have no more pain to drain it.

"You are killing yourself up here, my boy; this will never do," said Uncle Corny. "Bother the women; what a pest they are! Try to be like that ancient fellow—I can never remember his name, but they call him the father of history. You told me about him, when you went to the Grammar-school at Hampton. And it was so wise that I paid for another half-year for you to read him. You know better than I do; but I think there had been a lot of carrying off of pretty girls between two countries, and they were going to fight about them. But he says that they had no call to do it; for men of discretion would let them go, and make no fuss about them. Because it was manifest that the women would never have been carried off, unless they themselves had wished it. I don't suppose you could do it now; but if you can, bring down the book, and read it to me this evening. [251] It would do you a deal more good than to hold your tongue, and eat your heart out."

"I hate to hear of that rubbish," I replied; "they were a lot of good-for-nothings. To talk of my Kitty in that sort of way would drive me mad, Uncle Corny. If you have nothing better to say than that, you had better go home to Tabby."

"Well, perhaps they will come and carry Tabby off. I believe she would go for a new bonnet; and I don't know what I should do if she did. But shut up this place, Kit, and come back to the old

quarters. You want company, my boy; and I'd rather let old Harker in again than have you here killing yourself like that, and sleeping in the kitchen on two chairs; if you ever get any sleep at all."

"I will never leave this house," I said; "and I won't even be smoked out of it. When Kitty comes back, she will come here first; and there is no telling how soon she may want me. You only bother me with all this stuff."

"Well, I will not be hard upon you, Kit; because the Lord has done that quite enough. But you have not got a bit of religion in you, after all the teaching I have given you."

This was very fine from Uncle Corny, who never even went to church, except to keep other people out of his pew. And he rubbed his nose as he said it; as he always did, when he had gone too far.

"There is a very good man wants to see you," he went on a little nervously, for I knew that he had been leading up to something; "and a man to whom you are bound to listen, because he was the one who married you, and therefore understands all the subject, matrimony, women, and the doctrines of the Church. The Reverend Peter Golightly wishes to have a little talk with you."

"And I wish to have none with him. He is a very good and kind-hearted man. But I could not bear to hear his voice, after—after what he did for me, and Kitty."

"I was afraid there would be that objection," my uncle answered kindly; "but you will get over that by-and-by, my boy. And it would be rude not to see him, for he takes the greatest interest in your case. He has been disappointed himself, I believe; though of course he did not tell me so. He is too much a man for that sort of thing. I shall go and hear him preach some day, unless our vicar comes back again. They tell me that he does a lot of good, and he preached against robbing [252] orchards once, although he has only got one apple tree, and it is eaten up with American blight. There's another fellow wants to see you too—not much of the parson about him. He can tell you things you ought to know; and being about as he always is, I wonder you have not been to see him. Not that I care for Sam Henderson; but he is not so bad as he used to be. He is going to be married next month; and I'll be bound he won't let his wife—"

"Run away from him—you were going to say. Perhaps he will not be able to help himself. Well, I will see him, if he likes to come. I shall be back by nine o'clock. It is very kind of him to wish it. But send up a bottle of whisky, uncle. I have no drink of any sort in the house; and Sam is nothing without his glass, although he never takes very much. I must give him something, if he comes."

"And take a drop yourself, my boy, if only for a little change. I don't hold with cold water, when a fellow is so down; though it is better than the opposite extreme. I suppose, by-the-bye, that your Kitty has not taken—"

"Uncle Corny!" I cried, in a voice that made him jump; "what next will you imagine? She never touched anything, not even beer; though I often tried to make her take a glass. She had seen too much of that, where she was."

"All right, Kit. But you are getting very cross; which is not the proper lesson of affliction, as the Reverend Peter might express it. Well, I'll send little Bill up, with the bottle and a corkscrew. I don't suppose you know where to find anything now. That's the worst of married life even for three weeks. But I have got a plan I mean to tell you of to-morrow."

When I came back, a little after dark, having finished that hopeless wandering which I went through every evening now, there was Sam Henderson, sitting on an empty flower-pot outside my door, with a cigar in his mouth. He might have gone inside, for I left the front door open all day long and all night too, unless the weather prevented it, for I had nothing to be robbed of now; at least nothing that I cared about, except Kitty's clothes, which I had locked out of sight. And it seemed to be delicate and kind of Sam, to sit here in discomfort, instead of walking in. And he showed another piece of good taste and good will, which could hardly be expected from so blunt and rough a man—he said not a word about his own bright prospects, until I inquired about them.

But he shook my hand in a very friendly way, and left me to begin upon the matter which had [253] brought me to my present state. And for some time I also avoided that.

"I will tell you, old chap," he said at last, in reply to my anxious question, "exactly what I think, though it is not good for much, being altogether out of my own line. I think you have been awfully wronged, as abominably wronged as any fellow ever was, on the face of this earth—which is saying a good bit, mind you. Knowing what a lot of infernal rogues there are to be found at every corner, and much more often than decent fellows, I am never brought up standing by any black job; though the ins and outs of it may floor me. The Professor is a soft man, isn't he? He has shown it in many ways, although he is so clever. You would call him a soft man, wouldn't you?"

"Well," I said, wondering how this could bear upon it, "I suppose he is rather of the credulous order, as most good men are, who measure others by themselves. But he had left England long before. So that can have little to do with it."

"Right you are, as concerns himself. But I am a believer in breed, my friend. And the longer I live, the more true I find it come. A credulous father, if you prefer the word, is likely to be blest with a credulous child, and your wife took after her father more closely in the inner, because she didn't in the outer woman. At least, I can't say from my own eyes, knowing nothing of old

Blowpipes, but I understand she did not favour him in the flesh."

"Not exactly," I answered, with a little smile, as I thought of the loveliness of Kitty's face; "but she was like him a little just here and there."

"A little won't do. My old *Trunnion*, who croaked in the great frost that almost settled you, my boy, has a son of his old age, *Commodore*, who will be heard of towards July at the market, scarcely a bit like him in the face, except in one tuck of his nostril, and a tuft of five hairs over his near eye. But do you think I could not swear to him by his ways and tricks, and his style of coming up? That's the time to know what a horse thinks of you; and I tell you this colt thinks exactly as his father did; and all the more because he isn't like him in the face. There must be the likeness somewhere."

"Yes, I have heard you say that many times before, and I daresay you are right enough about it. But what has that to do with—what has happened to me?"

"Just everything, stupid. Your wife being soft—or credulous, if you like it better—she sucks in a [254] lot of lies against you. The dose comes from somebody she believes in, not her old enemies, of course. Her dignity will not allow her to complain—women are always horribly dignified when jealous—and off she goes, without a word, leaving you to your own conscience which will more than give you the tip for it. She'll come back by-and-by, when she has punished you enough; and then of course you'll have to swear, etc., etc. She'll call herself all sorts of names. And there'll be nobody like you, till next time. You'll see if that isn't at the bottom of all this."

"Not likely," I answered with some wrath. "In the first place, my Kitty would never believe a word of such stuff against me, and there is no such thing as jealousy in her nature."

"You know best. But I thought I heard something from the man round the corner at Ludred."

"That was a different thing altogether," I said quickly, although the remembrance struck me, as it had not done before; "and in the next place, if she could be so absurd, she would be the last person in the world to go away without a word, without even giving me a chance of taking my own part. No, that theory will never do. My Kitty was the most just, as well as the kindest darling ever born."

"You don't know what they are sometimes. How can you expect to know more about them than they do about themselves? Yesterday, just by way of something, I asked Sally what she would do, if she ever turned up jealous. 'I would grind my ring-finger off,' she said, 'with these two teeth, I would, Sam'—for she has got uncommon grinders—'and I would make my rival swallow it.' Now, Sally has been well broken in, remember, and no vice in the family; at any rate since her great grand-dam; but her eyes showed that she would do it!"

"There is no ferocity in Kitty," I answered with a lofty air; "I know nothing about race-horses, and very little about women. But women are only men in a better form, more gentle, more just, and more loving. They never give way to such fury as we do—"

"The Professor's wife, for instance, Kit. She never gives way to her temper, does she? Oh dear, no. Even if she has any temper to give way to. A sucking dove—too mild to suck, if her sister wants the pigeon's milk before her."

"She is the exception that proves the rule. And I doubt whether even she would be so, if she did not suck too much of stronger liquor. And I will tell you another thing, Master Sam, as you [255] have put me up to this; and you have a right to know everything now, that you may understand the case. It knocks your theory on the head. Only I must have your solemn promise that no one shall ever hear of it."

Sam gave me his pledge; and I knew that he would keep it, for he was well inured to control his tongue. Then I told him, although it went much against the grain, of the disappearance of our stock of money.

"That beats me; at least for the present," he replied; "it don't seem to square with anything. Throws me out of my stride, and makes me cross my legs. But I don't believe she ever took it. How can you tell that she took it, poor chap? If she collared that tin, she will never come back. Was there nobody else could have taken it? The Peelers, for instance, you know what they are? They had the run of the house. I have known a lot of cases—"

"No, it is impossible that they can have touched it. The lock had not been tampered with. The key was in its place, and the last place they would have searched for it. And I know by the state of the drawer, that no hand but my wife's had been inside it."

"Then you had better not call her your wife any more." Sam Henderson spoke very sternly; and then, looking at my face, went on more kindly, and with a huskiness in his voice, "You have been unlucky, old chap, as unlucky as any fellow I ever came across, except an old man at New York races once. It was not about money his bad luck was; or I would not compare it with yours, my dear boy. Sorry as I was for your trouble, Kit, I thought it could all be cured, till now. And it can be cured even now, dear Kit; but only as we cure the grief of death. I need not tell you to be a man; for I see that you have been one all along. After what you have told me, I understand your behaviour thoroughly. Before that, I was angry with you, and a little ashamed of you, to tell the truth, for moping here in this way. I thought, 'Why the deuce doesn't he go up and shake the truth out of that old rogue Hotchpot, or that bigger villain, Downy Bulwrag?' But now I see that

you could only stay at home, and trust to time to comfort you. And you must weed out, as I would a filly with three legs, a bad lot, a woman who—”

“Stop, Sam,” I cried, “don’t say a word that would make me hate you. Though all appearances are so black, I will never for a moment lose my faith in Kitty. Nobody knows her, as I do. If I never see, or hear of her again, I will say to my last breath, and feel to my last pulse, that she has been deceived, not by me, but about me; and that I have never been deceived in her.” [256]

“Well, old chap, all that I can say is, that you deserve a better wife than was ever yet born. And if your opinion of your wife is true, why, this affair beats any job on the turf, that I ever heard of; and I have heard of a smart few. But I shall keep my eyes open, Kit, and we’ll try to pull it off. I pick up a lot of things you would never think of; and there’s daylight at the bottom of the best tarred sack. Come and see me to-morrow. It will be a little change. And I can show you a young ’un that will take the shine out of all Chalker’s. If you want a pot of money, I can tell you where to get it.”

CHAPTER XL.
JOB'S COMFORT.

I DID not want any pot of money. And even if I had been filled with that general desire, Henderson's suggestion would have had no charm for me. But I resolved to do a much wiser thing—to stick to my work, with head and hands, and let the heart come after them, if it could, as it grew wiser. The police had made nothing of my case, although they had done their best, no doubt. Whoever had compassed my wife's departure—for I would not call it "flight"—had managed it with much craft; and luck (according to the ancient proverb) had shown a kinsman's love for craft. The lane, at the back of our lonely cottage, was little frequented, except on Sundays, and then in the evening only, for that study of mutual tastes and feelings, which is known as "keeping company." For this it was a popular resort, and therefore (as usual) called "Love Lane," by blushing youth and maiden. At other times its chief use was to give access to some meadow-land, and its chief wayfarers were four cows, a donkey, and a nanny-goat, belonging to Farmer Osborne. But it wound into divers other lanes, towards Hampton, Tangley Park, and Bedfont, and through some of them to Feltham Station, on the London and South-Western line. That was one of the places where I had made first inquiry; but Sergeant Biggs had [257] been before me, and so he had at Twickenham. And in fact he had sought far and near, and been put upon false scent sometimes, but had hit on nothing genuine.

Whatever any man may say, or even think, or dream of, the opinions of his fellow-men go into his mind, and work there. No one is certain what he believes; or at any rate how he believes it. And the harder he toils to establish his faith, the more apt he is to undermine it. His best plan is never to argue about whatever he longs to trust in; or if his good friends will not let him alone, he should choose for his disputant the sceptic. This will build him up a good deal; not because he has convinced the other man, but because he knows that he must have done so, if the other had been gifted with reason.

And now I was more convinced than ever, by the firm convictions of my uncle, and Sam, that they both were quite wrong, and that I was quite right. If they had only said that there might be some mistake, something that admitted of a simple explanation, and with patience on our part must receive it, in that case the chances are that I should have been doubtful whether they had any grounds for putting it in that way. But when they came and put it—without asking my opinion —in the very opposite way to that, and the opposite one to what I wanted to believe, their conclusion was a spring-board to send me heels over head to the counter one.

My good Aunt Parslow had been over twice, and held very long talks with Uncle Corny; but I had simply refused to take part in them. To go into all the pros and cons, and hear one say this, and the other say that; all assuming in the calmest manner that they knew at least ten times as much about my poor self, and my richer self, as both of us put together knew, in our most conscientious moments—grateful as I was, I offered them that view of gratitude, which alone can make a slow shot at her fleeting speed—the instantaneous process. In the twenty-four millionth part of a moment, all her legs have spurned the wind, and the fool who thought to chronicle her, finds her dust upon his glass.

Herein I was not just, or fair; and I have lived to be ashamed of it. But up to this present time of search, I have not come across the man, who continued to be just and fair, while a wrong that went to the bottom of his soul was fresh, and hot, and turbid. Such men there may be, of vast philosophy, or profound religion; but I have never met them yet; and if I do, I shall be afraid of [258] them.

Thus I waited, day by day, slowly quitting hold of hope, hardening myself to do without her, by incessant work of hand. In this I took no pride or pleasure, as a mill finds none in perpetual grind; but from morning twilight till evening dusk, I laboured among the lonely trees. My uncle begged me to go to London, if only for a little change and stir, as the strawberry season came, and he began to use his stand again. But I felt myself unfit for this, and knew that in my present vein, I should only do a mischief to him, among his ancient customers. For a happy face and a cheerful spirit do best among the buyers; and a bit of chaff, or a turn of slang, will sometimes help a lame market through. I knew a man once, a mere carter he was, who had never been near "Common Garden" before, but was sent up by a neighbouring grower, as a last resource, when his salesman fell ill. A mere bumpkin he was, and he wore a smock-frock, and cord trousers tied below the knee; but his round, merry face, and broad country brogue, and native simplicity and twinkling eyes, took the humour of the crowd; and he sold out all his lot at top prices, by looking as fresh as his fruit, before anybody else had got rid of a dozen.

"Well, if you won't go up, you won't," my uncle said to me one day; "but you will break down, going on like this. I like a young fellow to work; but I can't abide for him to do nothing else, and never think twice of his victuals. And you are spoiling your own chance altogether, in another and a very important affair. Your Aunt Parslow took a great fancy to you, and she meant to come down handsome when she dies. She told me that, almost in so many words. And now you are setting her quite against you. You know how you behaved, the last time she came over."

"I could not endure her perpetual talk. You can't say that I was rude to her. But I don't want her money. What good is it to me? I wish she had never given us a farthing."

"It is nasty rubbish to talk like that, Kit; and every one will turn against you. You used to have

such a lot of common sense. Well, perhaps you were not exactly rude to her; or at least you did not mean to be. But there is nothing ruder, as women look at it, than to let them have all the talk to themselves; although they insist upon it, if you don't. You must not interrupt them, of course; but still you must say enough to show that you are listening, and that you think highly of what [259] they are saying; though of course you knew it all, before they began. Instead of that, what did you do? You crossed your legs; women never like that, when they are talking to you, any more than a lap-dog who wants to jump up. I don't know why it is; but they never can bear it. And you did worse than that. The clock struck five, and you began to count it. You young fellows never behave well to ladies."

"I am sure I did not mean to offend her, uncle. I never thought twice of what I was doing."

"Exactly. And you should have thought of nothing else, while you seemed to think only of what she was saying. But I want you to do me a favour, Kit. I suppose you don't wish to offend me too?"

"Certainly not. Because you are reasonable, and have always been so good to me. I will do anything to oblige you, Uncle Corny."

"And by doing it, you will oblige yourself. You are wearing your fingers to the bone, and all the flesh off your other bones, by this confounded stubbornness. I hate to hear the tap of your hammer almost, much as I used to like it. Now, just take old Spanker to-morrow afternoon, and drive over to your aunt's at Leatherhead, with a basket of strawberries I promised her. She doesn't know what a good strawberry is; eleven people out of a dozen don't; any more than a babe that just opens his mouth. She has plenty of her own, I know; but none worth the trouble of eating. To-morrow will be Saturday. You can stop till Monday; and it will do you a lot of good, and set you up again almost. There is nothing like a woman in a case like yours. You let her talk on, and you never contradict her, and she says to herself—'Well, I have done him good!' And so she has; not the way she meant it; but by making you think that they are all alike, and not a bit of solid sense among them. And it is not only that, but you are pleased to think how much better you know things than they do; though you don't say one word to their fifty. Whenever I am bothered, or cheated, or insulted, I get a nice woman to talk to me; and it is as good as a pipe of the best birdseye; which you can have at the same time, if you know how to do it."

"You seem to look at things for your own advantage only," I answered, because I thought these views low; "however I will do as you wish; and Sunday is a dreadful day for me here, without any work. I thought last Sunday would never end; and not being a woman, I could not come and [260] comfort you."

I was pleased with this rap at him; because I could not see what business he had with nice women, and so on; whether they came to his house to talk with him, or whether he went to have his pipe at theirs, as he had almost let out by his last words. For there never was a woman who could stop him of a pipe in his own house—that was certain. But that he should talk of my being stubborn, amused me, every time I thought of it. Verily if I had a splinter of that substance in me, he was the oak from which it came; and he might have spared enough to roof a church, without anybody asking how he was.

Now he wrote to my aunt that I was coming, according to her proposal, and he made Tabby Tapscott come up to the cottage, and pack up a few things for me, inasmuch as I had no one now to do it. And he had his best strawberries picked in the morning, before the sun margarined them, and kept in a cold place till I was ready, and then packed so that no heat could get at them. And as *Spanker* had not been to London for three days, he was sure to strike out at a merry pace, when he found himself free of the country. For I never saw a horse that liked to go to London; any more than a man loves a cemetery.

Spanker was as gay as May, as soon as he knew where he was going; and he roused up each hill with a rush from the other, which showed a deep sense of Mechanics. Nobody would have believed his age, even if he had told it truly; which he had strong human reason for not attempting, having found his teeth filed quite early.

What with the brisk air of those hills, and the soft turn of the valleys, and the gaiety of the time of year, a quantity of heaviness went from me, and a vein of health flowed in. Not that I ever said to myself—as people of inconstant nature do,—"There are better fish in the sea," etc.; or, "If she be not fair to me;" or even so much as, "Care killed the cat." My mood was neither independent nor defiant, and I felt as respectful towards women as ever. It was only that more hope came inside me, from seeing so much in the world outside; and perhaps more faith in the Lord, because He was doing His best so largely. However, I never thought twice about that, and must claim no credit for it.

Aunt Parslow was not very gracious at first, though she could not find fault with the strawberries. She pretended that she had some quite as good; though she declared herself to be [261] most grateful. But as soon as I said, "Send for some of your own; that will be the true proof of the pudding, aunt," she discovered that her own were not quite at their best just now, and in fact they had been so good, that the slugs and the blackbirds could not resist them. This showed very little self-command on their part; for there was not a good fruit among them, as I found out on Sunday, the beds being a mixture of some twenty kinds, growing in great tussocks, and for the most part barren, which was just as well.

I let my aunt have her own way, as a man should let all women do, except those of his own

household; and by-and-by she became more pleasant, especially when she had discovered—as she did at dinner-time—that my present state of health required a bottle of her dry champagne. Being compelled myself, I thought it just to use coercion too, and had the satisfaction soon of finding her much more ladylike. Her coldness towards me passed away, and when we had clinked our glasses twice, we resumed our proper footing.

“You don’t fill up,” she said more than once, and I found the same fault with her; and when that error had been removed, we could enter into one another’s feelings.

“The great thing you want is nourishment,” she said, when I had made a noble dinner; “people in the present age never attach sufficient importance to that point. They indulge too much in stimulants—no more, Kit, no more, or at the outside, only half fill your own, for you require it—while they scarcely allow themselves time to take the proper amount of substance. Through a very old and deeply respected friend of our family in the City, a man of the loftiest principles, I am enabled to get the real turtle at half-price; and it has been instrumental, under Providence, in the restoration of your health. I have sent him a telegram; and to-morrow, although it is the Sabbath-day, we shall find a tin here, when we return from church. It is better than Grove’s, or any that you see in the windows going down Cheapside. A turtle should never be allowed to sprawl about barbarously in the sun. It is against his nature, and it does him harm. He becomes demoralized, and looses firmness. They say that we all spring from turtles now; but I cannot believe it; for cannibalism is never nice, and turtle is. What a turtle your Uncle Cornelius would have made!”

“I am glad that you find him so nice,” I replied; “but he would always have tasted of tobacco.”

“Well, we must allow for one another; and there is no accounting for tastes. *Jupiter* likes turtle; [262]
but the other dogs won’t touch it. I had a dog once who would eat cigars. If he found a stump in the road, it was quite as good as a bone to him; but he did not live very long, poor fellow! Now let them take away the things; and when you have had your glass of port, come to me in the drawing-room. Don’t hurry, because I mean to have my nap.”

As yet, she had never mentioned Kitty’s name, which surprised me not a little; but I thought it likely that she was still rather sore at my behaviour. For when she had come to see us lately, it had been more than I could bear to listen calmly while everybody offered any sort of guess; just as they might discuss a case of abduction in the papers, or the theft of a female dog, who “answered to the name of Kitty.”

CHAPTER XLI.
TRUE COMFORT.

EVERY allowance should be made for a man who is in deep trouble. Not because it is his due, for that would count but little; but because he expects it, which he never does of his other debts, after experience. But he does hope to receive fine feeling, when he knows how cheap it is; and his sense of bad luck blackens in him, when he cannot even get that much.

And yet he ought to feel how trumpery are his trivial joys and sorrows, in the whirligig of this great world. He does his utmost thus to take it; to shudder at the wrongs of others, and to glow at their redress, to suck his fingers more and more with the relish of his neighbour's pie; and perhaps with practice he begins to get some moonlight pleasure thus. But, alas! before he is perfect in it, some little turn of thought comes home, some soft remembrance thrills his heart, as the sun quivers in a well-spring, and all his nature lets him know that he belongs to it, and is itself.

A little touch of this kind took me, when I was full of higher things, or at least was trying so to be. I had not been to church since my day of dole, my day of doom and desolation. How could I go to Sunbury church, and see the spot where Kitty stood and stole my whole devotion, and see the [263] altar-rails where she had knelt and vowed herself mine for ever; and now, with no Kitty at my side, be stared at by a hundred eyes, all asking—"Well, how do you get on?" But now in this strange place, I went to the Sunday morning service, though Kitty had been there too with me, in the happy days not long gone by. My aunt came with me, and with much fine feeling allowed me to sit where my dear had sat, and to put my hat on the selfsame peg on which she had placed it for me.

At first it was a bitter time; but I went through it bravely, though at first I could not bring myself to open the Prayer-book, which I had brought in the bag with my clothes from Sunbury. My wife had given it to me at Baycliff, when I happened to admire it in a window, and I remembered that she had written "Kit," and nothing else, on the fly-leaf.

But the first psalm for that morning service, being a very sad one, suited my state of mind so well that I opened my book to follow it. And I remember reading with all my heart—"My heart is smitten down, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread. I am become like a pelican in the wilderness; and like an owl that is in the desert."

Perhaps through the shaking of my thumb, the cover of the book fell back, and showed me some words on the fly-leaf written with a pencil by my own wife. Before the word "Kit," which was in ink, she had written with a pencil "Darling," and after it, "God's will be done." The writing was faint, as if the pencil wanted cutting, and it seemed to have been dashed off in great haste.

This then was her farewell to me. I was sure that the words had not been there, the last time I used the Prayer-book; and indeed there would have been no meaning in them. Over and over again I read them, forgetting everything else, I fear, and standing up after the first lesson had begun, until my aunt gave my coat a jerk. I longed to rush out of the church and think; and the rest of the service went by me, as a dream.

Though very little light was thrown hereby upon my dark enigma, I found more comfort perhaps than reason would warrant, in this discovery. In the first place, if my wife had left me, in bitterness at some fancied wrong, she would never have addressed me thus; and this alone removed a weight of misery from my bosom. For it had been agony to me to think, as I could not help doing, that my own Kitty all the while was nursing bitterness against me, as if it had been [264] possible for me to wrong her. And again that she should not have gone entirely without a word, was a piece of real comfort to me; though others, who have not been so placed, may think that I was foolish there. Very likely I was; but never mind. The Prayer-book, as we all acknowledge, is a very noble work; and nobody can write such English now, as is to be found in it at every page; and I think that Kitty was quite right in choosing it for her last word to me. But if it comes to that, she was always right; at least according to my ideas.

Strange as it may seem to some—who cannot enter into odd states of mind, such as long had been my lot—I did not say a word, as yet, to my Aunt Parslow about this matter. She had formed her own theory, like everybody else, and I meant to let her go through with it. And so she did, that afternoon, having put great pressure upon herself—for my sake, as she told me—to enable her to hold her tongue, until she could speak with advantage, and without any risk of being taken by any one for a meddler.

For she liked to dine early on Sundays, and she always denied herself the pleasure of going to church in the afternoon, being one of the most unselfish persons I have ever met with. After a dinner not to be gainsaid, at any rate till supper-time, we sat in the garden and listened to the bells, and thought with pleasure of the congregation now going to have a hot time of it. I was full of tender recollections, for this was the very spot where Kitty had shown some delightful want of reason about Sally Chalker. And I told my aunt all about it now, with a sigh at the back of every smile. Then she laughed with superior wisdom, and no longer could contain herself.

"I knew she was a jealous little puss. Every woman has her fault, almost as much as men have. It took me a long time to discover any fault in her, until I started that idea myself. To make up for the want of other faults, she has that one to an extreme, you see. And that is at the bottom of

your present trouble, my poor boy. But she has carried it to an extreme, I admit. It seems a little too absurd."

"It is too absurd to be thought of twice," I answered rather savagely; "my Kitty is not quite a fool. And she would have been something worse than a fool, if she had acted from that motive. She would have been unjust and cruel, not to afford me so much as a chance of clearing myself from wicked lies. Our married life was short indeed; but long enough for her to learn that I am not a scoundrel."

"Don't be so hot, Kit. You have no idea what a woman's mind is. She thought you, of course, a [265] perfect angel, and herself not good enough to wipe your shoes. She was always humble, as you know; and that tyrant of a woman must have beaten into her poor head a bitter sense of her own defects. It is only natural, she would think, that this great wonder of a man should want some one better than poor me. And when some villain laid before her some strong evidence, we know not what, she would say to herself—'It is as I thought. I will not trouble him to explain. I will leave him for a while, and perhaps his love will return, when he has lost me. With this in my heart, I could not bear to look at him, and know all the while he was longing to be rid of me. I will have no scene, which would only make him think even less of me than he does.' And so she would go, without caring where."

"Possibly, aunt, some women might have done so. But not Kitty. She felt to her heart my affection for her; and she trusted me, as I trusted her. Do you suppose that if what you say had even seemed possible to me, I should have remained, as I have done, waiting for some news of her. I should have rushed up to every one, who had any motive for deceiving her, and taken them by the throat, and wrung their wicked, murderous lies out. No, it is something much worse than that. If Kitty had left me in petulance, would she have written these last words, would she have called me her 'darling Kit'? See what I found this morning."

"That proves nothing," resumed my aunt, when I had shown her my Prayer-book, and we had discussed that matter; "she may very well have relented, at the last moment, and written that to you."

"Then would she have taken all our money? Was that the way to cure my jealousy, and bring me back to her in penitence? She had a right to the money, because you put it into her own hand. But I am astonished at her taking it."

Miss Parslow was even more astonished, when I told her that part of the tale, which I had begged Uncle Corny not to do. It grieved me that she should ever hear of it; but she certainly had the right to know.

"Perhaps you told her in so many words that you meant it entirely for herself," I suggested, hoping that it might be so; for, little as I cared for that trumpery loss, I was cut to the quick that my wife should have inflicted it; "Kitty must have believed it her own, or she never would have touched it."

"I said nothing of the kind," my aunt replied indignantly; "I gave it to her, but I meant it for you [266] —that is to say conjointly. Her taking it was robbery, and nothing else."

I laughed a little at these words, which I had heard from other quarters. That my Kitty should be called a robber, seemed a little too absurd. But I could not be angry in the teeth of facts, at any rate with the donor.

"I'll tell you what it is," she said, even as I had been told before; "either your wife is as deep a little hypocrite as ever lived, which I cannot believe, for I should never trust any one again if I did; or else she ran away from you in a moment of insanity. My poor boy, I am so sorry for you. I cannot bear to ask you, but have you ever noticed any tendency that way—anything even odd, or absent, or inconsequential in her manner? The professor is a very queer man, I have heard. All great men of science are—well, to say the least eccentric."

"Captain Fairthorn is perfectly sound and clear-headed, though not a good man of business. And his daughter is as rational as I am—much more so, if I am to endure much more of this. She is quick, and bright-witted, and full of common sense; except that, like her father, she is a little too confiding. I never saw a token of even the slightest absence of mind about her. Her only insanity was that she loved me a great deal better than she loved herself. I believe she would have laid down her life with pleasure—"

"Don't talk about it, my dear Kit. I think you have borne things wonderfully well, now that I know all you have told me. And you must not break down now, my dear. All will come right in the end, be sure, although we are in thick darkness now. In spite of all difficulties, I still hold to my idea of jealousy. However, we won't talk of that any more. You know that I called upon Miss Coldpepper, the last time I was at Sunbury?"

"Yes. But I never heard what she said. I cannot see how she could help us at all."

"Well, I thought it worth while to try; and I found her much kinder than I expected. A little bit stiff at first perhaps, and rather of the grand lady style; but I am sure that she would help you, if she could. She likes Kitty better than her own nieces; that I am quite sure of; and she does not side a bit with that horrid Mrs. Fairthorn, at least as everybody makes her out, though I always form my own opinion. She perceived, of course, that I was a lady, and not to be treated as a fruit-grower might be, such as everybody looks upon as a sort of apple-pie. I explained that my [267]

connection with your Uncle Orchardson was casual, and had been against my wishes; while my family had been in the China-trade; and she asked very kindly, if I would have a cup of tea. I accepted, because I knew how it makes ladies talk. Then she asked me what I thought of it, and I said it was poor stuff; for I had no idea of being patronized by her, and I saw that she had sense enough to like the truth, especially when it was to her advantage, although not very complimentary. Then she asked me where she could get a better article; and I told her that I never recommended any place, having nothing to do with any business now, but living in a very pretty place of my own. Naturally this made her press me more; and not liking to be disagreeable, I told her of a place, where by taking twelve pounds she could get a tea worth two of hers, for fifteen pence a pound less money. And this made a very fine impression upon her; for she loves good value for her money. Then she became very gracious indeed; especially after her cur of a dog came in, and smelling souvenirs of my high breed, did his utmost to improve himself, by licking them. For your sake, Kit, I was obliged to say, that the wretched mongrel looked well-bred. Oh dear, oh dear!”

“Well, never mind, aunt; he has done me a good turn—” I remembered in time to stop sharply. My Aunt Parslow would take it as worse than high treason, that I should have stolen even such a dog; and how could I call it a good turn now?

“No dog would do you a bad turn, Kit,” she continued quite serenely; “at any rate no well-bred dog; they are as good as a woman, and infinitely better than any man, in judging human character. Now listen to what I have to say. I am not very sharp, for I live out of the world; and everybody owns that it gets much worse, from year to year, and from day to day. But I don’t care twopence for that, my dear, because nothing I can do will alter it. Only I am as sure as I am of the nature of the very best dog I ever had—and there he lies, beneath that tree—that your Kitty has never done a thing to wrong you, at least according to her view of things. I will not attempt to explain that money matter; for it is beyond me, and I am sorry that I spoke so harshly. I should have considered your feelings more, for I know that you are as true as steel. There is some black secret that we cannot pierce; it will all become clear as the day, in time; and in time, I hope, for [268] your happiness. I can well understand that you have been stopped in all your inquiries, by that strange device—for I believe it to be but another device, on the part of some very crafty foe. You have let some weeks go by, through that. No good has ever come, so far as I know, of any of those ‘Private Inquiry’ places; and I hate the very name of them. But I think that you are bound to watch the proceedings of those two villains, who carried off your Kitty, to that vile place near Hounslow. Of course, they would never take her there again. That you have ascertained long ago. And I do not believe that they have got her now. She would be no good to them, as a married woman. But they know where she is. I am sure of that. You have been in a maze of dejection and distress. And your pride has prevented you from doing what you should have done. Go and see those two men. Hunt them out. Take the matter entirely into your own hands. Your Uncle Cornelius is very good and kind. But it is not his wife who is missing.”

“Those two men are not in London. That much has been ascertained,” I said; “and it does not appear that they were in London, at the time—at the time of my trouble.”

“Never mind. Find out where they are. Follow them; never mind where it is. As for money, you shall have another hundred pounds, and a thousand if it proves needful. Don’t thank me, Kit. It is for my own peace. I have not enjoyed seeing a dog eat his dinner, since this wickedness was done. You shall thank me as much as ever you like, when you have got your Kitty back again. And she will love you ten times more than ever.”

CHAPTER XLII.
BEHIND THE FIDDLE.

It is vain for any man to say that, in the deepest depths of woe, he can receive no scrap of comfort from the tenderness of others. Words may help him very little; commonplace exhortations are a weariness to the worn-out soul; he lies at the bottom of his own distress, and does not want it probed or touched. But gradually a little light and warmth steal through the [269] darkness, not direct from heaven alone, but reflected from kind eyes and hearts. He is not alone in the world, although he ever must be lonely; and the sense of other life than his restores him slowly to his own.

After all the kindness shown me, and the good-will wholly undeserved, I felt ashamed to be so swallowed up by my own sorrow. Some indulgence I might claim from people of kindly nature, on the ground that it was not sorrow only, but dark mystery and doubt, and even some sense of black disgrace, which had robbed me of my proper vigour and due power of manhood. And it is more than likely that the long and wasting illness, from which I had not yet quite recovered, still impaired the force and tone of mind as well as body. But I do not want to make excuses, as people nearly always say in the very breath they make them with. Only I was now resolved that no more should be needed.

On the Monday, I drove *Spanker* home; which was a great delight to him, and to me as well, for the world looked brighter, when my face was set to fight it. Or rather I should say, to fight that vile and wicked part of it, which had robbed me of my just claim to a happy though humble place in it. In my breast-pocket I carried the book containing my wife's last words to me; for my good Aunt Parslow had kindly stitched it in a white kid glove, or a pair of them, which had been white in their early days. And in the pocket on the other side, I carried fifty pounds in bank-notes, so as to be able to start well, and procure better judgment than my own, if it should appear advisable. But about that I was not sure as yet; being very loth to ask any other man's opinion, however old he might be, about my pretty Kitty.

It was now the longest day, which is the most excellent and perfect time of year, in at least three years out of every four. Sometimes there arises a strong hot June; but scarcely more than once in twenty summers; and then, before the days come to their turn, leaves are getting flabby, and the grass is over-ripe, and the petals of the wild rose lie in the ditch, and the blossom of the wheat has dropped, its little quivery bee's-wing. More often there has been a black Pentecost, a May of lowering skies and blight, with every animal's coat put the wrong way on his back; and then a June of shrink and shiver, without a fair flower in the garden, and with the hedgerows full of black caterpillars. And every man flaps himself with his arms, like a cock when he springs up to crow; but the hedger and ditcher has nothing to crow at, and is too hoarse to do it, if he had. [270]

But now we had a very fair midsummer, neither too hot nor too cold; and the air was not only fresh but soft, and full of sweet yet invigorating smells. At the top of every hill, one seemed to sniff the rich calm of the valley, and again in the valley to feel the crisp air of the hill coming down for a change of mood; there was nothing to make much fuss about in the way of striking scenery; but a pretty peep could be had at almost every turn of travelling, where green leaves softened the brilliant sky, and sheep and cattle, in quiet pastures, showed that they accepted life, as if it were a blessing.

But I found my uncle regarding life from a very different point of view. He had brought all his strawberry-pickers in at three o'clock that morning, to make the great hit of the summer, as he hoped, in the Monday forenoon market. At six a.m. he had sent off about five hundredweight of prime fruit, all in pound punnets with dewy leaves, as fresh as the daybreak, and as bright as the sun, before it leaves off blushing. But ere he could put one upon his stand, one hundred and twenty tons of French stuff, which had been discharged the night before, were running, like a flood from some horse-knacker's, in every alley of the market. This refuse was offered, by the bucketful, at a penny a pound, which was too much for it; a dumpy, and flabby, and slimy mass, fit for children to make dirt pies of. Of course the good buyers would not look at it, for no man could put it in his window. But the British public could put it in their stomachs, which is not at all a choice receptacle; and the mere fact of its presence took the shine out of all fair English fruit. Uncle Corny's choice *Presidents*, and *Dr. Hoggs*, as good as if they leaped from stalk to lip, became jam for the Juggernauth of free trade; and he was left lamenting, as well as swearing very hard.

Whenever he had used strong language,—however well justified by international law—he was apt to show less of true penitence, than of anger with the world that had made him do it. Being a righteous man, he always felt ashamed; but he never was known to retract an expression; though he often declared that his words had been too weak, and he wished he had said what he was charged with saying. But Selsey Bill told me that he had been "just awful," and they were expecting beer all round, as a token of remorse. "Said a' would sack every son of a gun of us! Never knowed 'un say that, wi'out sending can out by-and-by. Ah, he is a just man, Master Kit, if [271] ever was one."

"Glad to see you, Kit," said my uncle, who was getting, with the aid of a pipe, into his right mind. "You are looking ever so much better, my boy. Can't return the compliment, I fear. The fact is, I have been a little put out; though I never lost my temper, as most people would have done. Fearful smash this morning at the Garden. But all the poor fellows did their very best, and it

would not be fair to punish them. They've been hard at it, ever since three o'clock. You might take the four-gallon can, if you like, just to show them that you are come home again. And I daresay you'll be glad of a glass yourself, for the roads are getting dusty. You can come and talk to me, when you've been round. Only half a pint each for the women, mind. It would never do to get them into bad habits. Unless any of them has a baby."

When I had discharged that little duty, I told him of all that my aunt had said, and showed him the message to me in the book, if indeed it could be called a message. He shook his head very wisely over this, and told me that he must think about it; for he could not at present see the meaning of it. But I saw that it altered his opinion of the case.

"You have been up to the cottage already, I see," he continued, as I sat quietly, after vainly searching once more the columns of his paper the *Standard*, as I daily did; "you will never find any notice there, my boy, nor in any other paper. It is the blackest puzzle I ever came across; and this only makes it the blacker. Mother Bull is come back"—he should have said, "the Honourable Mrs. Bulwrag Fairthorn"—"I was told so yesterday by that good woman, who came down when you were so ill. You know the woman I mean—Mrs. Wilcox. She was down here yesterday to ask for you, and was very sorry not to find you. She said that if Mother Bull had not been away, she could have sworn that it was all her doing. But now she doubts whether she knew anything about it; for when she does a thing, she always does it by herself, and never trusts any one with her wicked works. Mrs. Wilcox has not heard a word from your wife, as I need not tell you; but she flies in a fury at the smallest hint that there can be any fault on her part. She says that poor Kitty could never plot anything, even if she wished it. Her mind is too simple, and she could never carry out any plan requiring sharp management. I asked her what she thought of it all, and she could think of nothing at all worth speaking of. Only that there is something we don't know— [272] which I could have told her, without walking a mile. But I think it might do you good to go and see her; and it would comfort you at any rate, for she holds all your own opinions. And she said one thing which I thought right, and sharper of her than I expected, for it never had occurred to me—that you should take in one of those scientific journals, which give an account of discoveries and all that; so as to find out, if you can, where Professor Fairthorn is."

"How can that do any good." I asked. "He had sailed at least ten days before I was forsaken, and while we were down at Baycliff. The telegram from Falmouth proved all that."

"That is clear enough. And of course he cannot help us, while he is far away at sea. But for all that, we are bound to let him know, if there should be any chance. You would write to him, or write at him, if his daughter was dead; and it is very much the same case now."

"Uncle Corny, you have the most coldblooded way sometimes, though you never mean it. Certainly I am bound to let him know, if I can; and I ought to have thought of it before. But he has given us little of his company. I will go and see Mrs. Wilcox to-morrow, if only to find out what paper to get; for she will know what they used to take in. And I shall find out what is going on up there; though I don't see how it will help me much."

"When that dog was stolen from Miss Coldpepper," said my uncle, without meaning any harm, "by some big rogue in London, what did she do? Why, she offered a reward at once, and sent posters right and left. And what was the result? Why, the dog came back almost before she had time to miss him."

"But if he came back without any reward, what could the reward have to do with it?"

"How do you know that no reward was paid?" My uncle seemed quite to look suspicious; but perhaps it was my conscience that made him do it. "We can't tell what happened between them, up there."

"Certainly not," I replied with haste; "but I don't like talking about a dog, in the same breath with my Kitty."

"I did not mean to annoy you, Kit," he answered very humbly; "although the poor lady may have felt it bitterly, in her little way. All that I meant was, that we might have offered a large [273] reward for any information. It could have done no harm, you know. And it might have come to Kitty's ears, and inclined her to come back to us. Women are so glad to save expense."

"How can you understand such things? As if I could bear to fetch my wife home, by jingling a purse before the world! If she won't come back without that, she had better—she had better almost stay away."

"Very well. I can understand your feelings; and very likely I should have the same. You are like me, Kit, in many things; although a deal more obstinate."

My uncle was fond of saying this; but it always took my breath away, from the sublimity of his self-ignorance. It was like an oak-tree bidding an osier not to be so gnarled and stiff.

"Now remember one thing," he went on, as he saw me smiling just a little; "in spite of your stubbornness, you shall obey me, or I will know the reason why. You have tried what good hard work would do, and it has done you more harm than good. Because your mind has not been in it, and you have only been fretting at every stroke, though you stuck to it, like a Briton. To-day you are twice the man, because you have had a little change, and seen a little of a different life, and allowed yourself to speak more freely of your sad affairs, instead of snapping at every one who mentioned them. Henceforth you shall never do more than eight hours' work in these gardens in

one day, I mean of course all by yourself. For sixteen hours every day, you have avoided every one, and carried on work, work, all alone, as if you never meant to speak again. I am pretty tough; but it would have killed me, although I am no chatterbox. And it has gone some way towards killing you. I left you to your own foolish plan, because of your confounded obstinacy. But now, I will try to be as stubborn myself. I will come after you, with my supple-jack, unless you give me your word on this. And another thing you must bear in mind. You have taken your good aunt's money for a particular purpose; and you will have had it on false pretences, if you go on thus."

"I intend to use it for what she meant. I would never have taken it otherwise. You shall not complain of my sticking too close, but rather of my absence. But I shall not draw my weekly money from you, unless I have done a good week's work. To-morrow I shall do very little, because I am going to London. To-night I shall work for an hour or two, because I have a job to finish. And [274] I will look in, when you are having your last pipe."

There was every promise of a fruitful season, though not without plenty to grumble at, for I never knew a season good all round, such as more favoured countries have. After getting myself into working trim, I left my lonely little dwelling, with the front door so arranged that any one who knew the trick could enter without knocking. And in the kitchen fireplace—for I never used the parlour now—I left a little coke alight, so that it would smoulder on for hours, and could soon, with the aid of wood and coal, be nursed into glow enough to boil the kettle, which stood ready upon the hob. For I always fancied, when I went to work, that I might find my wife, when I should come home, making it a home for me once more, and listening to the singing of the kettle. And I left the lane door unfastened too, that she might have no trouble to get in.

Somehow or other, I seemed to feel that something strange would befall me that night, but I went about my work as usual. I had a large peach-tree to go over, for the second time that season, fetching every shoot into place, checking or sometimes cutting out the over-coarse and sappy growth, nipping every blistered leaf, removing the fruit, where it grew too thick or had no chance of swelling, and offering the many other small attentions, without which fine fruit may not be. And outside the border on the gravel walk I had the garden engine full of water for the nightly bath, which fruit and foliage in warm weather love, as much as vermin hate it.

The sun had been down for an hour or more, and the dusk was deepening into night, and I was just at the point of leaving off for fear of hammering the wrong sort of nail—when I heard a little sound, like the scraping of a twig, and turning my head, without any great hurry, beheld, as distinctly as I see this paper, the face of a man looking steadfastly at me. It was a large and solid face, as calm and unmoved as the full moon appears rising out of the haze on a fine summer night.

I could see no hat above the face, nor any human figure below it, only a face looking through a gap in a clipped *arbor vitæ* tree, about fifteen yards from where I stood. It was gazing at me quite serenely, and as if I were hardly worth the trouble.

Through all the time of my long distress, I had wholly lost the sense of fear—bodily fear I mean, and nervous trembling, such as brave men have. This had surprised me more than once; [275] things that used to make me jump had not the least effect on me. The reason was simply that my life was not of the smallest value to me. And I wondered that I was not frightened now, because I knew that I ought to be.

Without even taking my hammer up, I leaped across the border, to seize this fellow; but my foot caught in something, and down I went. A heavy garden-line had been left, stretched along by one of our men, who had been "making up the edge" that day. I knew it was there, but had not thought of it in my hurry; and now I was lame in both knees for a minute, for the shock had been very violent. At first I thought that my left leg was broken; but after a bit of rubbing it got better, and I hobbled towards the *Thuja* tree, which had been clipped into the shape of a fiddle by Bill Tompkins.

I dragged myself round it; but saw no one, nor even a footprint in the waning of the light; neither was there any sound among the trees beyond it. Wondering greatly, and very angry with the fellow who had left the line there, I collected my tools with some difficulty, and was obliged to leave the tree unsyringed. Then, as I went stiffly home, I thought of the fuss my Kitty would have made, to see me in that bleeding hobble; and if I was weak in body through it, I fear that I was weaker still in mind.

CHAPTER XLIII.
THE GREAT LADY.

At this time, I slept, or lay down to sleep, on a couple of good-sized chairs in the kitchen, with a cushion laid along them, which had come from my uncle's pew in Sunbury church. He had established a new cushion there, on the strength of my marriage and Kitty's good clothes; and the old one, being stuffed with sound horsehair, was not to be despised when upside down. And to save all risk of rolling off, I set it against the front legs of the dresser. The door of the room was left wide open, and the front door also, unless the night was windy; for I had nothing to lose, having lost my all; and I only wished that anybody would come and try to rob me. It would have been bad for him, unless he had been either Hercules, of Ulysses; for I was armed with [276] recklessness, and eager to tackle any open foe. Nervousness (such as a happy man may feel, when he hears a strange noise in the dead of the night) was an unknown power to me now, and I would have fought, like a bull-dog in his own kennel, and enjoyed it. This was not the proper turn of mind for a young man to indulge in. That I knew as well as could he; but the blame lay elsewhere.

Although I was very stiff and sore from the bruises of that awkward fall, I went at daylight to examine the place, where that stranger must have stood. The ground was dry and hard just there; but I found enough to show me that I had not been deceived by any trick of the imagination. Not only had the soil been trodden by a foot unlike my own, but the thick mat of the *Thuja* tree had some of the lobed leaves (which composed it and stood together like moss compressed), ruffled and crushed into one another, as if by the thrust of a heavy form. Then I went to the place where I had stood over against the peach-tree, and put my hat on a nail to represent my height, and returning to the clipped tree gazed through the nick of the fiddle at it, just as the face had gazed at me. I was obliged to stoop, to bring my eyes to the level at which those eyes had been; which showed that my visitor had been of some three or four inches lower stature, probably not more than five feet ten.

I could not trace his footsteps far, nor make out what kind of boots he wore, except that there was no sign of hob-nails, such as all our workmen had. It struck me that a man with such a face was not very likely to hurry himself, and the ground bore no traces of hasty flight, neither were the branches of the plum-trees (through which he must have retreated) broken. Probably he had retired at his leisure, while I was disabled from following. There were no signs of entrance to be discovered at or near the door into Love Lane; all our men had left work at the time of his visit, and no one had seen any stranger.

What on earth had he come for? was the question which arose, and could not be answered. There was nothing much to steal just there, for none of the tree-fruit was ripe; and though darkness forbade entire certainty, I felt pretty sure that the owner of that face would call himself a gentleman. It seemed to me better upon the whole to say nothing about the matter, for my uncle would probably laugh at it, as the product of my imagination; and as for the police, I knew too well that they would make nothing out of it. Only it was evident to my mind that this little adventure had some bearing on my trouble; and in spite of the dusk, I could swear to that face, [277] wherever I should come across it.

My uncle would have stopped me from going to London, on account of the injuries which I could not hide, for my hands as well as my knees were cut. But I went by the 'bus, being very lame as yet, and unable to walk without aid of a stick. Mrs. Wilcox received me very kindly, and I was glad to find her business thriving, and the sharp boy released from the pots, and growing very useful at the counter.

"It has done him a deal of good, indeed it has, Mr. Kit," she said, when I ventured to hint that his employment had not been elevating; "he knows every soul it is safe to give tick to; and as for bad shillings, of which I had a dozen, not one have we took since he come back. Ah, what a tradesman he will make! But now, sir, about your poor dear self. No one to stitch your knees better than that—ah, the righteous is always punished in this earth."

I told her exactly how things stood—that everything was as dark as ever, that the neighbourhood had been searched in vain (as might have been expected), that one or two false clues had been followed, not by myself, but by the police, and that now I meant to take the matter entirely into my own hands, as I should have done at first except for a private reason, which I told her, to wit the disappearance of the money. She was angry that this should have been allowed to hinder me even for a day. But when I told her how it weighed upon my spirits, and seemed to show that my wife was not at all in her duty to me, Mrs. Wilcox sided with me, and said that every one must do the same, whether I were right in the end or wrong. And then I asked her what she thought; and she said that she was afraid to say.

"Not that I don't know her, sir," she proceeded when she saw my disappointment; "as well as the inside of my own shoe, having had her almost from the bottle, and cut the best of her teeth on my own thumb. But they changes so, when they falls in love, as I know from my own experience, though going on then for thirty-five, that to make a prediction comes back on the mouth. I began it already; but it turned out wrong; and I said to myself—'If you want to be considered above the average, as you always was, you better wait, and see how the cat jumps first.' For that is the way of the women, sir, in general."

I was not in the mood to be satisfied with this, especially as she had said the same thing to my uncle, as late as last Sunday. And gradually, by coaxing her to begin, and then contradicting her [278] upon some little point of fact, I knew her opinions even better than my own, for my own had less to go upon. For it must be borne in mind that most of what I have entered about Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot and Mr. Donovan Bulwrag comes from knowledge which I obtained long afterwards; and none of it was, in my mind as yet, beyond what my Uncle Corny and Sam Henderson had said, and the little that had been dropped by Kitty, who had scarcely had three weeks as yet to talk.

"Well, I shall do this," I said at last to Mrs. Wilcox; "you have told me many things which will enable me to get on. Nothing can be worse than things are now; and the greatest enemy I have got—if I am good enough to have an enemy—cannot say that I have shown impatience. I have felt enough of it; but nobody knows but myself how close I have kept it. I mean to make no disturbance now; but I shall just go and see the great lady."

"You'd better not, sir," cried Mrs. Wilcox; "you would be like a dummy, if she chose to speak out, and the humour might be on her. And you can't get nothing out of her, except hard knocks."

"Hard words break no bones, any more than soft ones butter parsnips. I shall go and see her, if I can, and that villain of a son of hers as well. It is my duty to discover where my Kitty's father is."

"She won't see you, Mr. Kit, unless it is to triumph over you. She loves doing that, when any one is down. But you won't have a chance of seeing Mr. Downy. They say he is out of the country altogether, though my little Teddy swears he saw him Sunday night, and I never knew him go wrong about a face before. But he must be wrong this time, if there is any truth in words. And generally always he comes down this road, whenever he is at home."

"At any rate, I shall ask for him. By-the-bye, what is he like, if I should chance to meet him?"

"He have a great square face, sir, like the front of a big head, with a lot of sandy hair both above it and below. And he comes along the road with his eyes half-shut, just as if there was nothing worth looking at. And his eyes are as yellow as new-run honey, and a few butter-spots upon his cheeks, where you can see them. He is a square-built young man, not so tall as you, but thicker, and his legs come after him as he walks, and he looks as if he never could be in a hurry."

"Thank you. I think I ought to know him now. It will be my own fault if I don't. Not a pleasant [279] man to look at, if you do him justice, Mrs. Wilcox. No wonder that people don't seem to like him very much."

"Ever so much worse to deal with than he is to look at, Mr. Kit. Keep out of his way, sir, that's my advice. I believe he is at the bottom of your trouble somehow. Though what good he can get out of it surpasses me."

After begging her to keep a sharp look-out, and to send for me at once if she saw anything suspicious, I made the best of my way towards "Bulwrag Park," and was amazed at the change a few months had wrought. All the wilderness of work stood thick with houses, all the sloughs of despond were firm hard roads, young trees were in leaf where surveyor's flags had waved, and public-houses blazed with glass and gilt where bricks had smouldered. The Great Exhibition was in full swing, and the long streets were alive with cabs and broughams. However, the old house still looked grim and gaunt in its dark retirement, and the Scotch firs near it were as black as ever; and I passed with a throbbing heart the bay-tree which had sheltered my love and myself from the snow. I ventured to gather a spray of this, and put it as a keepsake beside my Prayer-book.

After two or three rings, I was admitted, and shown into the place I knew so well, and it seemed to my fancy to be glistening still with the tearful eyes of my darling. Then Miss Geraldine, the younger and more gentle of the daughters, came and looked at me with some surprise, and said that she would show me where her mother was, and I followed her into a morning room.

The great lady looked as well as ever, and received me with a stateliness which reminded me of her sister. She was beautifully dressed, so far as I could judge, and seemed in high good humour, and inclined to patronize me.

"Mr. Orchardson, I think you said, my dear? Mr. Orchardson, who married our poor Kitty. Well, Mr. Orchardson, I hope that you are happy. But surely—surely she did not do this? And if she did, you must not appeal to us. Sometimes she forgot herself—but still—and quite in the honeymoon—no, I am sure it cannot be."

I was determined not to be provoked, although it was very hard upon me. This violent woman was pretending to believe that the scratches on my face, from last night's fall, were inflicted by [280] my dear wife's nails. I did not condescend to answer that; and I was certain that she knew I had no Kitty now.

"I have ventured to intrude upon you," I said, "upon a matter of important business, madam. To ask if you will kindly tell me how I can send a letter, so as to reach Captain Fairthorn. He is at sea, I know, upon a voyage of exploration, or something like that; and it may be very difficult to communicate with him. But I have a very important message—"

"Nothing amiss with your poor wife, I hope. Oh, I should be so grieved, if there were anything

of that sort. She was flighty and wild; but with all her faults, there was much that was good about her. You could never see it, Geraldine, as I did. Please don't tell me, Mr. Orchardson, that after all your goodness to her—for few would have married her knowing what she was—she has had the heart to deceive you."

"No, she has never deceived me, madam; there is no deceit in her nature. But—but for some good reason doubtless,—for the present she has left me."

No one can tell what it cost me to drag out these words to her arch enemy, who was taking them in, like a draught of nectar, not only for the fact—which she had known when it occurred—but for the anguish they were costing me.

But she kept her countenance, like a mighty actress, that she might quaff her enjoyment at leisure to the dregs.

"I cannot understand what you say, Mr. Orchardson. It is simply impossible that poor Kitty, that your bride, that your dear wife you were so wrapped up in, should—should have run away from you."

"I cannot say whether she ran, or walked, or how she went—but she is gone."

"You astound me. Geraldine, you had better leave the room. Such things are not fit for good young girls to listen to. Now, Mr. Orchardson, tell me all about it. But first accept my sincere condolence. Although, as you know, I was against the marriage, mainly for your sake, I can assure you. I knew her so well—but so soon, oh, so soon! I could not have expected it, even of her. And did she inflict these sad wounds, before she went? A tender remembrance? Oh, it is so sad! But one thing I must beg of you—do not be soured by it. Do not conclude, as most young men would—that all women are bad, because this one has proved so ungrateful to you. And after [281] seven years of desertion, I believe you will be at liberty to take a better wife."

"I want no better wife. There could be no better wife. I love her with all my heart, in spite of this mistake. And I will never look at another woman, while I live."

"What a noble husband! How could she run away? And doubtless with some ignoble wretch—no other would have taken her from your arms. But when did it happen? Do tell me all about it. And who has supplanted you, so very, very quickly? One would hardly believe it in any story-book. And you so devoted—oh, how your heart must ache! Do let me order you a glass of wine."

"No wine, thank you. And I cannot tell the story, which would only increase your affliction, madam. Only one thing, in justice to my wife. No one has supplanted me in her affection. She is as true to me, as I am to her. She has been misled by some despicable trick. And, by the God in heaven, I will kill the man who did it."

"No horrible oaths before me, young man!" Her face, lips and all, turned as white as a sheet, as I spoke with the whole fury of my soul in voice and eyes,—the wrath of a quiet man wronged of his life.

Then we gazed into one another's eyes, until she was obliged to turn away.

"I could not expect you to have good manners," she said, after sitting down, and expecting me to begin; "if you behaved like this, before your wife, there might be some excuse for her running away. She has been used to the society of gentlemen."

"And that she has had in a humble way, since she became my wife. You must thank yourself for what I said; for you laboured to goad me up to it. And I mean it, madam. I spoke with no profanity. I am not given to swearing. Whoever has done me this foul wrong has ruined my life, and shall pay for it with his own. Give him warning of this, if you know who he is. I have nothing more to say than that."

Fear for the moment overcame her fury. And I left that house, with the firm conviction that my misery as well as my happiness, had proceeded from it.

CHAPTER XLIV.
MET AGAIN.

[282]

HOTCHPOT HALL has been a fine old place, as any one would say who looks at it; and it would have been a fine place still, if the owners had been of like quality. “It taketh its name,” says an old county book, “from a very ancient rule of law, that if sisters be in coparcenary, as heiresses to landed estate, and one of them hath from the same source a several estate by frank-marriage, she shall (as is just and seemly) bring that into *hotchpot*, which signifieth a mixture for a pudding, ere ever she can enjoy rights with the rest.”

Whether that be correct or otherwise, is far beyond my power to say, for I know not what “frank-marriage” is—nor for the matter of that “coparcenary”—but at any rate there stands the house, which savours in some degree of a pudding, being built of many-coloured stones; and the people for several generations have taken their name from this old place.

Though it stands in the midst of a flat and dreary country, with good corn-land spread among desert fens, and fewer and smaller trees than ours—for the glory of Middlesex is the noble elms—yet the house has the advantage of a fine rise towards it, and a wide and open view for many miles across the level. This gives it the air of an important mansion, and one that deserves to be kept in good repair. But for three generations now, the owners had been coming down in the world, by reason of bad times, as they themselves declared, but as anybody else would say, of their own badness. Till the last successor had scarcely the right to call himself the owner.

Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot was of good descent, if name may stand for nature, on his mother’s as well as his father’s side; for his mother had been Lady Frances Cumberleigh, the daughter of a North-country Earl. But she had brought no increase to the family estates, and had rather assisted to lessen them. And her son had pursued the same course, by gambling, and a dissipated and rambling life. It was only by sufferance now that he dwelt, when he fled from London creditors, in one wing of the old house, till some one could be found, who would take it upon a repairing lease, for it could not be sold to advantage.

This baronet was cunning, though he was not wise; and in spite of all misfortune, he relied on little tricks to keep himself going, while he still hoped to indulge in devices on a larger scale, to [283] fetch himself round. He took good care to reap his gains with the keenest promptitude, while he left his losses to be gleaned by very tardy process. And this had tended, more than once, to impair his popularity.

Sam Henderson came and said to me, while I was thinking what next to do, after getting the better of one enemy—“Would you like to see old Crumbly Pots?” Sam had been making money lately, and scorned anybody who could not pay up—“It might do some good, and can do no harm. He is ducking his head among his moats and meres because he was hard hit at Ascot. He owes me five ponies; he was ass enough to back that cur *Sylvester*, a nag who lays his ears back, the moment he is collared. I am pretty flush now, and I don’t care to squeeze him; but I’m going to the July, for one more spree, before being tethered finally. He won’t dare to show his mug there; but you and I could toddle on to his earth, afterwards.”

I told Sam plainly that I did not understand the meaning of his overture. But he only replied —“Then the more fool you. Can you understand this—I am going to the July meeting at Newmarket, where the best two-year-olds of the season come out, and you may see five or six of old Chalker’s string. It would do you a deal of good to see them, and take your mind out of your own hat; though you don’t know a racehorse from your old *Spanker*. If you like to come with me I will stand Sam, according to the meaning of my name and nature. I shall make another hatful of money there, for cockering up the bridesmaids, and that sort of thing; and after that we might rout up old Hotchpot.”

I perceived that Sam’s meaning was most friendly, and after consulting Uncle Corny, who thought that I sadly wanted change of scene, and a little more experience of the world, I arranged to go with Sam to headquarters, as he called it, and after the racing should be over to proceed to Hotchpot Hall, in Lincolnshire. Sam could procure me admittance there; and I longed to come face to face with my old rival.

With the racing I was pleased, as any man must be at beholding noble animals, and hoping that the best of them may win. Of the thousand guiles and wiles, that defraud them of fair play, I was happy enough to know nothing, and believed that the two legs across them were as honest as their four. Yet I wondered sometimes; and it proved how little one may judge of quality by appearance, and how true the Holy Scriptures are, when the horse that seemed likely to be last [284] came first.

Of Sam I saw little, for he was too busy, going the round both of stables and of houses, and forming opinion less by eyes than ears, and most of all by his own conscience, which told him how he would have acted in the position of the rest. Sam had a conscience not only nimble but extremely sensitive, which enabled him to judge that of other sporting men perhaps less highly gifted. For these he charitably made allowance, forgiving their defects when he pocketed their money.

“I have not done so badly,” he said on Friday night; “I made a fine hit through old Roper. That old chap is worth a mint to me, for I know every twist of his grand old mind. The professionals

were cocksure that *Columbine* was meant, and she could not have lost if she had been. How much have you won, Kit? I put you up neatly. You might have made a hundred, without risk of a hair."

"Well, I only bet half a crown, and that I lost. I think *Spanker* could have beaten most of them. They don't seem to me to go at any pace at all."

"That is what a greenhorn always thinks. If you were on their backs you would soon find out the difference. Well, let's have some supper, and be off by the night mail. But you look queer. Have you met any one you know, old chap?"

"Not a soul that I know, except Mr. Chalker; and I only know him by sight. But this afternoon I saw a face that I have seen before, though I have no idea who the owner is. I looked for you to tell me, but I could not find you."

"Very likely not. I went to see the saddling. You seem in a way about it. What makes you take it up so?"

Upon this I told Henderson about the man who had gazed at me so, through the clipped *Arbor vitæ*; and that now I had seen the same man in the throng on the Heath, and could swear to him anywhere. At first he was inclined to laugh, and thought I must have dreamed it; but seeing how serious and positive I was, he naturally asked how it was I let him go, without at least ascertaining who he was. I told him that I had done my best; and that I believed the man knew me, for our eyes met point-blank, until he turned his away. And then I had pushed through the crowd to seize him, but a fat man on horseback came clearing the course, and a rush of some hundreds of people swept us back, and when I could get out of it, the man had disappeared. I [285] described him and his dress, to the best of my ability; and then Sam gave a whistle and said—"I don't think it can be. He can scarcely have been here without my knowledge."

"You recognize him? Who is he?" I asked with some excitement. "Don't keep it back, Sam. It is most important to me."

"Well, the face, and the hat, and the green pearl in the scarf-pin remind me uncommonly of Downy Bulwrag; though I do not know him very well; and it can hardly be. He is out of England, I am told, and if he had been here I should have met him in the ring. For he always comes to bet, and he is a very deep file, though he knows very little of racing. He comes to invest for old Pot sometimes, and it is the only time Pot ever makes any money."

"But he may have gone off, when he saw me," I said; "he would hardly dare to run the risk of meeting me again."

"Wouldn't he? It would take ten of you to drive him. Downy Bulwrag is the coolest hand I ever came across. I give him a wide berth myself; for there is nothing but bad luck to be made out of him. He is worse than his mother, a thousand times; and everybody knows what she is. I am very glad you missed him. For he would have had the best of you."

"Would he indeed?" I exclaimed rather hotly. "I am not a milksop, Sam; and I fear no man on earth, when I have reason to believe that he has wronged me."

"You are strong enough, Kit," Sam returned, with some contempt; "we are all aware of that, my friend. You are stronger, I dare say, than Downy Bulwrag, although he is no chicken. But he is one of the first boxers in England. He has made a hobby of it. He can hold his own with the biggest prize fighters. He could double you up, before you got near him. And it is not only that, my boy. Likely enough he would not have touched you; for he never loses his temper they say. He would have had you up before the Bench to-morrow. He can always put anybody in the wrong. And then how should we have gone on to-night? No, it was a lucky thing that you got no chance to tackle him, supposing it was Downy, which I scarcely can believe. All the fellows are gone who could have told me. But I dare say I shall find out in London. Now let us have some grub, or we shall miss our train."

Sam Henderson's words set me pondering deeply. I had not intended to assault that stranger, [286] whoever he might be, but just to bring him to a halt, and make him tell me who he was, and what he meant by coming on the sly into my uncle's garden, and watching me in that peculiar manner. Now I felt pretty certain as to who he was, in spite of the difficulties Sam had found about it. If my description tallied so closely with that of Donovan Bulwrag, it was likely to be no one else who had come so to spy upon me. For there was the motive at once made plain. The man, who had robbed me of my wife, would naturally come to see how I bore it, to learn perhaps what sort of adversary I was, and to gloat upon my lonely misery. I felt delighted when I called to mind that I had indulged in no sighs or soliloquy that evening, but worked away steadily and even cheerfully, whistling every now and then for company to myself. My deadly enemy could not say—"Poor devil, how miserable he looks!"

And then why should I have such a bitter enemy? I had never done harm to this Bulwrag, except by marrying a young lady upon whom he had set his wicked heart, but who never would have had him, whatever he had done. And again I had defied his mother, and thrown her into one of her furious fits; but even if he had heard of that, it could not have moved him to any great wrath. From all I had heard, he was not so very deeply attached to his mother; and he must know, as everybody else did, how little was enough to infuriate her.

As I thought of all these things in the train, with Sam Henderson snoring, or rather roaring in

his sleep (like a celebrated horse who had won a race that day), the only conclusion I could come to was that my case was more mysterious than ever; that some fiendish trick had been played upon my wife and me; but how, and why, and by whom, was more than my simple, half-educated, country wits could discover as yet, or perhaps at any future time. Nevertheless I resolved to go on, and get to the end of it, whether round or square; whether it might be another sweet circle of happiness, or a coffin. And in this state of mind, being lifted for the moment out of the body, by the hoisting of the mind, I set my hands together—for it was a first-class carriage, and there was room to do it, though it seemed to me a showy thing upon the part of Sam, when third-class tickets would have done as well—and I prayed to the Lord, which I had not done lately, having found it lead to nothing, that He would interfere, and not allow everything to be under the control of the Evil one. After that I felt better; for faith is a fruit-tree, which requires (in a common soil) [287] the choicest cultivation.

"Here we are," cried Sam, who could sleep by the mile, and be wide awake at the direction-post; "what a heavy-headed chap you are! Just look to our bags, while I see about a trap. We have five miles to drive, and then we put up at old Cranky's. There we have a shake-down, and I fare to want it, as the folk in this part of the world express it. They all know me here, and they have a black mare who can travel."

For five miles we drove through a sleepy-looking land, with scarcely anybody yet astir, but a multitude of birds quite wide awake; and then we put up at a wayside inn; where Sam seemed, as usual, to be well-known. He told me to take it easy, and he set a fine example; for he very soon peopled the house with his sleep, while I wandered about to see how the land lay.

"Pots is never up till twelve o'clock," Sam explained at breakfast-time; "so you see we may just as well keep our hay in cocks. I say, Cranky," he addressed the landlord, who was coming in and out, having no maid to attend to us, "What's-his-name been down this way lately? Fancied we saw something of him yesterday."

"No, sir, not a sign of him, since you was here last. They don't seem to hit it off together as they did. Leastways that was what my missus heard."

"More chance of honest people coming by their due. How much does Sir Cumberleigh owe you, Cranky? Take thy bill, and write down quickly."

"Lor', sir, it would take a week to make it out. And what good would come of it when done? Sir Cumberleigh never pays nobody. No more than his father before him." It were vain on my part to attempt to express the long-suffering of Mr. Cranky's drawl.

"These are wonderful fellows," Sam declared aloud to me while the landlord looked at him, as if to say—"And so are you," and then turned to me to see if I were likewise; "they never seem to expect to get their money from their betters, as they call them. That cock would never fight, in our part of the world. Any lady been down at the Hall, this summer, Cranky? I mean any one, who has never been before? You need not be afraid of telling me, you know. I am an old friend of Sir Cumberleigh."

This question was put in such a common sort of way, that I dropped my knife and fork, and [288] looked furiously at Sam. For I knew what he meant; and it appeared to me too bad.

"No, sir," answered Cranky, leaning over him confidentially, as if he were uncertain about speaking before me. "None but the two as come last winter; and not so very much of them. My missus did hear as Sir Cumberleigh were going to pull up, and to enter into holy matrimony with a beautiful young lady from London town, as had sixty thousand pounds of her own, and then we should all be paid on the nail in full. And the Hall was to be made new, and I know not what. But I said it was too good to be true, and so it seemeth."

"Hope for ever, good Cranky. Hope can do no harm to the *Hotchpot Arms*. But how goes the time? We are going to call upon this reformed gentleman, as soon as he is up."

CHAPTER XLV.
ROGUES FALL OUT.

As we walked very slowly through the wilderness of thistles, which had once been a fair park trimly kept, I disturbed the mind of Sam—which was busy with abstruse calculations of all sorts of odds—by asking rather suddenly what I was to say, and how I should conduct myself in the presence of this man. For I felt a deep dislike to him, not only because he had been such a plague to Kitty, but on account of his bad character and loose ways. And my ill-will towards him had been increased by his cowardly treatment—as it seemed to me—of the patient people round him, and encroachment on their loyalty.

"You mustn't ask me, my dear fellow," answered Sam; "the thing is out of my line altogether. You wanted to see him, and here he is. I must leave you to the light of nature, although he is rather a dark specimen. Perhaps he knows nothing about your trouble. But he is up to most of Downy Bulwrag's tricks, or at any rate knows when to suspect him. And if he has had a row with Bulwrag, and can see his way to harm him, he will do it. For Pots is a very spiteful fellow. You had better appear first as my companion. I can manage not to let him catch your name; for he is rather hard of hearing, though he won't allow it. I shall work matters round till Downy's name comes up; and your business will be to hold your tongue and listen, until you can strike in with [289] advantage. He will see me, I think, because I wrote to tell him that I had a little money for him. There is nothing like that to fetch Pots."

After a little reconnoitring from a window at the flank, we were admitted by an ancient footman, who looked as if he never got his wages, and shown into a shabby room, fusty, damp, and comfortless. Here we waited nearly half an hour, while Henderson drummed on the floor with his stick, and at last began to blow a horn which he found behind a looking-glass. Then the master of the house appeared, and shook hands with Sam, and bowed to me.

It is easy enough to introduce a stranger, so that his name shall be still unknown; and Sir Cumberleigh, not being quick of hearing, received my name as "Johnson." "On the turf?" he inquired; and Sam said, "Yes; he has been on it every day this week;" which was true enough in one sense; and I longed to be back in a garden again, where we grow rogues, but nothing like so many.

"Very glad to see you, very glad indeed, young sir." This gentleman offered his hand as he spoke; but I bowed, as if I had not seen it. It may be a stupid old bit of priggery; but no man's hand comes into mine, while I am longing to smite him in the face. And I could not help smiling at our host's new manners, so different entirely from what he showed in London—unless he had been vastly misdescribed to me. He pretended now to dignity and distance, and a fine amount of grandeur; for no other reason that I could guess, except that he was upon his native soil, breathing the air of his ancestral vaults, and cheating folk who let him cheat because his fathers did it.

But all this air of loftiness had no effect on Sam; who had rubbed whiskers many times even with a Duke, when their minds were moving on a good thing together.

"Got a bit of rhino for you, Pots," he said, and I thought it showed little good taste on his part, for Sam's ancestors had been stable-boys, and I have always been a good Conservative; "not so much as I could wish; but every little is a help. And everybody says that you are awfully hard up. Hope it isn't true; but we must have seen you at the July, if you had been at all flush."

"I have not been very fortunate of late," replied the Baronet, still keeping up his dignity on my account; "and my property here has been much impaired by—by a lot of things that did not come [290] off. I was not at Newmarket, because I intend to have nothing more to do with racing matters; which I must leave to people who are sharper than myself, and have different views of integrity. But anything really due to me—"

"Perhaps I had better not say any more about it;" Henderson's black eyes were twinkling with contempt. "I had no right properly to receive the money; and if I had thought twice about it, I should have refused, for I had no commission from you to collect it; but Georgie Roberts knew that I was coming to see you, and knowing me so well, he took my receipt on your behalf, because he was anxious to square up. I'll just return it to him, and he can send you a cheque. I heard a thing afterwards that put me in the wrong. Bulwrag is the proper chap to act for you. And he seems to have been there after all, but he cannot have turned up, till Friday. I'll send back these notes, and his receipt to Georgie." Sam put away his pocket-book, and looked contented; but Sir Cumberleigh did not see it so.

"No, Sam, no! Business is business. I will write you a receipt. How much did you say it was? Let me see. I forget these trifles. Somewhere about eighty-five, if I remember."

"Forty-five," said Sam; and I was struck with the amount, because it was the very sum that had so grieved me. "He had forty against you upon the Levant. Downy managed that for you."

"Downy Bulwrag never did me any good, and he never will;" said the Baronet sternly, yet looking round, as if afraid of echoes. "He is always getting me into some vile scrape."

"For instance, about the young lady at Hounslow. Did he carry on any more with that affair?"

Sam put this question in the most off-handed manner, just as if he had said—“Any news to-day?” But being unused to any mystery on shuffling, I looked for the answer with extreme anxiety, and Sir Cumberleigh observed it, and was put upon his guard.

“How can I tell? I know nothing of his doings;” he answered, with his eyes on me, while speaking to my friend. “Downy is too deep for me; he is always up to something. Mr. Johnson, do you know him? You almost look as if you did.”

“No, I have never had that honour,” I answered as calmly as I could; “I live in the country, and [291] have little to do with London, except when I am there on business.”

“Very well then, I may tell you, Henderson,” our host continued, as he put aside the notes, after counting them, and giving his receipt; “that Master Downy has not behaved of late in a very friendly manner towards myself. He has not the high principle, I am afraid, which has always governed my conduct, at least in all matters of friendship and money. My rule is rather to wrong myself, than any other living being. We have held these estates for some centuries, Mr. Johnson; and no Hotchpot has ever yet sullied the name. Fortune has continually been against us; but we have borne ourselves bravely, and won universal esteem, and even affection. I never praise myself; but when my time is over, the same thing will always be said of me.”

He spoke with such firm conviction that I was impressed with his words, and began to feel sure that report must have wronged him; until I thought of Kitty, who was no harsh judge of character.

“Hear, hear!” cried Sam; “you have done it well, Pots. After that, you can scarcely do less than invite us to drink your good health in a bottle of champagne.”

“That I will, with pleasure. Only you must excuse me, while I see to it myself. The Hotchpots are down in the world, Mr. Johnson, because we could never curry favour. We cannot keep our butlers and our coach-and-four, and our deer-park, as we used to do. Instead of that, I keep the key of my own cellar. But I feel no shame in that. The shame lies rather—”

“Look sharp, old chap; I am as dry as a herring.” Sam was always rough and rude in his discourse; and Sir Cumberleigh set off, with a significant glance at me.

“He has taken a liking to you, the old rogue,” Henderson informed me, when the door was shut; “because he believes that you suck all his brag in, like a child. You stick to that; it suits you well, for your face is no end of innocent. An old stupe like that can be buttered up to anything, if it is laid on by the right card. You don’t suck up to him, you see; but you let him suck up to himself. We shall draw him of everything he knows, and what matters more, everything he suspects. Only you leave the whip-hand to me; green you are, and green you will be to the last.”

“You are altogether out in that,” I said, though I knew it was hopeless to reason with him; “you fellows, who see such a lot of fast life, are none the more sagacious for it. You doubt what [292] everybody says, unless you can find a bad motive for it. And you generally go wrong in the end, because you can only see black all round. But if this is a black sheep, you take the shearing of him. Only I hate to go under a wrong name.”

These words of mine proved that I was not a fool, at least to my own satisfaction. Sam stared at me, as much as to say—“There is more in you, than I thought there was;” but I did not care to press the point; for he might take a huff, and say, “Do it yourself, then.” Only I resolved to listen carefully, and see if there was anything to be learned. And before he could answer, our host returned, with a bottle of champagne under each arm, and the old retainer following with glasses and a corkscrew having a blade attached to it. And I thought that he could not be bad altogether, but must at least have intervals.

“Henderson, will you oblige me by being our—what’s his name? Diomede, or something. I have a touch of rheumatism in one wrist. No corkscrew wanted, if the cork is cork, and not wood, as a great many of them are. But he understands it. Well done, Sam! Fill for Mr. Johnson first. Ah, this is the right sort. Now we know what we are up to. Mr. Johnson, your good health, and the same to you, Sam!”

“Sir Cumberleigh, here’s confusion to your enemies,” cried Sam, standing up to give force to it; “and especially to one whom I could name. Ah, he has led you a pretty dance, and feathered his own nest out of it. However, we won’t say any more about him. A downy fellow can’t help being downy. Every man for his own hand, in this little world.”

“Sam, you know more than you have said. You go about more than I do now. Do you mean to say, that he has let me in purposely?”

“No, I never could believe that he would do it. It looks rather queer, but it must be straight enough. No doubt everything can be explained. You remember about *Flying Goose* at least?”

They began to talk a quantity of racing stuff, which was nothing but jargon to me; till Sir Cumberleigh rose from his chair, and struck the table, glaring with his eyes, and turning purple in the face.

“Then his name is not Bulwrag, but blackguard;” he exclaimed, turning round to me, to attest it. “And as soon as we meet, I shall tell him so.” Then he swore a round of oaths, which were of [293] no effect, but to hurt himself, and turn up the corners of the pity we were spreading for him. What had he lost? Money only. I had lost more. I held my tongue.

“You must not be too hard upon him;” Sam began to soften, to make him harder. “Every man for his own hand. Fair play, Pots; you would do it yourself.”

“Not for any one who trusted me. That makes all the difference. He thinks he can do what he likes with me. He shall find the difference. I know a trick or two of his that would send him to the Devil, if I let out.”

“Well, we won’t talk about any secrets now;” said Sam as cool as a cucumber, while I was like a red-hot iron; “his private affairs are no concern of ours; and we don’t want to hear of them. Johnson is a very steady-going chap, with a wife and six kids. We won’t corrupt him, Pots.”

“Not much fear of that, if he is on the turf,” Sir Cumberleigh replied, with a wink at me; “see a good bit of the world there, don’t you, Mr. Johnson?”

I nodded my head, and turned away; for I never was much of an actor, and now I could not trust my voice for words. But Sir Cumberleigh was as full of his own wrongs, as I was of mine in a different way.

“I know a thing or two,” he went on, becoming more determined, as we feigned to check him, “that would stop his little tricks for a long time to come. He would have to be off to the Continent again, if I were to treat him as he deserves.”

“Then don’t do it, Pots. Forgive and forget; that’s the proper tip nowadays. Who doesn’t try to let you in? It is no concern of mine—but let us talk of something else. I dare say he is a good fellow, after all.”

“Is he?” cried Sir Cumberleigh, working himself up; “I may have done a thing or two, in my time. But I never harmed man or woman, out of pure spite. Every man must consider his own interest, and try to hurt no one, when it does not help himself. That is my idea of the rule of life. But it is not Master Downy’s, I can tell you that.”

“Never mind, old fellow. Let us drink his good health;” Sam lifted his glass, but our host set down his. “Whenever I hear a poor fellow run down, I begin to think of all that is good in him. And I don’t believe Downy would hurt any one, unless he was obliged to do it on his own account. He made a pot of money, and he dropped a bit of yours. But you must not score against him for a [294]
little thing like that.”

“It is useless to talk to you, Henderson. You have not been hit, and you may whistle over it. But I’ll just ask Mr. Johnson what he thinks, for I can see that he is a man of proper feeling. Now what should you say, Mr. Johnson, of a fellow, who wanted to marry a girl who did not like him, because he thought she had a lot of money; and then when she married a very quiet man, who took her without a halfpenny, could not let them be happy with one another, but got up some infernal scheme to separate them?”

“I should say he was a scoundrel too bad to be hanged;” I answered with warmth unaffected; and I was going to say more, but Sam checked me with a glance.

“Oh come, no fellow would ever do such a thing as that;” he spoke with contemptuous disbelief. “Any man must be a fool, who would get into such a scrape for nothing.”

“Then Downy Bulwrag is a fool, as well as what you called him, Mr. Johnson. I could tell you the story, if I chose; or at least I could tell you a part of it. But it would not interest you; and it is a long in and out of rascality. Well, I won’t say any more about it; and I don’t know how he managed it. But he will have a score to settle about that, some day.”

“That he will, and a bitter one;” I began, with hands clenched, and heart throbbing; but Sam kicked me under the table, and whispered, while Sir Cumberleigh was reaching for the other bottle—

“Don’t be such a gone idiot. Leave it to me—can’t you?”

“I should have thought Downy was too sharp for that;” Sam stroked his chin, and looked sceptical. “Of course, I don’t know him as you do, Pots. But I should have thought he was about the last man you could find to risk his hide for mere larkiness.”

“Well, I don’t know that he risked very much. The young man is in the agricultural line, and they are fair game for any one, and have been so for the last twenty years. You may stamp on those fellows, and they rather like it. By George, if we treated the mill-owners so, they would have marched upon London long ago. But a fellow with no kick in him must expect to get plenty of it from his neighbours.”

These were my sentiments to a hair, coming straight to me from Uncle Corny; and at any other time I should have struck in boldly, with larger capacity of speech than thought. But to him who [295]
has no home to defend, politics are as a tinkling cymbal, instead of a loaded cannon.

“What part of the world was it in?” Sam Henderson asked, that the subject might not slip away; “that sort of thing would never do in our part of the world; though we call ourselves pretty rural still.”

“Well, I don’t know exactly where it was. And we had better not say any more about it.” Sir Cumberleigh became suspicious at the first sign of direct inquiry. “After all, I dare say there was no harm done. And perhaps the young fellow was glad to be quit of all, before she had time to run

up any bills. Although she was a devilish nice girl, I believe. But who could want more than three weeks of any woman? Except for the sake of her tin, of course. Mr. Johnson, you agree with me about that, I can see."

"Nothing of the sort," I answered sternly, forgetting how I wrecked my purpose by my indignation; "a good wife is the greatest blessing any man can have. And the man who robs him of her is no man, but is a Divil."

"You had better set Johnson after your friend Downy;" Sam Henderson struck in, as Sir Cumberleigh stared at me. "You see how a Benedict regards the subject. And I shall have to be of his opinion soon. Next week I shall lead to the Hymeneal halter, who do you think?—give you three guesses, and lay a fiver you don't hit it."

"Done with you!" cried our host, for I believe he knew. "Three chances, Mr. Johnson, you heard what he said. No. 1, Violet Hunter, such a stunning girl."

"Wrong. Try again. No Vi Hunter for me. Wouldn't have her, if she was dipped in diamonds."

"Well then, it must be Gerty Triggs, a fine young woman, and five thousand pounds."

"Wrong again. Only one go more. Have your flimsy ready."

"Oh, I say, it can't be Sally Chalker. That would be too much luck for a chap like you."

"It is Sally Chalker, and no mistake. Though I'll trouble you to call her Miss Chalker, Pots, until she is Mrs. Henderson. And I'd like to see any fellow come between us."

"Hand over," said Sir Cumberleigh; "well, Sam, you are in luck. What a lot of things you will put us up to then! Here's to your happiness! Well, this is good news indeed. Stop to dinner; we can have it early."

But Sam declined the honour; and we soon set forth for home, as nothing more could be [296] extracted from our host, concerning the matter which had brought us there. And Sam, who understood him pretty thoroughly, felt sure that he had already told us all he knew, and perhaps even more in the way of mere suspicion.

CHAPTER XLVI.
TONY TONKS.

Once I met a man who was a mighty swimmer, spending half his waking time in the water, and even sleeping there sometimes, according to his own account; though I found it rather hard to believe that altogether. But one thing he told me, which I do believe, because it is not so far out of the way, and the same thing might have happened to myself almost.

He had made a wager to swim across one of those inlets, or arms of the sea, which may be found upon our western coast, where the tide runs in with great force and speed, over a vast expanse of sands.

The distance from headland to headland was less than he had often been able to traverse; but, being a stranger on that coast, he had not reckoned, as he should have done, upon the power and strong swirl of the tide. By these he was soon so swung about, and almost carried under, that the sand-hills, where the people stood to watch him, stood still themselves, instead of slowly gliding by. And the yellow current flaked with white, across which he was striving, seemed to be the only thing that moved.

He began to doubt about his destination, whether in this world or the next; for the cup of his hands, as he fetched them back, and the concave impulse of his feet as he spread his toes behind him, seemed to tell nothing upon the vast body of water he was involved in; there was no slide of surface along his shoulder-blades, and his chin rose and fell at each labouring stroke, without budging an inch from the dip or the rise. He began to feel that he was beaten, and a quiet resignation sank into the stoutness of his heart, such as a brave man feels at death. And he never would have lived to tell the tale, except for a big voice from the shore, the voice of the very man who had the money hanging on it.

"Put your feet down, Tom," he cried; "for God's sake put your feet down." [297]

The vanquished swimmer put his feet down, though he thought it was his death to do it; and there he felt firm sand, and stood, with the tide which had threatened to engulf him, rippling round his panting breast, and lapping his poor weary arms. There happened to be a spit of sand there, far away from shore and rock, and known to the boatmen only. There he stood, and renewed his strength, with cheers of encouragement from the shore; and then, as the rush of the tide was slackening, after filling the depths inshore, he threw his chest forward upon the water, and fought his way safely to the landing-place.

"But I would not take the money," he said; "if I had taken that man's money, I should have deserved to be drowned next time."

This appeared to me to be a noble tale, showing goodness on both sides, which is the true nobility. And it came to my memory now, because it seemed to apply to my present state. I had battled long with unknown waters, and against a tide too strong for me; and now, though still far away from land, I had obtained firm footing. By what cross purpose and crooked inrush, my power and pride had been washed away, was a question still as dark as ever; but now I could rest on the firm conviction, which had been only faith before, that my Kitty still was true to me, though beguiled by some low stratagem. And I knew pretty surely who had done it, though it might be very hard to prove.

"Don't lose a day," said Uncle Corny, when I told him all we had done and heard; "never mind me, or the garden. You can make up for all that by-and-by; and you have left your part in first-rate order. That scoundrel follows in his mother's track; but he is ten times worse than she is, because he keeps his temper. You must try to do the same, my lad. It would never do to have a row with him, and to take him by the throat, as he deserves. There is nothing you can prove at present. And the moment he knows that you suspect him, he will double all his wiles and dodges. He might even make away with your poor wife. He would rather do that, than let you regain her, and convict him of his tricks."

"Bad as he is, he could never do that. I cannot believe that any person living, who knows what Kitty is, could raise his hand against her. But the wonder is, where can he have put her? Gentle [298] as she is, she is not a fool; and she would never submit to be restrained by force. And all that sort of thing is quite out of date now, at any rate in England."

"So people suppose; but stranger things are done, even in this country still. He may even have got her in a lunatic asylum, after driving her out of her senses first. Or more likely still, on the Continent somewhere. Why, they do worse things than that in Spain, and in Italy, too, from what I have heard. And as for Turkey—why, bless my heart, they keep the women in sacks and feed them, till they are fat enough for the Sultan. And you heard that he has gone abroad. Mrs. Wilcox said so. That is what he has done with her; you may depend upon it."

"But she would not have travelled with him, uncle. He would not have dared to take her into any public place. But don't talk about it; it drives me wild. I see nothing to do, but to force him to confess, to get him away somewhere by himself, and hold a pistol to his head. A blackguard is always a coward, you know."

"Nine out of ten are, but the tenth is not," my uncle replied sententiously; "no sort of violence will serve our turn. We must try to be crafty as he is. The only plan I can see is to have him

watched, followed everywhere without his knowledge, and not put upon his guard by a syllable from us. We had no reason to do that till now; but now we have, for I feel pretty sure that old Hotchpot was right. You ought to have got more out of him."

"It was not to be done. We tried everything. And I believe he knows no more than this—that before they quarrelled, the younger villain made a boast of it that he would have his revenge, but never let out what his plan was. And when Hotchpot heard that it had been done, he naturally concluded who had done it. When we compared notes, Sam and I agreed that in all probability there is nothing more than that."

"It is very unlucky for us," said my uncle, "that Henderson is going to be married so soon. We cannot expect him to help us any more, for a long time to come; and he has twice the head that you have. I don't mean to say for useful work, for there you would beat him hollow, but for plotting, and scheming, and all sorts of dirty tricks. He has been brought up to those things from the cradle, and he can tell a lie splendidly, which you cannot. You are much too simple and truthful, Kit, just as I am, for dealing with rogues and knaves. And he knows a lot more of the bad [299] world than we do. He is hand in glove also with a host of swells, such as you and I never spoke to. Why, I never shook hands with a lord in my life, although I should do it like a man—if he offered, mind, for I should wait for that. And you are in the same condition."

"Not a bit of it. I shook hands with two at Newmarket, and they seemed to think very well of me. But that reminds me that I met the very man for our job, if he would undertake it. And I believe he would, if we paid him well."

"For spying upon Bulwrag, you mean, Kit. I can't bear the idea of spying, even on that fellow. But I fear we must make up our minds to it, just as the police watch a murderer. And as for the cost of it, I would go half, and I am sure your Aunt Parslow would pay the other half. But what makes you think that he would suit? A very sharp fellow is wanted, mind. Not a bit like Selsey Bill."

"If it must be done, he is the very man. But you shall not pay a farthing, Uncle Corny; you have plenty to do with your money. At any rate I will not ask you, until I have spent all I have for the purpose. Your advice is quite enough for you to give, and it is worth more than money. See what I should have done without you now! I had made up my mind to pursue that fellow, and seize him, and shake the truth out of him. But I should only have shaken out a heap of lies, and probably got locked up for my trouble. But I see that your plan is the only wise one."

"You are a sensible young fellow, Kit, when you have good advisers. But who is this man of craft you were speaking of, and how has he got experience for a job like this?"

"He has been brought up to every kind of nasty work; and the nastier it is, the more he likes it. He is a spy on horses, to watch them in their trials, and sneak into their boxes, and learn everything they think of. It seems to be a regular profession, where they keep racehorses; and Sam knows all about this man. They call them Touts, or Ditch-frogs, or Sky-blinkers, or half-a-dozen other names; but they get well paid, and they don't care. His name, or nick-name, is Tony Tonks, which he takes from some story-book, I believe. He is a very queer sort of fellow; if you saw him once, you would know him always; not a bit like any of our folk down here. Sam says he could canter round any of his chaps, and he would try to afford him, if he did crooked work; but Tony is a costly luxury."

"Never mind the cost. Your aunt shall pay; she has nothing to do with all her cash, except to [300] blow out a lot of dogs, like footballs. But is this Tony to be trusted? He might be a Jack of both sides."

"That is just what he isn't. And that is how he gets double the wages of any other Tout. He puts his whole heart into anything he takes up; and yet he is cool as a weazle. He makes a point of honour of winning, Sam told me; and he would rather pay money out of his own pocket, than be beaten, whenever he takes up a job. And he is very small; he can slip in and out, while people say —'Oh, what boy was that?' But I doubt whether he would take up this. He would have made a wonderful jockey, I was told; and he rides as well as the best of them. But he loses his head, when he is put upon a horse, or he might be now making ten thousand a year. Nobody can explain such things."

"Nobody can explain anything;" my uncle replied with his usual wisdom; "look at me. I have been in a garden all my life, and I have kept my eyes open, and I am no fool. But if you ask what canker is in an apple-tree or pear, or blister in a peach, or silver-leaf, or shanking in grapes, or sudden death in a Moorpark, or fifty other things that we meet with every day, all I can say is —'Go and ask the men of science, and if two of them tell you the same thing, believe it.' No, my lad, we know nothing yet, though we find bigger words than used to serve the turn. Have you told young Henderson, that you would like to try this fellow, Tony Tonks?"

"No, I never thought of it, until just now, when you suggested that the villain should be watched, to find out where he goes, and all his dirty doings. It is fair play with such a deadly sneak. But for all that, I hate the thought of it."

"We must meet the devil with his own weapons. Sam is going to be married at Ludred, I suppose."

"Yes, next Thursday. And I have promised to be there. Although it will be a bad time for me."

“Never mind, Kit. You shall have your time again. As I have told you more than once. I am an old man now, and have seen a lot of wickedness. But I never knew it triumph in the end. Go up at once to Halliford, and get your friend to write to this fellow by the afternoon post. We might have him here to-morrow night, and settle matters with him, while we have Henderson to help us.”

I was lucky enough to find Henderson at home, and he entered into our plan with zeal; for he [301] had his own grudge with Bulwrag. But he told me that we must be prepared to part with a heap of money, if we began it; and he could not tell how long it might last. I answered that we had a good bank to draw on, and that I should be able to repay it in the end out of my own little property, which I should insist upon doing.

“Tony will want five pounds a week, and all expenses covered; and you may put that probably at five pounds more.” Sam looked as if he thought I could not afford it. “And then if he does any good, he will expect a handsome tip. And you must let him have his own head. He is the best man in England for the job, if he will take it. And perhaps he will. There is nothing on now in his line of business much, till the Leger comes on. Tony will do a good deal for me. I shall put it as a personal favour, you know. But we won’t tell him what it is, until he comes to see.”

Busy as he was with his own affairs, Henderson wrote to the great horse-watcher, and receiving reply by telegraph, met him at Feltham the following afternoon; and after showing him all over his own places, brought him to supper with us at my uncle’s cottage at nine o’clock, as had been arranged in the morning. And it was as good as a play—as we express it—and better than most of the French plays now in vogue, to see my solid uncle, with his English contempt for a spy, and strong habit of speaking his mind, yet doing his utmost to be hospitable, and checking himself in his blunt deliveries, and catching up any words that might be too honest for the convenience of his visitor. He told me afterwards that he felt like a rogue, and was afraid of sitting square to his own table.

The visitor, however, did not in the least appreciate these exertions, or even perceive their existence. He was perfectly contented with his own moral state, and although he said little, I could almost have believed that he regarded my good uncle with as much superiority, as was felt —but not shown—towards himself. And his principal ambition was to take in a good supper.

Being concerned more than all the rest in his qualities, I observed him closely, and became disappointed when he said nothing of any particular astuteness. But perhaps, like most men who have to work their brains hard, he allowed them a holiday when off duty, and cared very little what was thought of them then, if they came up to the scratch at signal. And although he said [302] little, what he said was to the point, and he did not expend great ability in proving, as most men do, that two and two make four.

His outer man was of such puny build, that when he sat by my uncle’s elbow, it seemed as if he might have jumped into the big pocket, wherein the fruit-grower was wont to carry a hammer, a stick of string, a twist of bast, a spectacle-case full of wall-nails, a peach-knife, a pair of clips, a little copper wire, and a few other things to suit the season, according to its latest needs. Tony Tonks glanced every now and then with great curiosity at my uncle, and at this pocket which was hanging with its weight under the arm of a curved Windsor chair; as a fisherman likes to see his bag hang down, but only once in his lifetime has that pleasure.

But though Tony Tonks might go (more readily than the fish who won’t come at all) into that pocket, Nature had provided him with compensation for his want of magnitude. There never lived a very small man yet, who was not in his own opinion big. Great qualities combine in him, of mind and soul, and even of the body for the sake of paradox; so that no one knows what he can amount to, but himself. And as the looking-glass presents us with ourselves set wrong; so the mirror of the man who weighs but half the proper weight, may exalt him to the ceiling, if he slopes it to his mind.

Tony spoke little, but he spoke with weight, and expected to be followed closely, when he gave us anything. And it became pleasant to behold my uncle gradually forming a great opinion of him, because he was not offered much to build it on. Sam Henderson nodded very knowingly to me, and I returned it with a wink behind my Uncle Corny’s head, when the pipes were put upon the table, and the grower took the clean one he intended for himself, and gave it (with a grunt at his own generosity) to Tonks.

“Now we all know where we are,” began my uncle, as if a puffing pipe had been the cloudy pillar; “the best thing, as I have always found in life, is for people to know what they are at, before they do it.”

Tony Tonks nodded, and my uncle was well pleased, both to have the discourse to himself, and to perceive that the visitor smoked slowly, and could dwell upon good things.

“You give us your experience and skill, for the period of one month at least if needful, for the sum of five pounds a week payable in advance, as well as travelling expenses, if required, and [303] lodgings. You report to us by post, when there is anything to tell, and you come down at the end of every week, to let us know how you get on, and to draw your money for the next week. And you attend to nothing else, but the job you are engaged on.”

“Nothing else. Never take two things in hand at once.”

“And the business you undertake for us is to find out everything that can be found about the

doings of Donovan Bulwrag. Where he goes, who his companions are, what messages he receives or sends, how he employs his time, what he is up to, everything about him that is of interest to us. It seems a nasty, shabby thing, but he has brought it on himself. We can't bear doing it; but it must be done."

"Nothing shabby in it," Tonks exclaimed with spirit, and a quick flash in his small gray eyes; "trickey people must be tricked."

"A man who has wronged another man," said my uncle, putting it on a larger footing, "as that low scoundrel has wronged us, has put himself outside of all honour. You know the man very well by sight, I believe."

"And by more than sight;" answered Tony, in a voice that made us look at him. But as he offered no explanation, we did not ask him what he meant, but concluded that he had his own bone to pick with this crafty enemy.

CHAPTER XLVII.
TOADSTOOLS.

We arranged that our watchman—as my uncle called him, thinking it much more respectable than spy—should hire a room from our friend Mrs. Wilcox, who could help him in many ways. For she knew all the habits of the house of Bulwrag, and had useful friends in the kitchen there, and could introduce Tonks to a distant view of the adversary's mother and sisters.

All this being settled, and everybody else in good spirits about it, I fell suddenly into deep dejection, not on account of Sam Henderson's good luck, for that I rejoiced in and would not think of, but simply from dwelling on my own hard fate, and the sympathy aroused by it among all who knew me. For as time went on, I was pitied more and more, and our neighbours one and [304] all made up their minds, that there never had been a more unlucky fellow. And especially the women looked at me in such a way, that when I could avoid them without rudeness, it seemed to be a comfort to have business round the corner.

This began to tell upon me more and more; for as no man can see all the world for himself, but must take his view of it from other people's eyes; so even in his own affairs he finds their colour affected by the light or shade that others cast upon them. And labour as I might to think that every one was wrong, and ought to be compelled to keep his mind to his own business, yet when I had made all this most certain to myself, a frosty fog and gloom of doubt would settle on my spirits, and wrap me in a world of wonder having no straight road in it. And what with one state of mind and another, sometimes the pangs of memory, and sometimes the stings of fury, and worst of all the heavy ache of listlessness and loneliness, upon the whole it seemed less harm to be out of life than in it.

How it might have ended I know not, if it had not been for something which I took to be an accident, and of no importance to me more than any other meeting. One evening after sunset, as the days were drawing in, though the summer was still in its power and beauty, I was taking my usual lonely walk in "Love Lane," as the young people called it. There had not been a night, whether fine or wet, from the time of my loss to this moment, when I had failed of this lonely walk, unless I was far from Sunbury. It was some little comfort to end the day in pacing to and fro where last, so far at least as knowledge went, my Kitty's footsteps must have been.

And now, when the sunset tint was gone, and the sky could be looked into like clear glass, and in the tranquillity of summer night the flutter of a leaf might almost seem to be caused by the twinkle of a star, I, the only unquiet creature—according to the laws of man—was treading the same restless round, and thinking the same endless thoughts, as when the storm of evil fortune had been fresh upon me. Wrapt in my own cares alone, and breathing only for myself—for absorbing love in small men is but selfishness by deputy, and I in all but outward form have been a small man always—here I plodded without heed of grandeur, goodness, or the will of God.

But things are strangely brought about; and any one not remembering this might laugh to hear how I was enlarged, and for the moment more ennobled than by all the stars of heaven, through [305] the sight of a white cotton handkerchief. A man climbed over a gate into the lane, stiffly raising one leg first, and then after a little pause the other, as if his active days were gone. And probably I should not have seen him, for all his clothes were black, unless he carried a white handkerchief. This was conspicuous in the dark of the overhanging foliage; and it seemed to be doubled up by the corners, and bulging with some bulk inside.

"What can he have got in that?" thought I, and hastened my steps to see, although it was no concern by rights of mine.

"Good evening, Mr. Kit—excuse me, Mr. Orchardson I mean." This was said in a kind and gentle voice; and I took off my hat, for I saw that it was our parson, the Rev. Peter Golightly, not our vicar, who was absent for the summer, but the curate in charge of our parish.

"What a calm and beautiful night!" he resumed; "it takes one out of one's self almost. It makes our sorrows seem so small."

He might have talked like this for an hour, without any effect of that sort on me; if he had not finished with a heavy sigh, in spite of all the solace of the scene. Then I knew that he referred to his own grief, which was a dark and bitter one. He had lost his wife, just before he came to us; and now it was said that his only child, a graceful girl of about fifteen, was pining away with some mysterious illness, and would take no food. And he, an old man of threescore and five, of feeble frame and requiring care, must finish his earthly course alone, poor, and forlorn, and with none to love him.

"I hope Miss Bessy is a little better," I said very softly; for I felt rebuked in my health and strength, by a grief like this.

"No, I fear not. She fancies nothing. As I came back from visiting poor Nanny Page, I saw some fine mushrooms in the footpath field, and it struck me that possibly my child would like them; though they are not very nourishing or wholesome food. But if we could get her to eat anything—and I have a special style of cooking them. But it was nearly dark when I gathered them, and I scarcely know the true from the poisonous. I was going to ask Dr. Sippets, but I fear he would forbid them altogether. You could do me a great favour, if you would. Just to look these over for me."

This I undertook with the greatest pleasure, and asked him to come to my cottage for the [306]
purpose, where we could procure a light. And I was pleased that he did not in any way attempt to "talk goody," as our people call it, nor even refer to my lonely condition; though I knew by the softness of his manner that it was present to his mind. The reverend gentleman had collected his booty in too Catholic a spirit, mingling with the true Agaric some very fine "horse-mushrooms," and even one or two poisonous toadstools. Having packed all the good ones in a tidy punnet, which looked more enticing than his handkerchief, I carried them for him to his own door, and obtained leave to call on the morrow, and ask whether the young lady had been tempted.

My Uncle Corny was one of that vast majority of good Britons, which can never forbear the most obvious joke, even when it is least attractive. The most fastidious people in the world could scarcely call him "vulgar,"—which used to be a favourite word with them—because he could let them call him what they liked, and be none the worse for it. They might just as well blame a dog for loving liver, or a cat for believing that heaven is milk, as fall foul of my Uncle Corny, because he ate the onions of very common jokes. He liked to make a laugh; and when he failed, he perceived that the fault was upon the other side.

"I thought of a capital thing," he told me, "when I was half awake last night, for I never sleep now as I used to do. If you go on like this, you'll have to answer to the parish for it. What right have you to change our parson's name?"

I saw by the wag of his nose that he was inditing of some cumbrous joke; and I let him take his time about it.

"How slow you are! Can't you see, Kit, his proper name is Golightly; and you are making him go heavily. Well, never mind. I can't expect you to see anything just now. I suppose you never mean to laugh again."

"Certainly not at such stuff as that. What am I doing to disturb him?"

"Why, you are getting into talks together, and heavy proceedings about probations, and trials, and furnaces of affliction, and all that sort of stuff, as I call it; instead of coming to have your pipe with me."

"There has not been a word of the sort;" I answered, wondering how he could be so small. "Mr. Golightly leaves all that for the Methodists. He is a churchman. And not only that, but he is a man of true courage, and real faith in God. If he could only give me a hundredth part of what he has, [307]
how different I should be! And he never talks about it, but I know that it is in him. Without a single word, he has made me thoroughly ashamed of the way I go on. Look at him! A poor old man, who can scarcely climb a gate, or lift a chair, and who sees his one delight in this world pining and waning to the grave before him. Yet does he ever moan and groan, and turn his back on his fellow-creatures? Not he. He sets his face to work, with a smile that may be sad, but is at any rate a pleasant one; and he gives all his time to help poor people, who are not half so poor as he is. I call him a man; and I call myself a cur."

"Come, come; that's all nonsense, Kit. I am sure you have borne your trouble well; though you have been crusty now and then. And you can't say that I have not made allowance wonderfully for you. And here you are ready to throw me over; because this man, whose duty it is, and who is paid for doing it, sets a finer example than I do! I don't call that a Christian thing. Let him come and grow fruit, and have to sell it, and if he keeps his temper then, and pays all his hands on a Saturday night, and sets a better example than I do—"

I burst out laughing. It was very rude; for my uncle was much in earnest. But I could not help it; and after staring at me, with a vacant countenance, he gave three great puffs of tobacco and smiled as if he was sorry for me.

"Well, take him another bunch of grapes," he said with true magnanimity; "I am glad that the poor maid enjoys them. And they are come down now to fifteen pence."

Thus was I taken, without deserving any such consolation, into a higher life than my own, and a very different tone of thought. The bitterness, and moody rancour, which had been encroaching on me, yielded to a softer vein of interest, and sympathy in sorrows better borne than mine. The lesson of patience was before me, told in silence and learned with love; and it went into me all the deeper, because my pores were open.

But in spite of all that, I saw no way to sudden magnanimity. It is not sensible to suppose that any man can forego his ways, and jump to sudden exaltation, just because he comes across people of higher views than his. Women seem to compass often these vast enlargements of the heart; but a man is of less spongy fibre, if he is fit to marry them. It had been admitted by Tabby [308]
Tapscott, even in her crossest moments, that I was a "man as any woman could look up to, if she chose." And the very best of them must not be asked to do that to a man, who is like themselves. And so I continued pretty stiff outside, and resolved to have my rights, which is the only way to get them.

"Here comes Tony," exclaimed my uncle, on the following Saturday night; "time for him to show something for his money. If there is anything I call unfair, it is to pay for a thing before you get it. He will prove to his own satisfaction that he has worked it out, of course. When you were at Ludred about Sam's wedding, you should have fixed your aunt to something. Your fifty pounds is nearly gone; and she never gave you another penny. I don't see why I should pay for it like this.

And the French stuff is in the market already. What's the good of being an Englishman?"

"And what's the good of being an Englishwoman?" I answered, for I thought him too unjust, as he had not paid a sixpence yet. "Unless she is allowed to dress sometimes, and be told that she is twenty years younger than she is. Aunt Parslow looked fit to be a bridesmaid quite. And she will come down handsomely, when she has paid her bills. She looked at her cheque-book, and she said as much as that."

"Then let her do it;" said my uncle shortly. "I suppose this spy-fellow will expect his supper. Eat he can, and no mistake. The smaller a man is, the more he holds. You had better run down to the butcher's."

Mr. Tonks might have heard him, but he made no sign, only coming up quietly with his tall hat on, and taking a chair which stood opposite to ours; for the weather being friendly, and the summer at its height, we were sitting out of doors, beneath the old oak tree. Then he nodded to us, put his hat upon the grass, and waited for our questions.

"Well, Tonks, what have you been up to all this time? You have sent us no letter, so I suppose you have done little?"

Thus spoke my uncle, looking at him rather sternly. I also looked at him very closely, and was surprised to find a certain strength of goodness in his face, which I had not observed, when I first saw him. His face was thin and narrow, and his cheeks drawn in, and his aquiline nose had had a twist to one side. But the forehead was high and broad, and the lips and chin full of vigour and [309] strong resolution. And the quiet gray eyes expressed both keenness and resource.

"A thing of this kind takes a lot of time," he said; "and if you gents are not satisfied, you had better say so. I take no man's money, when he thinks it thrown away."

"Hoity, toity, man, don't be so hot," my uncle replied, showing much more heat himself; "we have not said a word. We are waiting for you."

"I have not done much. It was not to be expected. I have cleared the ground for further work. It depends upon you, whether I go on."

"Yes, to be sure! Go on, go on. We give you your head, and we are as patient as Job. I suppose you have found out where that scoundrel is."

"Yes. And I have found out something more than that. I have struck up an acquaintance with him, and he does not know me; though he ought, for he broke my arm last winter; though perhaps he never saw my face. But I wore moustaches and whiskers then, and a green shade through a little kick from a horse. I know of a gambling-club he goes to, and there I meet him every night. I have put him up to a trick or two; and we are to rehearse them at his rooms to-morrow night. He is very close; but I shall gradually worm him. But I must be supplied with cash, to do it."

"We will try to arrange about that," said my uncle; "and of course you can return it, and perhaps win some more. Gambling is a thing I detest with all my heart; and no one can ever win by it, in the end. If he did, it would do him no good. But still, it is right that the rogues who live by it should be robbed. If you pick up a pound or two there, all the better. I think you have done wonders, Tonks. But I suppose you have discovered nothing about—about the lady."

"Not a single syllable yet," he answered, looking at me, as he caught my expression; "but I believe I shall, if I have my time. What I have done is a great deal better than 'shadowing' the man, as they call it. I might do that for months, and be no wiser. But I am obliged to be very careful. So many people know me. I can never go near him where the racing people are. And I have had one very narrow shave already. But there is another thing you may be glad to know. Bulwrag is beginning to make up to a rich lady. He is not sweet upon her; but it seems that he must do it."

"The thief!" exclaimed my uncle; "we must never allow that. The scamp would break her heart. [310] I am determined to prevent it. I shall let her know my opinion of him. I know all the villainous lot too well. Don't be excited, Tonks. I can't stand that. Give me her name and address; and I will go with the van myself, if necessary. I should think myself a party to it, if I did not stop it. She will soon see what I am."

"I was going to tell you, but now I had better not," Tony Tonks answered with a sly dry smile; "what good could you do, Mr. Orchardson? The lady would only laugh at you, even if she deigned to see you."

"Nobody ever laughs at me. And as for deigning to see me,—why, the Queen herself would do it, the way I should put it."

"Well, you have a good opinion of yourself. But you must keep quiet in this matter, unless you want to spoil my little game. The lady is the Lady Clara Voucher, daughter of the Earl of Clerinhouse, a very great heiress, and not bad looking. What more he can want is a puzzle to me. But it goes against the grain with him."

"He shall never have her; he may take his oath of that," said my uncle, bringing down his hand upon his knee, as if he were the father of the peerage.

“Well, this is a curious affair,” thought I; “how can he be taking to anybody else, after having cast his eyes on Kitty?”

CHAPTER XLVIII.
THE DUCHESS.

All these things compelled me to think about them, because they were so different from what might have been expected. When first I lost my wife, and knew that I had been robbed of her, I made up my mind for savage work, and nothing could be too wild for me. The greatest wrong that man can do to man had been done to me; for a stab to the bodily heart is better than the destruction of faith and love. But the care for my dear wife's good name, (which would have been blasted, if ever it got abroad that she had eloped with the money), as well as many other tender thoughts, had kept me quiet, and conduced to stop me from any acts of violence. And this instinct [311] of true love proved quite right; as all will confess who care to know the end of it.

Straitened as I was with my own cares, and sometimes buried in them, I could not help trying to lift if it were but the corner of the burden imposed by Heaven upon a man a thousandfold better and more noble. The only excuse I could make to myself, for the different way in which he bore his grief, was that he was bound to do it as a clergyman, and being so old, must be getting used to it. But I knew in my heart that this was paltry stuff; and that the true reason of the difference was, that he was a large man with faith in God; while I was a little one relying upon self. There was no way before me to cure that, for no man can set up his ladder on a cloud; still it did me good to know that he had found staple support, and was steadfast upon heaven.

Mr. Golightly was not only a Christian, but a gentleman. Far as I was below his rank in life, he never let me feel the difference, either by word, or turn of manner, or even by tone of silence. He never inquired into my affairs, though no indifference prevented it; and nothing was further from his mind than the thought that he was doing good to me. Being of a nature which requires something to love, I loved this man, and never could see anything to laugh at in him, as my Uncle Cornelius made believe to do.

I became restless if any day went by without my seeing him, and I could not sleep on my two chairs, however tired I might be, without the remembrance of his—"Good-night, God bless you, Kit"—which he always gave me, in a gentle voice, and with a look which was itself a blessing. And now I had been admitted to the acquaintance of his darling; whom he loved as I loved Kitty, but with a holier sense and fear. She was lying on a horsehair sofa, in his poorly furnished room; for he was poor, as a good man is nearly always somehow. And I never shall forget the look she gave me from her weary eyes, quite as if the depth of kindness were enhanced by its want of power. And she rose upon one wasted arm, and offered me a hand just like a white kid glove, that has been drawn off.

"You have been very good to father;" she looked at my sunburnt face, as if she would like to remember it somewhere else; "and what lovely grapes you bring me! See, how greedy I have been!"

It was as much as I could do to keep my eyes from being like grape-stalks; and I tried to drive my sorrow inwards, by thinking that all of it was wanted there. But it would not do, and I turned [312] away.

"What she wants is outdoor air;" I said, as soon as we left the room, and her father asked me what I thought; and I said it more to hide my own distress, than from any hope at all. "Outdoor air without exercise, and with very gentle movement."

"Sims, the flyman, is very good;" her father's lips trembled as he spoke, and he tried to make a smile of it; "he knows that we cannot afford much carriage-hire, and he comes at half-price when he has nothing else to do. But since the other spring broke, she can hardly bear it. She fainted twice, the last time we went."

"But the river, the water, the Thames!" I said, almost fearing to make a suggestion so stale, "what can be more easy than the gliding of a boat? Is that even too much for her?"

"Bessy has never tried it yet," said the anxious father, pondering much; "when I was at Oxford I loved the river; but I have not found time for it for many years. And I fear it would be cold upon the water."

"It is much more likely to be too hot;" I answered, with some wonder, at the clear unselfishness of this man, who loved the river, yet lived upon its banks, without ever taking boat, for fear of slighting duty; "the sun strikes very strong upon the river; but after four o'clock it is delightful. I know a boat that would exactly suit her. She can lie upon the cushions in the stern. The weather is beautifully calm and warm. Will you let me try it?"

He was loth to consent without leave from Dr. Sippets, which of course was right enough; but the doctor said it was the very thing he was going to recommend that very day; and as soon as the poor girl heard of it, she would scarcely hear of any other thing. We had an old boat of our own, but it was not nice enough for her; so I went as far as Shepperton for the one of which I had spoken to him. This was a very commodious affair, and the name painted on it was *The Duchess*, obliterating the old name *Emmy Moggs*; for a genuine duchess had been in it, while staying for her health at Walton. Phil Moggs was the owner, and he raised his price, as soon as he had painted out his good wife's name. And he thought so much of this boat now—though described by rivals as the washing-tub—that he always insisted on going with it. However, he was not a bad sort of fellow, though belonging henceforth by his own account, to the higher aristocracy. The [313]

cheaper men called him “the Duke,” and he accepted the title without ill-will.

Regardless of expense, I hired boat and him, under private agreement that Mr. Golightly should pay him half a crown, and suppose that all. And we brought the young lady in a bath-chair to the bank, and shipped her without any difficulty. And it was worth a lot of money to behold her fair young face, delicate with dreams of heaven, taking the flush of the firmer air, and gradually kindling with the joys of earth. She looked at every tree we glided past, and every fair garden upon either bank, and every feathered bend of hill and hollow, as if they were coming to her in a dream, yet so that she could make friends of them. At first her dear father clasped her hand, as if she could glide more smoothly so; but soon she became more independent, and wanted both hands, to point out her delight. Then the tears of kind pleasure came into his eyes, and he turned away, and looked at the world for himself, and thanked God for this little touch of happiness.

“Shall we rest a minute beneath this willow?” he said, as the sun drew along the stream, and the myriad twinkles of bright air seemed to be dancing to the silver chord of waves; then we slid into the silence of a cool arcade, and I said,—

“It is high time for Moggs to have some beer.”

Mindful of this prime need of every British waterman, I had brought a little stone jar from my uncle’s tap; and thinking that the savour of this fine beverage might not be agreeable to our fair freight, I landed on the island, with a wink to “the Duke;” and he very kindly followed me. The Pastor knew well that his flock must be fed, and he extended his knowledge to the neighbouring parish.

There was lemonade and strawberries for the weaker vessels; and while they remained afloat, and entered into these, Moggs and I sat behind a bush, and considered what was good for us.

“I suppose you don’t often come Sunbury way;” I said, just to lend a little tongue to tooth-work; for I had bought some bread and a hunk of bacon.

“Nobs goes mostly up the river, Chertsey, and Laleham, and the Mead, and that likes,” Mr. Moggs replied, with his knife upon the bone. “Ain’t been your way, pretty nigh three months.” [314]

“Ah, but you had a nice time then. Very fine ale at the *Flower-pot*, Moggs.”

“Well, so there he; but quite as good nigher home. And I likes my drop of beer, without no water in it. Here’s your good health, Mr. What’s your name.”

“Thank you, Moggs; and the same to you. But I don’t understand about water in your beer.”

“Well, did ever you see a young ’ooman cry enough to fill a bucket, let alone a boat? I pretty nigh wanted one of them tarpaulins. Just lost her Daddy, the old man said to me. But he told me not to speak of it; no more I did. But I found out arterwards all about it. Seems she come from Molesey, though I took her t’other side.”

“From Molesey? I know a good many of the people there. The only man who died there this summer, to my knowledge, was an old bachelor by the name of Powell. What was this young woman’s name?

“Watson, or Wilson, I won’t be certain which. Never mind; I dare say she’s all right by now. The more they takes on at first, the sooner they gets shut.”

“But you took her on our side of the river, as you said. Did you go to fetch her? What day was it? What was she like? Who sent you for her? Where did you land her? How came you—”

“Look here, Mr. What’s your name. You hires my boat, and you hires me to row; but not to go on about other people’s business.”

“But it may be my own business, Philip Moggs. And you may get into desperate trouble, by refusing to tell me all you know of it.”

“Not a bit feared of that,” the old man answered; “I’ve a-knowed hundreds get into trouble with too much clacking, but never one the other way.”

He shut up his mouth, and looked like an old villain of a horse I had seen at Sam Henderson’s, who had pits above his eyes, and ears that stuck back like a gun-cock, and a nose that was as wiry as a twisted toasting-folk. This was a man who would whistle on his own nails to warm them, but not to warn another man from going down a weir-pool.

“Well,” I said, “never mind; I don’t suppose it matters”—for I was able to master my manners now, after three months of endurance; “only somebody has a bit of money upon something; and you might cut in for it, if you gave a hand. But I’ll be bound you know nothing about it, after all. [315] You fellows, who are always on the water, dream all sorts of stuff, just as I did this afternoon.”

“Then, Mister, I’ll just keep my dreaming to myself. I did hear of something queer down your way. But least said, soonest mended. Time to be shoving off again.”

On the homeward row, I did my best to drive out of my mind all thought of this ancient mariner, and his story. And he feigned not to be thinking of it; though I caught his wrinkled eyelids dropping suddenly at the sudden glances which I cast upon him. He was watching me narrowly, when I looked away; and I thought it likely that he would land again when he had

discharged us, and try to learn all about me in the village. For we at Sunbury knew but little of the Shepperton people at that time, looking on it rather as a goose-green sort of place, benighted, and rustic, and adverse to good manners. Shepperton, without equal ground, despised us, as a set of half-Cockneys, and truckling for the money of London, which they very nobly contemned, because they got so little of it. If anything exciting came to pass at Sunbury, these odd people shrugged their shoulders, and talked about Bow Street, and Newgate, and the like; as if they belonged to Middlesex, and we to London. However, there can be no doubt which is the finer village.

I was much dissatisfied with myself, when I came to think of it, for allowing as I did this boatman's story so to dwell upon my mind, that even the fair invalid in the stern lost many little due attentions. But happily she fell fast asleep, being sweetly lulled by the soft fine air, and the dreamy melody of waters. Her long eyelashes lay flat in the delicate hollows of her clear white cheeks, where a faint tinge of rose began to steal, like the breath of a baby angel.

"How beautiful she looks!" I whispered to her father, as he gazed at her; and he answered —"Yes. How can I bear it? It is the beauty of a better world."

But he was in livelier mood about her, when we took her gently home; and she rose from the chair with a rally of strength, and he said, "Well, Bessy, how do you feel now?"

"As if I wanted a good tea," she answered; "and as if I never could thank this gentleman for the pleasure he has given us."

I wondered whether in trying ever so feebly to give pleasure, I might have won, without earning, some great good for myself; and off I went (after proper words) to follow the course of [316] the *Duchess*.

In a minute or two, I had gained a spot which commanded the course of the river; and there I perceived that the unmistakable Moggs, instead of hastening home, was resting on his oars to watch the bank, and make sure that no one was watching him. I slipped into a quiet niche, which made me think of Kitty; for here I had seen her surveying the flood, in the days of my early love for her. It had been a happy place that day; would it help me once again?

Presently Moggs made up his mind, if haply it had been wavering; and pulling into the evening shadows, sought a convenient landing-place. Then he fastened the *Duchess* to a stump, and stiffly made his way towards that snug little hostelry the *Blue Anchor*, favoured by most of our waterside folk.

"That will do," thought I; "he has conquered his contempt of Sunbury. He is going to pick up all he can about me. There must be something in it. And now for the Molesey story."

Without delay I returned to our village, and through it hastened to the landing, where our ancient boat was kept. There was no fear of meeting Moggs down here, for he was a good half-mile above. Pulling leisurely down stream, I began to think how stupid we had been in our inquiries, at least if my present idea proved correct. But the policemen, to whom we had entrusted the first part of the search, must bear the blame of this stupidity. They had not failed to make inquiry among the boatmen, and along the river; although their attention had been directed chiefly to the roads and railway. But they had assumed throughout that the fugitive must have gone towards London, and as regarded the Thames, they had only cared to inquire much down stream. Up the river there was as yet no railway, and no important road; and with their usual density, they had searched but very vaguely hereabout.

At Molesey I had friends who knew every item of what happened there; and they soon convinced me that no young woman weeping for her father's recent loss was likely to have quitted that good village, east or west, at the time in question. Therefore Phil Moggs had been deceived, whether by his passenger or others, as to that part of the story.

I was greatly surprised to find how little the general mind of Molesey seemed to be concerned about my case. Few seemed even to have heard of it; and the few who did know something knew [317] it all amiss, or had put it so, by their own imaginations. Indeed I could scarcely have guessed that the story, as recounted there, had aught to do with my poor humble self. Even Uncle Corny—great in fame at Sunbury, and even Hampton,—was but as a pinch of sand flung from a balloon, to these heavy dwellers in Surrey!

CHAPTER XLIX.
CRAFTY, AND SIMPLE.

DOES it lighten a man's calamities, or does it increase their burden, to know that they are spread abroad and talked of by his fellow-men? No man wishes to be famous for his evil fortune; and as for pity, he is apt to be alike resentful, whether it is granted or denied. But that is quite another point. Without a bit of selfishness, and looking at their own interests only, I certainly had a right to complain that an outrage which must move the heart of every honest husband, and thrill the gentler bosom of his faithful wife, had scarcely stirred a single pulse at Molesey; just because the river ran between us. None of the papers (except one that we subscribed to, at an outlay of four and fourpence per annum) had taken up my case with any fervour; as sometimes they do, when there is nothing in it, like a terrier shaking a skull-cap. This depends on chance; and all chances hitherto had crossed their legs against me, so that I could bring forth no sound counsel.

When I told my uncle of my last suspicion, and that I could go no further with it, because of the stubbornness of Phil Moggs he became so enraged that I saw he was right.

"What!" he exclaimed—"that old hunks dare to refuse any further information! I wonder you did not take him by the neck, and hoist him clean over the tail of his *Duchess*. No doubt you would have done it without the young lady. He would never dare to try it on with me. Why I knew him when he dug lob-worms at the Hook. He has forgotten me, I daresay. Well, I'll remind him. You shall pull me up there to-morrow morning. One way or the other, we'll crack his eggshell. I could never have believed it of him."

It did not concern me to inquire; but so far as I could make out what my uncle meant, he was [318] not at all pleased with Mr. Moggs for having got on in the world so well. No man can satisfy his friends in that respect; unless he makes so big a jump that he can lift them also, and even so he never does it to their satisfaction.

"To think of that fellow," my dear uncle grumbled, all the way to Shepperton, "owning half a dozen boats, and calling one of them the *Duchess*! Why, I gave him an old pair of breeches once, that he might not be had up for indecency. And now he calls my nephew, 'Mr. What's your name!' Do you know who his wife was? No, of course you don't. But I do. Why, she was in the stoke-holes at old Steers', the pineapple grower at Teddington. And no one knew whether she was a boy or a girl, with a sack and four holes in it, for her arms and legs. But what a lot of money they made then! He sold all his pines at five guineas apiece to George the Fourth, and sometimes he got the money. Ah, there will never be such days again. You must scrimp and scrape, and load back from the mews, and pay a shilling, where they used to pay you to take it. But here we are! Let him try his tricks with me."

Unluckily my uncle got no chance of terrifying Mr. Moggs, as he intended. We landed at a very pretty slab-faced cottage, covered with vines and Virginia creepers, and my uncle began to shout —"Moggs, Phil Moggs!" quite as if he were a Thames Commissioner. But no Moggs answered, nor did any one appear, till my uncle seized a boat-hook, and thundered at the door. Then a very respectable-looking woman, with a pleasant face and fine silver hair, came and asked who we were, and showed us in. She seemed to know my uncle very well, though he was not at all certain about her.

"Is it possible, ma'am, after all these years," he began in his best manner, "that I see the young lady I once had the pleasure of knowing as Miss Drudger?"

"You see the old woman, who was once that girl," she answered, as she offered him a chair; "ah, those indeed were pleasant days!"

I thought of the stoke-hole, and could well have believed that my uncle had been romancing, if I had ever known him capable of that process. But she very soon reassured me.

"I worked hard then, and I had no worries. But I have known plenty of care since then. I suppose you came to see my husband, sir. Is there any business I can do? He started for his holiday this morning. The doctor has been ordering him change of air; and at last I persuaded [319] him to go. He is gone for a month or so, to Southsea. We have a daughter there doing very well indeed. She is married to a large boat-builder. My eldest son George sees to everything here, now his father has taken him partner. But I keep the books, and can take any order, just as if Mr. Moggs was at home."

It seemed rather strange that she should speak like this, quite as if she expected some inquiry. I looked at my uncle and saw that the same idea was passing through his mind.

"Thank you, Mrs. Moggs," he said, as if he wanted time to think; "I fear that we must not trouble you. But are you in the habit of entering orders?"

"All the more important ones we do. At least for the last year or two we have. It was through a curious thing that happened, and we were nearly getting into trouble."

"You cannot be expected to show your books to strangers. I wanted to ask one little question. Moggs would have answered it with pleasure. But of course, as he is not at home—"

"That need not make any difference, sir. Everything we do is plain and open. We don't make a practice of showing our books. But if there is any particular entry you wish to inquire about, I

shall be glad to help you. That is, if you can tell me the right date."

Again we were surprised at her alacrity. But after a few words, my uncle mentioned the 15th of last May, as the date of the occurrence he wished to be informed about.

"Let us look at the day book," she answered very promptly; "that will show everything we did then. It is in the next room. You shall see it in a minute."

While she was gone, my uncle leaned both hands upon his stick, and looked at me. "This is all gammon, Kit," he whispered; "never mind; you watch her."

The old lady soon reappeared with the book, which was nothing but a calendar interleaved.

"You see I have learned business since you knew me, Mr. Orchardson," she said as she turned back to the date; "Moggs isn't half such a scholar as I am; but George is a great deal better. Why, he can do decimals, and fractions, and all that. You don't mind my turning back the edge of the leaf. Our prices, of course, are our own concern. We don't seem to have done much on the day you speak of."

"Very little indeed. Much less than usual; though the day, if I remember right, was beautifully clear and sunny. There seem to have been only three boats out, and all of them up the river. Your [320] husband spoke of coming down our way; but I suppose it was some other time. And of fetching a lady, who cried all the way."

"Then it must have been some other day. It could never have been on that day, you may be certain; or here it would be in black and white. But he never remembers when he did a thing; and he often mixes up two years together. A lady who cried? Why, let me see; I did hear something about it. Was she in deep mourning, Mr. Orchardson?"

"Not in deep mourning at all; but a grey summer dress, and a short cloak, or jacket, or whatever you call it, braided in front and scolloped round the bottom. And a very beautiful face with blue eyes, like the colour of the sky in settled weather—oh, but she may have cried them out, so you must not go by that, so much. And she had a pretty way of putting up one hand—"

"Shut up," I said, for who could stand all this? And Mrs. Moggs looked at me, as if she was so sorry.

"Oh, then it must be some one different altogether. The young party I heard of was about a year ago, and they did say she was going to her father's funeral, whether that day or the next, I won't be certain. My poor Moggs begins to get queer in the head, from being so much on the water, no doubt. He is right about most things, and you may take his word for untold gold, Mr. Orchardson. Such a man of his word never lived, I do believe. Sometimes I say it is unnatural, and he ought to try to break himself; for if every one was like him, where would business be? But without days and months, he is wrong more than right, even when he have been to church and heard the psalms. No, no, sir; he have put you in the wrong boat altogether. It can't have been any of our people."

"You are sure to know best;" said my uncle, looking at her, in a very peculiar way of his, which was apt to mean—"You are a liar;" and she seemed to know well what was meant by it. "Mrs. Moggs, we are much obliged to you. Remember me to your worthy husband"—he laid a little stress on the adjective—"as soon as he comes back from Southsea. Or rather when you join him there. What station do you find most convenient?"

"Woking, sir; there are others nearer. But that is the first where all trains stop, without you go back to Surbiton. 'Tis a long drive to Woking; but they will soon come nearer, according to what I [321] hear of it. How they do cut up the country, to be sure! They are talking of a lot of cross-lines already. But the river is the true line, made by the Lord, and ever so much more pleasant."

"So it is, Mrs. Moggs; and quite fast enough for me, when it isn't frozen over, as it was last winter. Ah, you must have had a bad time then! But I am glad to have found you so flourishing. Good-bye, and we are very much obliged to you."

"Oh, the liar!" he cried, as we shot out of hearing. "Put a beggar on horseback—it is the truest saying. Here comes a boat of theirs, by the colour! Hold hard a moment, Kit; I want to ask a question."

Easing oars, we glided gently past a light boat fitted for double sculling, with only one young fellow in it, perhaps an apprentice.

"Young man," said my uncle; "we want to know the name of your best doctor here in Shepperton. Your governor is an old friend of mine. What's the name of the one he goes to?"

"He!" cried the young fellow, balancing his sculls; "he never been to no doctor in his life. Don't look as if he wanted one, do he? Oh, I wish I was as tough as the old bloke is."

"What do you think of that, Kit? Pretty solid, don't you think? What a bushel of lies we have had from that old Emmy! 'Jemmy' she was called, till she turned out a girl, and then they took the J off. Such things don't happen in these schooling days; and much good they have done with them! That thief of a Moggs has cut away, you see, through what he heard last night in Sunbury. They'd lynch him there, if they knew he had a fist in it. Now one thing is quite clear to me. Your dear Kitty was taken in a boat, to Shepperton, or somewhere up the river; and Moggs was paid

well for doing it, and to hold his tongue about it afterwards. Most likely he did not bring the *Duchess*, but a lighter and swifter boat, perhaps the one we met. It is useless to ask any of his fellows; you may be sure he never let them know of it. And it would have been dark by the time he took her. He spoke of an old man, you told me, when he let out what has put us up to this. Could that Downy have made himself into an old man?"

"He could make himself into almost anything; but never so completely as to cheat my Kitty. It must have been some one he sent, and not himself. She would never have gone with the [322] scoundrel himself."

"No, she was much too sharp for that. What lies can they have told, to make her cry so? It is the d——dest plot I ever heard, or read of. And not a word from her, all this time! if she had been alive, she would have found a way to write. Whatever she might believe you had done, she never would have been so cold-blooded to her Kit. That is the darkest point of all. I know what women are. Even her step-mother would scarcely have been so relentless. And Kitty was the softest of the soft to any one she cared for. I fear that you must make up your mind to the worst that can have happened, my dear boy."

"I will do nothing of the sort," I answered, although I had often tried to do it; "and just when we have hit upon a fresh track, uncle! *Nip* is in the stable. Can I have him? I shall start for Woking Road, this very afternoon. It can do no harm, if it does no good. And I never could sit still, and let it stop just as it is."

"Very well; and I will telegraph for Tony Tonks to come down by the time that you return. We are bound to let him know of this last turn of the mystery."

To this I agreed; and as soon as we got back, I saddled the young horse *Nip*, and rode by way of Walton Bridge to Woking, feeling as I went that I would almost rather know the worst, than live on in this horrible suspense.

Woking Road Station was a very different place from what it is now, and of much less importance. Where a busy town stands now, created by the railway, and mainly peopled by it, there were in those days but a few sad cottages in an expanse of dark furze and lonely commons. Very poor sandy land, and black patches where the gorse had been fired, and one public-house, called of course the *Railway Hotel*, and large sweeps of young fir-plantations were its chief features then, and the shabby station looked like a trunk pitched from the line.

There were two dirty flies, like watchmen's boxes, one with the shafts turned up, and the other peopled by a horse, who had been down upon his knees, and was licking the flies off at his leisure. The driver was sitting on a log in the distance, cutting bread and cheese, and sipping something from a tin which appeared to have submitted to the black embrace of bonfires.

Perceiving that this was a crusty old fellow, of true British fibre, and paid by the day, which [323] relieved him from restless anxiety for work, I approached him as nearly as I could in his own vein.

"They don't seem to be very busy here just now. But I suppose your old nag can go along when he likes. How much do you charge to Shepperton?"

"Shepp'ton, Shepp'ton? Never heard of no such place. Which way do it lie, governor?

"Well, you had better ask," I said very craftily as I fancied; "some of your mates will be sure to know. Some of them must have been there before now. They can tell you how far it is."

"None of them at home this afternoon," the lazy rogue answered, as he took another mouthful; "better ask station-master. Like enough, he knows."

"He has nothing to do with you. And I want to know what the fare is. Look here, I'll stand you a pint at the bar, if you will just come up, and find out what it is. Some of your mates must have been as far as that, to take people for the pike-fishing. Shepperton is a great place for that."

"Very well, come along. But what do you want a cab for, when you've got your own horse, and a good 'un too?"

"Stick to your own business," I answered gruffly; and that tone seemed to have more charm for him, as happens very often with ill-conditioned men; "you are on your legs now, try to keep them moving."

"Gent wants to know fare to Shepperton;" he shouted through the precincts of the bar into the stable-yard. "Any of you chaps been there lately? Governor gone up to have a snooze." He illustrated that point with a genial wink.

"Why, Tom been there, not so very long agone," said a little old man who was washing a double curb under the pump, and twisting out the grime with his thumbnails; "or if it wasn't Tom, it was Joe—Joe Clipson, so it was. And a long job it were. I had to stop up for him. Thought something must have happened—he were gone such a time."

"Ah, but perhaps he went with a fishing party," I said as indifferently as I could; "when people go fishing they won't be hurried. Come in and have a glass of beer yourself, my friend."

"Well, no. I never see'd no rods, nor baskets, nor nothing of that sort, so far as I remember. But he did say something about waiting for a boat. Thank'e, sir, thank'e; here's your good

health.”

“How long ago was it? And who went with him?” My hand began to shake a little, do what I would. For I seemed to be on the track at last, where no one was likely to be bribed into lying. [324]

“Well, I don’t know justly, for I worn’t here when he went; and when he come back, he had been to station first, and I were that sleepy that I didn’t care to hearken, nor he to gab much, for that matter; but I know he said something about a young femmel. And how long agone? Why, let me see. Must ’a been about time for sowing scarlet-runners, for I mind my little grand-darter was playing with them, pointing out the speckles, and no two quite alike, a thing as I never took no heed on; and I must a’ been shelling of them for her mother.”

“What time do you generally sow scarlet-runners here? Not, I suppose, till all chance of frost is over.”

“Well, sir, generally about third week in May month. There is a lucky day, I know—birthday of Saint Somebody. Rabbit me if I can tell his name—the chap as took the Devil by the nose and made him holler. Blest if I shouldn’t ’a liked to see that though. Wouldn’t you, Bill? What a spree it must ’a been!”

“I can’t remember anything about those saints. Our parson isn’t one to insist upon them. But the one that did that, was called ‘Dunstan,’ I believe. ‘Dunstan,’ does that sound like it?”

“Why, it is the very ticket!” he exclaimed, with a clink of his pewter on the slate slab, made up to look like marble. “Bill, you know, that’s the day for putting scarlet-runners in?”

“Was it him as was going in a cab, to what you call it?”

“No, no, Bill. You never had no eddication. They used to teach us better in the times gone by. ’Twas three, or four days before his time. Fetch a Prayer-book, miss; and then I’ll prove it.”

The young lady in the bar, who had been looking at us queerly, tossed her head, as if to say —“What fools these men are!” Then she swept the money out of reach, and disappeared. Presently she came back, with an ancient Prayer-book; and my old friend, after spitting on his fingers, turned over the leaves of the calendar, and shouted—“Here it is! I could ’a sworn to it, from Sunday-school. May 19th. St. Dunstan’s Day!”

He put his thumb upon the place, and made a long-abiding mark; and I never shall forget again St. Dunstan’s Day. Those Board schools never teach such useful things as that. And at grammar-school we only kept the best of the Apostles. [325]

“Where is Joe Clipson to be found?” I asked. “Surely he could tell us all about it. I will give a sovereign to know who came in his cab, that night, from Shepperton.”

All who had gathered for that great discussion looked at me with astonishment and fear. And I saw that I had made a wrong move altogether. For nothing shuts up country mouths so sharply, as the hovering in the air of a thing that may prove criminal. At the same time, I saw that deep interest was stirred; and I fancied, very naturally, that it must be in my favour.

“Can’t say when Joe will be at home,” said my old friend. “He have gone to Knapp Hill with a gent, to see the trees. When they gets among they, they never comes back in a hurry. Might be nine o’clock afore he comes home.”

I looked at my watch, and saw that I must start at once, if I meant to be at home in time to meet Tony Tonks. And it struck me, that he would be much more capable of going through with the inquiries here, than I, who had already made a muddle of it, by putting questions too point-blank. So I tried to put on a careless manner.

“Well, we won’t say any more about it now. Only I should like to know what fish they caught; or whether they weighed in at the club with what they bought. If we think it worth while to go on with this, we can send a boy over, to hear Joe’s account. It doesn’t concern any one except ourselves. But we don’t like to be beaten by the silver hook. There is a rare fish at Shepperton, that nobody can catch.”

They looked at me, as if they could not quite accept this turn; and there was much disappointment on the barmaid’s face; for, with a woman’s instinct, she had scented a romance. But without another word, I jumped into the saddle, and was soon upon the furzy commons, full of prickly wonderings.

CHAPTER L.
A POCKETFUL OF MONEY.

"We are on the straight road now," said Tonks, as soon as he had heard my story; "and jigger me if we don't hunt her down. But luck can give five stone to skill, whether the course be straight or [326] round. I have done all I know; but you beat me in a canter, just by getting the inside turn. But unless I am out of it altogether, you may trust me to fetch up by-and-by. I must find out who that old chap was. It could not be Downy himself, you think. Not likely that she would have gone with him. Well, now you want to hear what I have done; and I think it leads to something.

"I am bound to be terrible leary, you see, for he is uncommon wide-awake. If he had spent all his life in the sharpest stables, he could hardly have been more up to snuff. He never believes a single word a fellow says, until he has been round it to know the reason. I can't abide that sort of thing myself, for it gives such a lot of trouble on both sides. If he asked you what o'clock it was, and you looked at your watch and told him, he'd place no faith in it, unless he saw the hands; and even then he would doubt whether you had not shifted them, on purpose to mislead him."

"Such a rogue should be knocked on the head," said my uncle; "and I wish I had the doing of it."

"It makes everybody hate him, although his manner is not rough. He never seems to think it worth his while to take offence at people. But they would rather have that, than what he does. Old Pots is popular compared to him; because Pots hates his enemies. But this man goes on as if they were not worth hating. And that has made me doubt sometimes why he has done this; and sometimes whether he has done it at all."

"If he has not done it, it can only be the Devil," my uncle broke in with some anger; "I am not superstitious, but the Devil might be vexed by Professor Fairthorn's kick-me-jigs, and run off with his daughter, just to dig him in the ribs. By George, I never thought of that before!"

"And I hope you won't think of it again," I said, in great haste that the idea might not go into his mind, for it would be hard work to get it out again; "I should hope you know better, Uncle Corny! Would the Devil think of paying such a price as Phil Moggs gets, and hire a four-wheeler to Woking Road Station?"

"You are right, Kit. He will have full value for his money; and he never could have stood the smoke I made. He gets too much of that at home. But Tonks says now that he doubts if Bulwrag did it. What are we coming to? Are we all to start again, as if we had never spent twopence over [327] it? Tonks has been with him a deal too much. When two fellows get together so, they can't smell one another."

"I judge just the same as if I never saw him. He isn't one to get over a fellow with his looks, nor his manner neither. Mr. Orchardson, you are quite wrong there. I go by observation, and nothing else."

"And what has come of your observations?" My uncle still despised Mr. Tonks, and he hated to be told that he was wrong, especially when I heard it.

"A good deal," said Tonks, leaning back in his chair and collecting his ideas; "a good deal, if you place confidence in me; without which I act for nobody. I don't pretend to be any wonder. But when I take a man's money, I am true to him. I have plenty of other jobs I can take to. Throw me over, if you choose, and have done it."

"No, Tony Tonks, we will not do that. I believe that you are doing all you know; and I am a reasonable man. Now tell us all that you have to tell."

"Well, there isn't very much, but it may come to something more, especially with what you have just found out. The worst of it is that he is getting shy of me, and I dare not say things as I did. I told him that I wanted to run down, to take stock of Henderson's place down here, and I asked him if he knew the neighbourhood, and whether we should take a trap and run down together. If I could get him to that, I might pick up a lot of things, in a careless and casual way, you know. But he was much too fly for any game of that sort; and it almost seemed to me as if he smelled a rat. Then I got on to him about the scientific codgers, thinking to lead up to the old Professor and the cruise he is going on about the bottom of the sea, and the place for laying cables, and a lot of things like that. But that wouldn't serve; and so I tried another lay. We were talking of old Pots, and I said, 'Oh, by-the-bye, was it true that the old fool was sweet upon some girl, some girl with a lot of money, who pitched him over?' And he said, 'What a joke! I should like to hear of that. Tell us the story, Bowles, if you know it.' Bowles is the name he knows me by, you see; for it would not do for me to turn up as Tonks.

"In fact I got no hold upon him, as I thought I should have done; for he knows how to make people useful and no more; and I saw that he would drop me as soon as he had learned all the [328] little useful things I know at cards and pool. Of course I was not swell enough for him to introduce me to his 'family circle,' as the ladies call it. And as for getting him to take a drop too much, and then working him skilfully, as can be done with most fellows,—well, I am pretty tough, but if I took the water and he the brandy, I believe I should be drunk before he was. His head is too big for any barrel to upset it.

“I was pretty near despairing, I can tell you, Mr. Orchardson, though I never have been beaten yet, and don’t want to begin it; when a little bit of accident, the merest casual accident, put me further forward than a month of work might do. You may be pretty sure, without my saying, that my appearance is not distinguished enough—although I have gone arm in arm with bigger nobs than he is, and real gentlemen some of them—but not swell enough to be seen in Downy Bulwrag’s company, in Piccadilly, or the Park, or high and mighty places. No no, not for Joe, as the poet quotes it.

“But he is not at all above allowing me the honour of his society, when I can be of service to him, and no one is likely to say—‘Who’s that?’ And there is one particular house of his—never mind where, that has nothing to do with it—at which he always likes to have me, and treats me quite as his honoured friend. And there we were on Monday night, tickling the pigeons, as you might say, which is only what they expect of us. He can beat me now in my own inventions, not from any superior skill, but because he is the coolest hand ever seen, and nothing puts him out of tune.

“He had won all along the board that night, and his pockets were full of money; but instead of being up, as a decent fellow would be, he took all his luck in a cold-blooded way, just as if it were nothing to what he deserved. That is never the right way to get any more. You must never do that, Mr. Orchardson.”

“Sir, I never gamble; and I want no lesson.” My uncle spoke severely; he thought it due to me to do so.

“It is too late in life for you to begin,” Tonks proceeded affably; “and your hands are too hard, Mr. Orchardson. But as I was saying, we came down the stairs, and slipped out very quietly. It was one of those little streets off Soho, where a man who knows London like the lines of his own hand may lose himself in half a minute, by one wrong turning. The night was very dark, and all the publics shut up long ago, and not a light was to be seen, except a dull lamp here and there. But we were quite used to this sort of thing, and felt no sort of fear, though we knew that we [329] were passing through a den of robbers; and a man who has a lot of money in his pockets is inclined to fancy somehow that every stranger knows it.

“Suddenly, as we went by a narrow reeking archway, a fellow sprang out of it immediately behind us. Before I could turn, I heard a crash, and there he lay, sent backward by a heavy blow from Bulwrag’s fist. I thought that he was killed, for the blow had been tremendous; such as I have seen, when they meant business in the prize-ring. But luckily for him, the fellow wore a hard-rimmed hat, which lay behind him doubled up, while he rolled over, gasping.

“‘Not much got out of that,’ said Downy, looking at his knuckles; ‘the sooner we slope the better, Bowles; or there will be a rumpus.’

“‘We can’t go, before we see whether you have killed him. You hit him hard enough to kill an ox,’ I answered.

“‘Killed myself more likely. Just look at my hand. The fellow can’t be hurt much. What had he on his hat-front? Don’t pick him up. He’ll be better where he is.’

“But seeing no one up or down the street, I disobeyed him, and drew the stunned man into the shadow of the archway, and set him with his head against the bricks, while Bulwrag showed much more concern about his hat.

“‘Here it is—a metal thing! I shall keep it. Put his hat on again, Bowles; and let him meditate. We don’t want to cut a shine at Bow Street. Let’s be off!’

“I was rising to go, for I hate the police-courts, and the man was evidently coming round, and could do very well without us. But before we could leave him, he stretched out his hand, and said, ‘Captain, Captain, for God’s sake stop a minute. I have got something for you most important. I didn’t go to rob you, but to tell you something.’

“You may be sure that I was pretty wide awake at this; but of course I took care not to show it. And I saw by a shadow on the line of wall that Bulwrag had raised one hand, probably to his lips.

“‘Right!’ said the man, who was on his legs now, but sidled away into a darker place; ‘let the other gent go. I was to tell you by yourself. I daren’t come to your place, but you must come to mine.’

“‘Out with it! I never keep any secrets,’ Bulwrag replied, just to humbug me. ‘Unless it concerns other people, and then—Well perhaps, Bowles, you wouldn’t mind going to your den. [330] Stop, let me speak to you a moment outside.’

“He took me away, while the man stopped there; and I saw that his object was to prevent me from finding out any more about that fellow. I was forced to let him have his way that far, and to play a waiting game with him.

“‘Some bosh or other,’ he whispered roughly; ‘I think I know who the fellow is, and all about it. A gamekeeper’s daughter down in Hampshire—always wanting money. Stop, you may as well take most of this, for fear of my being too soft-hearted. There, leave me five; that’s as much as I can spare. Good-night! Very much obliged. See you to-morrow.’

“‘You had better mind what you are about,’ I said; ‘he owes you a grudge, and you are in a

slummy part, you know. I'll come with you, if you like, and wait outside.'

"'You had better not wait at all. I am apt to mistake people, as you have seen already?'

"This was a threat; and as such I took it, walking off with a dignity which must have vexed him. However, as soon as I was round the corner, I slipped a pair of rubber socks, that I always carry with me, over my boots, and put myself on duty in other ways; so that if he met me in the shadow, or even ten yards from a lamp, he would have little chance of knowing me. And in less than two minutes I was back again; not in the archway, of course, but at a place from which I could make out part of what was going on there. For I knew that there was something up quite out of the common way with him. Now how did I know that? Can either of you tell me?"

"Why, of course, by his knocking that fellow down," my uncle replied sagaciously; "that was a bit of by-play, I suppose."

"Not it. That was all done, bone fiddles—as we say. I knew it by the pile of cash he gave me to hold for him. Oh, he is a deep file, and all there at any moment. He had clearly formed a low opinion of your humble servant, and thought that I should bolt with all the rhino, and be seen no more. And it could be no trifle that made him risk the sum of five and forty pounds."

"Forty-five pounds!" I exclaimed; "how strange! Why that was the very sum"—But here I stopped, for I did not wish to go into that question with him.

"Yes, forty-five pounds, when I came to count it. I could not tell how much it was, at the [331] moment; but I felt that it was a tidy lump of cash, and I jumped at his motive in handing it to me. But he reckoned altogether without his host there. Well, when I came back, there they were, still at it. I could not hear a word of what they said, for I was forced to keep my distance. But I guessed that the skunk would take him somewhere, for what he had said beforehand, and then my wits would come into play. And sure enough he did, for in about two minutes they both came out, and looked up and down the street, to make sure that they were not followed. Seeing no one, they set off, at a good quick step, and I took the right style to be after them.

"They turned so many corners, and went through so many alleys, that no other man in the world could have kept them in sight, as I did, without blundering on them. We passed through many places I knew nothing of; but at last I stowed them in a quiet little den, not very far from Drury Lane. Here the fellow went down a steep narrow staircase, and knocked at a door that was like a cellar-flap. Downy stopped outside; which I thought was very wise of him, while the other went in, and for some time disappeared. But Downy came back to the entrance for fresh air, or perhaps to be certain that he was not watched. And I gave myself up for lost; but most luckily an empty truck or barrow stood against the wall, and I just slipped under it in time. I could have touched him with my hand, but the place was very dark; and he went back without twigging me.

"I have had many narrow shaves, but none to beat that. He would have killed me with a blow, and in a hole like that, I should soon have been under the flagstones. I had no time to be in a funk till it was over; but then I began to shiver horribly, and my nerves were not fit to be trusted any more.

"I knew this; and thinking of it made them worse, for I have a wife and seven children to look after. All I cared for now was to get away, for I had run the chap to earth, and could put my hand upon him.

"There was no chance of overhearing any of their talk, even if they had any; and if they once discovered me, even though I might escape, there would be no chance of learning more. I could find the hole again, for I had seen 'Coke Yard' daubed with a tar-brush on a patch of whitewash, and wherever I have once been I can always go again. So when Bulwrag turned back towards the [332] door, I made ready to slip round the corner.

"But before I could do so, I heard the door creak, and the fellow with the broken hat came out again. I heard him say—'Now, you'll believe me, Captain. I'd be glad of the price of a new hat, afore you go.' What it was he gave to Downy, I could hardly see, but it looked like a packet of papers, or letters, or something done up in paper. Downy gave him something, and he said—'That all? Ain't much for such news;' and then Downy gave him more. 'Daren't come to your place. You come here,' he says, 'if you want any more—say next Saturday night; ask for Migwell Bengoose, and say *Cluck*.' That was the name so far as I could catch it. But I was bound to be off, for Bulwrag was coming. And you may depend upon it that I did not stop to chat with him."

CHAPTER LI.
NOT IN A HURRY.

We were all pretty sure that this discovery of Tony's concerned us deeply, and might lead to something, if followed up at once with luck and skill. But we thought it more important that he should go first to Woking Road, and inquire further into the story of Joe Clipson's cab, which he was sure to do much better than myself; for he could make himself look like a brother cabman, without any trouble.

He had little more to tell us about the Coke Yard yet, for he had to feel his way very tenderly there, and must wait for opportunities. And Bulwrag (who was never very sweet of temper, though, unlike his mother, he could curb himself) had been more like a bear than a cultivated Christian, since he got that cut across his knuckles. As our sympathies were not with the sufferer, Tony made us laugh by his description of the want of resignation in a case so trifling.

"Here it is," cried Bulwrag, after hopping round the room, as soon as his poultice began to draw; "look at this scurvy Saint! He is made of copper. Why the devil couldn't he have a Saint made of gold?"

Tonks replied that perhaps the individual with the hat could not afford a golden Saint to sit upon the brim; and the copper perhaps had done him a much better turn than gold, both in [333] saving his head from the crushing blow, and avenging it on the smiter. For the wound looked very angry, and it might be even dangerous. But what made him wear such a Saint at all?

"How the deuce can I tell why they wear such rubbish?" Bulwrag had answered crustily. "Those foreign sailors are such fools. You know more about him than I do."

This was by no means true as yet, though Tonks hoped to make it so, if allowed his own time about it. And he told us quite earnestly, and as I believe sincerely, that he never had felt, not his mind alone, but his heart, more deeply engaged in solving the merits of the darkest horse in the leariest stable, than they both were now in getting to the very bottom of this affair about my Kitty. And though I did not altogether like his way of putting it, when the meaning is good we must not quarrel with the manner in which other people look at things.

So we treated him well and put him up for the night; and the following morning I drove him by way of Weybridge to Woking Road Station, or as near thereto as we could get without any one observing us. Then I went back to Weybridge, so as to meet him at that station, and hear all he had to say, before he took another train for London.

Nothing could have been better managed. I borrowed a badge from Sims the flyman, and a spotted yellow neckerchief, and a broken whip, and Tony lounged into the inn-yard, as if he had left his cab down at the blacksmith's by the bridge. As I saw him in the distance I said to myself that nature must have meant him for the driver of a cab, for he put his knee out and turned his heels in, and carried his elbows, as if he had been born so. Any brotherhood of good will and lofty feeling, such as that of cabmen essentially is, must welcome him at once, and make him free of any knowledge it possessed that would bring in nothing.

And so it proved, when he rejoined me by the two o'clock train at Weybridge. "What have you ordered?" he asked; and I replied,—

"Chump chops, new potatoes, and pickled onions."

"Couldn't be better," he was good enough to say; "but have in the pewter first. Blest if I believe there's anything to parch the throat like a jolly good lie, and if I've told one, I've told fifty. Dinner first, business afterwards."

That I should consent to this will show how thoroughly I had been drilled by long endurance [334] and fretful discipline. Perpetual disappointment too, and the habit which hope had now acquired of falling without a blow—just like an over-matched prize-fighter—as well as a sense of evil fortune, drove me sometimes almost into the apathy of a fatalist. And so I let Tony Tonks munch on, and even joined him in that process.

"I wish I had got that to do again," he said, as at last he laid down knife and fork; "I don't often do so well as that. The air of these commons is uncommon sharp, sharper even than the Heath is. But you have been very patient, and I won't keep you any longer. I found out all they knew back there, and it only cost a shilling. I don't know that it is worth much more; for it carries us very little further. But so far as it goes, it is plain enough. I had it from Joe Clipson, the man who drove them; and no secret was made of the affair to him."

Now the story, as he had it, comes to this. Some one got out at Woking Road Station, on the afternoon of May 15th, it might have been an up or it might have been a down train, Clipson could not say, for two trains came in together, and the man had no luggage of any sort. The date could be fixed by several things, and there could not be any doubt about it. And the time when two trains meet there in the afternoon is 4.15; which comes pretty close to our figures.

This man carried nothing but a little bag, a little black leather bag, such as nine people out of ten have. There were three cabs, or flies as they called them there, waiting in the station yard; for it is their busiest time of the day, and he chose Clipson's, because the horse looked freshest, and told him to drive to Shepperton, without saying a word about the fare.

Clipson had not been in that part long, and he had scarcely heard of Shepperton, which is severed from all those Surrey places by the unbridged river. But it seemed to him a pleasant thing to start without any fettering as to money, and the man who engaged him seemed very free of that, in a style that said—"Never stand out for a shilling." And he seems to have acted up to this; although it is scarcely ever done, except with a true friend's money. But Clipson did not care whose it was, if he might be allowed to go home with it.

The day was very bright and pleasant—exactly as I remembered it—with plenty of light in the air, but no heat, and no flies to make horses grieve that they cannot swear. Clipson remembered [335] how cold it grew, even before the sun went down, and he tucked a sack under his calves as he came home, because he had promised Mrs. Clipson so, and his word was more tender in absence.

He said that his fare seemed to know a good bit about the principles of the road—that was the word he used for it—as if he had learned it from a map, or description which somebody had rubbed into him. But he was not in any way up to the corners, which show—as Joe said, and with some reason too—whether a man understands what he is at properly. But he knew where he was at Chertsey Bridge, and he waved his hand at the first turn to the right.

Being a Surrey man, from some outlandish part in that straggling country, Clipson was not at all comfortable upon our side of the river. To a certain extent, and with much better reason, I feel the same thing as regards them; though I admit (without thinking twice about it) that there are plenty of good people there, and especially my Aunt Parslow. But Clipson, although he depended for his livelihood upon a railway station, did not like going into unknown places, especially with a horse who might come down and stop there; for there was only one sound knee out of sixteen that were washed in the yard every Saturday; but that one belonged to Clipson.

His horse was a clipper, by his own account; and nobody could tell how good he was, because he never had been called upon to do his best. Still it was a toughish journey for him; and Mr. Clipson could not see, taking the state of the roads into account, and the distance, and the waiting, how he could charge less than five and twenty shillings; and if asked to go again he would not do it for the money. For he waited four hours, as he vowed, and I daresay it may have been three, at the public-house, which is a sharp pull from the house of Phil Moggs at the waterside.

For these details I did not care so much (although they were full of interest) as I cared to know who the man was that employed him, and how he behaved, and whether he looked good, and above all how my darling Kitty seemed to take things, and what she said, and whether she was weeping all the way about myself. The cabman had paid no attention at all to this part of the question, and could give no more account of Kitty, than if she had been a portmanteau, or inside one. Tony Tonks had never asked (as a man of kind nature would have done) whether my dear [336] had a handkerchief in her hand, or whether she seemed to gulp down a sob, or how she looked up at the evening-star, or even what the condition of her eyes was! For him it was quite enough to learn, that the "young 'ooman looked down in the mouth like." Well, that is the way the world goes on.

About that I cared to make no fuss; for it even seemed a pleasure to me that none but myself should know these things; remembering as I did, that no one ever could cry as my Kitty could. For I never could understand how it was, that having so very little practice as she had (in spite of many opportunities), she could yet make anybody feel as if all the world was woe, the moment there appeared a gleam of trouble in her soft eyes. I am tolerably hard, and Uncle Corny harder still—from having lived so much longer—but either of us would rather have had a 64lb. box of strawberries drop from the tail of the van upon the tender places of both feet, than let a single word fall from us, even in the hottest moment, to bring a cloud into those tender eyes. However, all people are not like us; and perhaps she never let that cabman see what was the matter with her; for she was proud, as well as gentle.

Moreover the man was hungry, and that makes a world of difference. The kindest man that was ever born cannot be expected fairly to feel for his fellow-creatures, when he is yearning after animals. The heart being full of beef and mutton, because there are none in the stomach, how can any room be left for creatures of less relish? This explanation may be unsound; but at any rate the cabman did not melt at Kitty's weeping.

And now two questions of prime importance rose in following out this tale. It was evident from two accounts, both that of Moggs the boatman and of Clipson the cab-driver, that no kind of compulsion had been used to make Kitty go with them. It was plain that she went of her own accord, deeply grieved—as the boatman's story showed—but resigned and patient. In the first place, then, who was the man that had done all this to fetch her? And again, when they got to Woking Station, whither did they journey thence?

As to the first point Tony Tonks had found out little more than I did. The cabman said that he believed he would know the gent again if he saw him, but there was nothing very particular about him to notice. He seemed to be elderly, and rather short, but very sharp and active. His clothes [337] were dark, and he wore a short cloak, not much longer than a policeman's cape. He did not sit at the young lady's side, but on the front seat opposite to her, and he did not seem to be talking to her much. It was quite dark when they left Shepperton, and it must have been ten o'clock when they arrived, or later; for the horse was a little lame from standing still so long. They did not seem to be in any hurry, and as they had no luggage, except a couple of light bags, he did not follow them on to the platform, and could not pretend to say which way they went, for there were

three more down-trains after that, and four or it might be five to London.

As to that, Tonks had made vain inquiries of the station-porters, and booking clerks. It was so long ago by this time, that even those who might have noticed them had forgotten. They had passed into the station, that was very well established; but after that nothing at all could be discovered, and there the clue broke hopelessly.

After hearing all these things, I became sadly downcast. They reminded me of that dreadful night when the snowdrifts overwhelmed me. I seemed to be walking in the same sort of maze, continually struggling to get forward, and perpetually driven back, seeming to walk with all my might, yet by a stronger power to stand still. And losing all confidence in myself, I asked Tony Tonks what he thought of it, just as if he had been the great oracle that smelled the turtle soup of Crœsus, without even longing for a taste of it.

"It all turns out just according to my views," replied Tonks, as if he saw his views running like the gravy, which he had been saving up to drink out of the spoon; "the same as I have expressed all along, and find them confirmed more by all I discover. Any one who puts two and two together could swear that Downy Bulwrag is at the bottom of the mischief, though he has taken uncommonly good care not to show his nose in it. I am rather inclined to think that the lady is on the Continent. They are more likely to have gone down the line than up. If they had meant to go to town, what should have taken them to Woking? Supposing they were shy of the Windsor line, Surbiton would have been their place, or Weybridge. Though of course they might have thought Woking road safer, so that we must not reason too much by that. By the way, can the lady speak French at all? That might make a difference to her."

"I am not at all sure," I replied after thinking; "for we never happened to talk of that. She was [338]
at a good school for a little time; and then that hateful woman, her stepmother, took her away when she was doing well, and sent her to a wretched place at £20 a year. She can read French, I know, because I asked her something; but I doubt whether she can speak it."

"Then that's where she is. I begin to smell a rat. He took her from Southampton, depend upon it. And now I twig some bit of meaning in that copper saint. The south of France—that's where she is."

"But why in the south of France, more than any other part?" I thought that he was jumping rather fast to his conclusions.

"Well, it might be Italy, or Spain," he answered, with a fine generosity; "I can't say very much about it. But a brother of mine was at sea, till he was drowned, and he traded a good deal from the south of France; and he had one of those things in his hat, because of being struck by lightning. They get it very bad in those waters, he declared; but I can't call to mind the name of the saint that stops it. Of course I have no faith in such stuff, though there might be nothing to laugh at, after all I have seen about horses. But there it is. They stick those things up, as an officer's coachman mounts a cockade; and bad luck it was for Master Downy's knuckles. His hand was like a pease-pudding yesterday. His flesh is always of a yellow nature, like a Cochin China's. Shouldn't wonder a bit, if he got lockjaw."

"Not till I have settled with him." It made me forget the Rev. Peter, and all his style of regarding things, when people spoke as if right and wrong had an equal claim upon the Lord in heaven.

CHAPTER LII.
A WANDERING GLEAM.

My uncle, however, was not like that. He had suffered too largely from rogues himself, in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, to have any calm way of considering them.

"Either a man is honest through and through, or else he is a thief all over. It is humbug to talk as if a fellow didn't know when he is stealing, or when he is not. He knows it pretty sharp when it is done to him; and he puts it short, as he has a right to do. And then he turns the corner, and he wipes his mouth, and serves others with the dose that made him sputter. To cheat the man that cheated you, is Christian enough; but not to pass it on to other people. Ask Mr. Golightly what he thinks about it." [339]

That pious clergyman would scarcely have been satisfied even with my uncle's view of Christian conduct, although he was moderate in his expectations of us, after all his experience of our doings. This made it very pleasant to be with him frequently; and for my part I am certain that I never could have lasted through all this gloom, and suspense, and indignation, without his example and quiet comfort. All that we had found out, at Shepperton and at Woking, I owed to him, or at any rate to my acquaintance with him; and although it might not seem as yet to carry me much further, still I found some happiness in knowing that little, and hope of learning more from it. And now I went to him about another question, which I could not settle for myself.

It may be remembered that Tabby Tapscott, who came to attend to my uncle's house, had more than once given me good advice; and some may have set me down as ungrateful for keeping her out of sight since my great disaster, as if she were of no importance. But the real truth is, that I had sought her counsel almost every time I saw her, and had found much comfort from it, because she was so scornful. For the little woman tossed her head, and shot forth her under-lip, as if she could not trust herself to speak, so thoroughly was her mind made up. She looked upon all that had happened as the fruits of a foul conspiracy on the part of man against woman, and she scarcely held me guiltless. And she had no patience with me, because I would not do the proper thing, to find out all about it. Until I did that, she would say no more, but leave me to listen to a set of zanies. Why on earth I refused was more than she could understand; and she went so far as to declare, once or twice, that I could not be in earnest about getting Kitty back, or I would have done it long ago. She herself had known a girl, of Westdown parish in the North of Devon, who found out all about her sweetheart's murder, and got two men hanged for committing it.

The means were certainly simple enough, if anything would come of them. The bereaved one must let the full moon pass for as short a time as possible; and then, at twelve of the middle-day, go to the dress last worn by the lost one, and take something from the left side pocket, or failing that cut a piece out. Then he might carry on as he pleased, until it came to bed-time, and then do as follows. Under the pillow on his left-hand side, he must place whatever he had taken from the dress, and then instead of his common prayers, pray in the following manner— [340]

"Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,
Bring me back my love that's gone.
Bring her white, or bring her red,
According as she is 'live or dead."

Then he must throw the window up, or out, if it was a lattice, and look at the moon which would then be up (for he was supposed to keep good hours, as all gentle lovers should); and after that he must lie down, with his left ear on the pillow, and repeat the Doxology—which Tabby called the "Doxy"—until it made him go to sleep. Then, as sure as he was a living man—or in the other case a living woman—the lost one would appear at midnight, and tell him all about it. Only he, or she, must ask no questions, and above all offer no contradiction.

Now, I have never been superstitious; though some of the wisest men I have met with seem at times to be so; and I laughed at all this stuff of Tabby's, although I had found her truthful. Then I asked her to go through it all for me; but she stared at my stupidity; "As if her would come nigh me!" she said. "It is the love as does it, and the angels to the back of it."

But when she kept on so about it, and assured me that much wiser people than I, and a long sight better—as she was good enough to say—had tried this plan and been set up by it; I began to think that it could do no harm, and if it afforded her any pleasure—why, no one else need hear of it. Except that the sin of witchcraft is most strongly denounced in the Bible; and many might think that this proceeding savoured of that character. However, if the Church of England could be brought to sanction it, the Powers of the air might do their worst; for our church is built upon a rock.

The Rev. Peter Golightly said, when I opened out this case to him, that he was a little surprised to find me listening to such nonsense. I told him that it was very far from my desire to do so; but if it was likely to ease the minds of others, it might be my duty to go on with it. At this he laughed, and did not say, but seemed perhaps to mean it, that I was not bound to make a fool of myself, because my brother fools wished it. However, I was not going to be argued down about it; and I put the question point-blank to him, whether there was any sin in it. He could not say that [341]

there was any; but being more on his mettle now, declared that it was rank folly, and insisted very strongly on the superiority of prayer. There I had him on the nail; for what was this but a mode of prayer, invoking also those holy writers, who alone have taught us the use of prayer? He shook his head, as if unconvinced; but his daughter called him away just then, and I did not care to renew the subject, feeling that now I had his permission; which he might recall, if argued with.

The moon was full at six o'clock in the morning, as Uncle Corny said; and he always knew everything about her, except the weather she would bring. And at noon I went to my dear wife's frock, the one she had worn on the very day before she disappeared from me. She had kept them on a row of hooks—for we were not rich in wardrobes—with a scarf of something drawn along to keep the dust from settling. It had been one of my sorest jobs to unhang them very reverently, remembering when she had worn them last, and how my arm had been round them. For she had a very pretty way of coming up in the morning (when her hair was done, and her collar on) for me to tell her how she looked, and to see that all her strings were right But now these empty dresses lay, all folded, and locked in the bottom drawer.

I may be soft beyond most people—although it is a fault more shared than shown—but when I had spread that simple frock upon the bed, which I never entered now, and passing both hands down the bosom, clumsily searched (as a man must do) for the mouth of the little pocket, and then could only get three fingers in—all the strength of my resolve to be quite firm and manly quivered on my lips, and melted in the haze that crept across my eyes. A tiny notebook, with a pencil, and a silver thimble, a little house-wife, and a button meant to be sewn on my coat, two or three jujubes (which she kept to pop into my mouth, because she fancied I was hoarse sometimes) nothing for herself, but all for me, or for my service; and then a little scrap of paper, my last scribble from the garden—"Darling, not till nine o'clock"—as I took them one by one, all [342] seemed fragrant with her sweetness, and holy from her loving hand.

I could not bring myself to go through Tabby's rigmarole that night; for my mind was full of larger thoughts, neither would I go upstairs into the lonely bedroom; but I gazed for some time at the moon, as people when in sorrow do, by some mysterious instinct. And then I placed a pillow, instead of the roll of mat beneath my head, and under it my dear wife's house-wife, and her pretty thimble, not for that night only, but as my companions henceforth; and therewith I cast myself on the hard church-cushion, and thought of her. Before very long, I fell asleep, having done a good day's garden-work at sundry jobs that were sadly in arrear.

But Tabby's jingle was still in my head, moving without my will or wish, as a mouse comes in the wainscote; and with the moon shining into the room, one of my last reflections was that I had been very lucky in yielding to no witchcraft. Not that there could be anything to frighten me in my darling, "whether white, or whether red;" by which the old chant seemed to mean, whether she might be in the bloom of health, or the wan hue of the winding-sheet. In either case she would love me still; and that was the thing I cared most to know.

Suddenly, I sat up and looked. The old church clock was striking slowly, and the sleepy sound loitered on the drowsy air. The moon was gliding calmly on her southern road, and being in her humble summer state, she could scarcely top the big pear-tree which stood before my window. The room was full of light and shade, in bars, in patches, and in triangles, with no strong contrast in and out, but fused, like silver-wire netting, or water parted by the weir-posts, and rejoining under them. And there, in this faint flow of light and wavering ebb of shadow, I saw my Kitty, sitting calmly, and gazing at me steadfastly.

No surprise or fear whatever crossed my mind—which seems to show that I was not altogether wide awake; but I waited for her to say something, while she kept on looking at me. I had left off wearing a nightcap ever since I went to Hampton School; not that I ever slept there, but because the boys had laughed at it. My Uncle Corny always said that this was tempting Providence; and now I tried to put up my hands, but they would not go, and I sat and gazed, being a little surprised, but not amazed, as some people might have been. Then Kitty put up her hand to me, [343] showing the palm of it quite rosy, as it always had been; and I saw that her dress was the one in the drawer; but that did not surprise me.

"Darling, you must be patient still. I am thousands of miles away from you;" she spoke as quietly as if she were saying—"The tea is not quite drawn yet," and I received it as quietly. "There is a good reason for my going; and you know it better than I do. Only, be happy till I come back; for whatever you feel, I feel. When I come home, we shall never part again."

This was a little too much for me, high and tragical as it seemed.

"I want you now. Oh Kitty, Kitty, don't run away again!" I cried; and over went both my Windsor chairs, as I sprang up, to fling my arms round her.

But when I came to the place where she had been, lo, there was no one! Everything was cold and hard; instead of her soft warm figure, all I embraced was a kitchen towel; and the handle of a gridiron came between my vainly opened lips.

CHAPTER LIII.
A BAD NIGHT.

NEVERTHELESS, that vision, if it was a vision, cheered me. The more I thought of it, the more I felt that it meant something; and though free as any man can be from human superstition, here I found a special mercy, showing that I was not quite abandoned and forsaken. But I took good care not to make myself the laughing-stock of any one. Neither Uncle Corny, nor Henderson (who was now come back from his honeymoon), nor even Tabby Tapscott, who might well claim the best right of all, ever heard a word of it. To Mr. Golightly alone I spoke at all about the matter, and he, instead of laughing at me, took it very gravely.

"It is meant to encourage you," he said; "and you should be thankful. Many even of the true believers have their doubts, as is natural, whether our little earthly course is guided by a higher hand; or whether in the light of full instruction we are left to work it out. But I venture to think with the men of old, that all things are ordered for us. You have had a bitter trial, such as befalls [344] very few so young; and you have borne it well, my friend. Sometimes you have been gloomy and downcast, but never bitter. A more mysterious affliction I have never witnessed, and you know well how my heart is with you, though I seldom speak of it. 'Bear and be strong' is the true watchword, and you have kept it nobly. I pray that I may live to see you in your happiness again; and you may without presumption hold that this has been vouchsafed you, as a token of approval, and a signal to encourage you."

So I tried to take it, though it seemed but meagre comfort. And I wished that I had broken my knees again, before I jumped up in such haste, and spoiled the chance of learning more. My darling seemed to have finished; but if I had only waited, very likely she would have begun again, as women generally do. Of geography I had little knowledge, except as taught at a grammar-school, and then it went some three inches down the "World as known to the ancients." I doubted whether the south of France could be "thousands of miles" from Sunbury, though that might be a poetical expression, and no lady is expected to be accurate. And what was meant by the declaration, that I knew better than she did the reason of her quitting me? That looked as if I had done something wrong; and an inspired vision should have known that I had never even glanced at any other woman. Thinking of all this, I was puzzled, almost as much as comforted.

In the next thing that occurred I found a further element of puzzle, but none at all of comfort. It was now the usual thing for me, being in bachelor condition, to turn into my Uncle Corny's house, at the time he was having his early dinner. Not that it mattered much to me; only that I was able thus to save myself from bread and cheese, and secure a little nourishment.

I was doing this to the best of my ability, without observing it, when in came Tony Tonks, as if he was running away from the bailiff. One of my firm convictions was that thin men never panted; but that impression, like all others, now required revising. Tony Tonks was in such a state, alike of mind and body, that neither could at all work out the meaning of the other.

We happened to have a little bit of boiled beef and young carrots; and my uncle was just helping me to a scutcheon of gristle at the corner. For he liked to keep a level cut, and he found me fitter now than he was, for the horny places. But Tony was in such a state, that when his knife [345] and fork were laid, he said, "Not a bit for me, sir."

My uncle looked at him as if he were troubled with his ears again, as he had been last winter. "Certainly, a nice bit," he said; "and close to the bone accordingly. We buy it fresh, and we pickle it. At this time of year, the butchers make it leather with saltpetre."

Tony saw that his face was stern; and to escape acrimony, he took my plate with all upon it that should have been for my inside. To this sort of thing I am too much accustomed to remonstrate.

"Not a word, till you have finished," my uncle spoke decisively; "I have known a man who cut his throat, by talking too much at dinner-time."

Mr. Tonks looked not unlikely to commit this error; but after yielding to my uncle's orders he seemed better. Then he crossed his knife and fork, which is a very defiant thing to do, and said as if he shot a pea at us—"I am come to throw up my appointment."

My uncle did not speak at first. When people took him suddenly, he would not be disturbed by any contagious gush of suddenness. And he waited for Tony to go on, instead of being pushed by him.

"What I mean is"—Tonks continued, seeing that he might as well go slowly—"I have done the best I can; and there is nothing more to be made of it. I can make out all about a horse, because he is straightfor'ard. But about a man is a different thing; and I shall go back to my business."

"Have you been frightened?" asked my uncle, looking at him steadily.

"Not a bit of it. What is there to frighten me, or any one? In the eye of the law, we are all equal. The man who killed me would swing as high as if he had killed Prince Albert."

"But that would not bring you back to life. You have been frightened, Tony Tonks; and it is useless to deny it."

“Well, my life is as much to me as the greatest man’s that ever lived. ‘Frightened’ is not the proper word. Only I look things in the face, and weigh the rusk against the risk; and I find the last come heavier. And I am wanted now for the Leger nags. I am worth ten pounds a week at least, so I wish to say good-bye to you.”

“I call you a coward, and a sneak,” said my uncle, getting his wrath up; “and it serves us [346]
altogether right for dealing with such a fellow. I could not bear it from the first; but I listened to other people, as I am always much too apt to do. You won’t have your spy-money, I can tell you, for any day since Saturday.”

“Ah, but I’ve got it,” answered Mr. Tonks, who seemed well accustomed to reproaches; “it was paid in advance, you must remember. I have cashed it, and mean to stick to it.”

“I don’t quite see how that can be,” said my uncle, with great sagacity; “you must be making some mistake. You can never have got so in front of us.”

“Ah, but I have, old cock, I have. All expenses paid; and here is my five-pound note, as safe as eggs.” He tapped his pocket, in a manner quite unworthy of an experienced tout.

“Very kind of you to show us. We will have it back.” My uncle seized him by the waist, and planted him on the table. “Leave him to me, Kit. He won’t hurt me, and I won’t hurt him, if he is quiet.”

He pinned the spy’s arms with one of his, and took the note from his waistcoat pocket, while the poor man struggled vainly. Then he set him again on the floor, and said. “You should learn to be more just, my friend.”

“Highway robbery!” shouted Tonks.

“High table, you mean,” said my uncle.

“I’ll fetch the police. I’ll give you in charge. I’ll take out a warrant. I’ll—”

“You won’t do anything of the sort. Sit down, and reason quietly. You have broken contract; and if you were one of my workmen, I would pay you nothing. But as you are a poor little jackanapes, and did your best for us, I believe, until you got into this blue funk, you shall have half of this money, Tonks, to pay your way back to your proper work. But only on one condition—that you tell us what has scared you so.”

“Well,” answered Tonks very sulkily; “I always do what is fair and right. But you can’t expect a man to go with his life in his hand, to please you. Fact of it is I got into grief by following up that Migwell Bengoose, or whatever his name is. I told you that I was bound to do it, before Downy went to see him again, unless I could get any chance, you know, of seeing what was in that packet. And I got no chance at all of that, though I did my best in Bulwrag’s rooms, whenever I went to see him. But his hand, in spite of all the doctor’s work got swollen as big as a horse’s [347]
head pretty nearly; and his temper became that frightful, that I scarcely durst go nigh him, and of course there was nothing to watch, when he could scarcely get about at all. Naturally I did my best to make something out of his grumbles; but he would not have it, and at last he says, ‘Bowles, what the devil are you always after me for? It ain’t from friendly affection,’ he says, ‘and I can’t pick up anything now, you see. If you want to spy into family affairs, I’ve got one hand left,’ he says, ‘and that’s enough for you.’

“Well, that was pretty plain, you know. And worse than that, in comes the doctor, and says he will not answer for his life, unless he goes into some place where he can be properly nursed and tended. So Downy makes his mind up in two minutes, gives up his rooms in Dover Street, and goes back to Bulwrag Park, as they call it, for his mother to coddle and comfort him. And there they’ve got a hospital nurse, and a wheel-chair, and I don’t know what all; and much too grand of course for me to go near with a binocle. ‘You’d better come and see my mother, Bowles, when you want any further information,’ Downy said to me, with his frightful grin, like a yellow mangle-wuzzle, ‘ah, she does like answering questions—light and sweetness, that’s her nature!’

“So I was shut off, as you may suppose; and I pretty soon found out what made him so suspicious. He discovered somehow that I had been living, for the first week, you know, not afterwards, at good mother Wilcox’s place near by, and they look upon her as an enemy, no doubt, having been nurse to the young lady they have stolen. If you try any more watching work up there, you must not make that the head-quarters, for they keep a look-out there, you may depend. But I don’t see what more you have now to watch. The lady is out of England, you may take that for certain; most likely she is snug in some lunatic asylum, or nunnery perhaps, or monastery”—Mr. Tonks was not well versed in such matters—“either in the South of France, or somewhere on the Continent; and unless you can lay hold of Downy Bulwrag, and put him on the rack (as they do in Spain) until he squeaks out all the truth, there’s no chance of your being much the wiser. I mean, of course, unless she escapes, or comes to herself, or whatever it may be, and tells you all about it with her own lips; and that is not very likely. They know what they are about, a great deal better than you do.”

“Because they are scoundrels, and we are honest men,” said my uncle, making the little room [348]
resound; “it may take a long time, but we shall win, and grind them beneath our heels, sir. You have seen as much robbery, Tony Tonks, as any man yet created. Now don’t deny it, don’t falter with it; but speak, as you will have to speak that day, when you go where lies are useless. Have you ever known cheating prosper?”

“Better than anything else in the world. You can’t get on without it, Mr. Orchardson.”

“You know what I mean. Don’t play with words. Does it prosper in the long run?”

“It would, if they only knew when to stop; but that is just where the difference is. An honest man stops in good time, you know.”

“An honest man never begins,” said my uncle; “but it is no good talking to you, Tonks. You have got corrupted altogether. Well, what did you do about Bengoose?”

“Ah that’s just the point, that is. Says I to myself—‘Now the coast is clear, and I’ll have a turn at that fellow. Downy is laid up with his mammy, and I’ll get to the bottom of that affair.’ So I set off last night, with a pistol in my pocket, one of those Colt’s revolver things; for I knew it was a bad place, and they might not stick at trifles. And sure enough, they didn’t, as you must acknowledge. I came up very quiet, and knocked gently at the door and said ‘Cluck!’ as the fellow gave the ticket. It was opened very civil, and I asked for Migwell Bengoose, and the man said ‘All right, just wait a minute.’ A little dark place it was under the stairs, and I did not much like the look of it; for I could hear a lot of voices further on, and they seemed to be drinking and card-playing. However, I sat down where I was told, and began to think over my story. My plan was to tell him that the Captain was ill, and had sent me to say that the papers were all right, but he would like to know how he got hold of them, and where he could get the others that were mentioned in them, and to pay him a sovereign, just to keep things going, till the Captain should be about again. The fellow would remember seeing me with him, and I had made up a very nice tale of it.

“But the smell of the place was something awful, worse than all the bookmakers put together, and there is plenty to spare when you get among them. Either that, or something else, made me feel quite heavy, and I began to doze a little, though I fought very hard against it. And all of a [349] sudden, before I could jump up, there was a leather strap round me, and my arms were buckled in it, as tight as you had me on the table, Squire; and a deal worse than that, for I was fastened to the chair, with a dollop of some stinking stuff across my eyes and mouth, so that I was blind and pretty well choked. Then my legs were tied together as tight as any hayband, and in that way I was left, I shall never know how long, to listen to a lot of blackguards laughing. There were women cackling too among the hooting of the men, and they cried ‘Cluck, cluck, my noble cock!’ and the worse I tried to rave at them the better they enjoyed it. Then they searched me, and took all my money, and my pistol, and threw me, chair and all, upon the floor, and whacked me on the arms and legs with a towel knotted up.

“I thought my last moment was come; and it would have been, if I had not shammed dead, and rolled over against the wall, where I got a little air, by rubbing the sacking against it, for I could not get my hands near my mouth. Then they began to talk in some thieves’ lingo, which I could not make head or tail of. But the upshot was that they released my face, and gave me some horrible stuff to drink, and let me lie there the Lord knows how long. I would rather die straight off than have such another night, for I saw great holes in the floor, and expected to be pitched down, and never come up again.

“At last a big fellow came and untied me, and pitched me out of the cellar-flap. ‘Had enough of cluck, cluck, haven’t you, old chap?’ he said as he banged the door behind me. And I found it was daylight, and I was in the court where I hid behind the truck from Downy. I was in such a state that I could scarcely crawl; but a good-natured coster put me on his barrow, and took me to Drury Lane, and there I found a cab. I never saw Bengoose all the time; but no doubt he had arranged it all, under orders from Downy Bulwrag. If you don’t think I have had enough of this job, I do, Mr. Orchardson.”

“Show your legs,” said my uncle, with a smile in which there was not too much compassion; “I don’t wish to be hard upon a man in trouble; but you are given to romance a little, by your own account, friend Tonks.”

“Never to my employers, sir. But look here!”

His poor little drumsticks had plainly been acting the part of the drum quite recently, and were painted of divers colours, while a broad stripe showed where the ligaments had been.

“I have a better opinion of you, Tonks, than I ever expected to have,” said my uncle. “You are a [350] plucky little chap. Here’s your five-pound note, for you have earned it. It was your fault that I took it from you, because you defied me. Now go back to your proper work. And if ever you come this way, look in, and I will give you a good dinner.”

CHAPTER LIV.
PRINCE'S MANSION.

WHEN any man has once got into a racing state of mind, it is not fair to his bodily health to keep him in a wheatfield. Sam Henderson had been expected, by his bride and her female relatives, to walk about in country places, and sit on stiles, and admire the moon; like a young man from Whitechapel coming to feel his way to be a teacher. Sam had borne it pretty well, as a thing not likely to come twice, till he found it too much to come once. For he was not of my quiet nature; and still less could it be supposed that his Sally was like my Kitty.

He went off to some races at York, I think, or somewhere nicely convenient, for they were on the eastern coast; and he offered, as fairly as a man could do, to let his bride come with him. But she said she saw too much of horses at home, and preferred to remain with her landlady. He thought that she was too independent, and she thought the same of him; but they soon made up that little matter, and came home to Halliford as affectionate as need be.

Sam was beginning to boast about his condition prematurely. If any friend of his replied to his sudden invitations—"Sam, I should be most delighted; but it might be inconvenient, you know, to Mrs. Henderson"—Sam would look at him with a laugh, and say—"The best soul living, my dear boy. Always proud to welcome any friend of mine, at any time. We pull together, and no mistake. You may come with your coat on inside out, and she won't say a word, till I do."

To this I listened very gravely, knowing what a good wife is, but doubting whether it can be wise to take such liberties with her. And I knew that Sam was a pleasant fellow, partly because of [351] his bounce and brag. Whatever belonged to him became pure gold or glittering jewel; as there are Oriental gems, which glow at the touch of the owner. Nobody had such dogs or horses, nobody had such clever men; and now we were to believe that no one had ever owned such a wonder of a wife.

"Let us go and see how they get on," I said to my Uncle Corny, when a grand invitation on gilt paper was brought by a man in a pink silk jacket, riding a horse full of ringlets; "'Mr. and Mrs. Henderson beg to be favoured with the company of Mr. Orchardson, and his nephew Mr. Christopher Orchardson, at dinner at half-past six o'clock on Tuesday, the 12th instant.' And look at the top in gold letters, uncle—'Prince's Mansion, Halliford!'"

"Prince's Mansion!" cried my uncle; "get my specs, or I won't believe it. Well, there are fools in this world! I knew they had got into that old ramshackle house, that was let to some foreign fellow, who bolted from his creditors. Prince's Mansion! Oh my goodness! Why don't they say—Windsor Castle? You may go, if you like. But you don't catch me. And half-past six! I couldn't wait till then. It's too late for dinner, and too early for supper. You go and see them, and say I won't come."

"But it must be answered on paper, uncle. And you must never say you won't come, you must say you can't."

"I am not going to tell any lie about it. I can go well enough, if I choose; but I don't. You suppose that I don't know how to behave. I can behave as well as the best of them."

"You have got a blue coat with brass buttons," I said on purpose to irritate him; "it was all the fashion twenty years ago; but I am afraid you have got too fat for it."

"You are getting horribly cheeky, Kit. You are catching it from that Henderson. What would Kitty say, if she were here? There, I never meant to vex you, lad. I'll go, if that will please you."

When the great day came, my uncle looked as well as the very best of them. He had an old Sunday coat let out, for he would not buy a new one, and he wore his big watch with three gold seals, and black silk stockings, and knee-breeches. Also he had a velvet waistcoat, double-breasted with coral buttons, which he had bought for my wedding-day, and a frilled shirt, and his [352] white curls brushed in a very becoming frizzle. "A' look'th like a bishop," old Tabby pronounced, though perhaps she had never seen one; "but no bishop han't got such legs as thiccy."

Aunt Parslow, as an old friend of Sally Chalker, was invited specially, and came over in style with a pair of horses, and her dinner-dress done up in a long silken package. She called at my uncle's on her way to Prince's Mansion, and they laughed so that I was surprised at their manners, considering who was to feed them that day. But perhaps they felt no gratitude before they got it.

It was a good step to Sam's house, for Prince's Mansion stood in the upper part of his grounds, nearly half a mile from his "Doctor's Shop," as he called the place where he had feasted me, and where he had been content to live. Though the days were now getting short again, and our road led away from the village, it was likely enough that we might come across neighbours, who would be astonished at my uncle's appearance, and could hardly fail to run home, and publish throughout the village that the grower was out of his right mind at last.

To save any difficulty about this, we sent for Sims and his ancient fly, and putting up the windows, went in state to the dinner at Prince's Mansion.

My uncle had been positive and almost snappish, in asserting his knowledge of the world; and I had given him credit on the strength of that for knowing almost everything. But now he showed

signs of some anxiety and doubt, as we passed through the gate at the beginning of the drive, and he glanced at his nails, which were of a steady brown, and his knuckles, which resembled door-knobs.

"There won't be any ladies, of course," he said, "besides Mrs. Sam and Aunt Parslow. Just look to my collar, this side, Kit. It seems to cut uncommon hard."

"Ladies?" I replied; "why, there'll be a dozen, according to what Sam said yesterday. There are three Miss Chalkers, Sally's aunts, and three Miss Kempes, her cousins, and Mrs. Spry from Tonbridge Wells, and three or four racing ladies, and a very fashionable one, and very beautiful I believe, whose name is Lady Kickloose. So you see your velvet waistcoat won't be wasted, Uncle Corny."

"If I had known this, I would have stopped at home. Why I shall have one on each arm! I like people to talk with that I know all about. By-the-bye, I forget—which arm is considered the most [353] polite to walk with?"

"It does not matter much. But you will do very well, if you don't begin to tell any of your long stories. People won't have them now. All they care for is what they call general conversation."

"If I am not allowed to tell my old stories," my uncle replied indignantly, "all I can do is to hold my tongue. What is the good of bits and splinters? You can't make anybody laugh like that. You must take your time, and let them think what's coming. It's just the same as carrying a pint of beer. If you are jogged on the elbow all the froth runs over. I give a man his time, and I like to have my own."

"To be sure, and they'll be glad enough to listen to you, when they have had their own talk out. But one thing I want you to do particularly. You are so sharp in seeing everything. You observe so much better than I do."

"Well, you can't expect to be equal to me yet. Though you are not a fool, Kit; not half so much a fool as some who think they are mighty clever. What is it you want me to notice, my boy?"

"Why, I want you to notice particularly how Sally behaves to her husband. To hear him talk, one would suppose that he had got a perfect jewel—a model of a wife that worships him, and would crawl on her knees to please him. In fact, you would think she was fifty times the wonder that my Kitty was. But from what I know of Sally Chalker, I don't believe a word of it."

"Ha, ha! Jealous, is it?" he answered most absurdly. "I'll keep my eyes wide open, Kit, and report accordingly."

Sam Henderson was a most hospitable fellow, and not a single word shall pass my lips which might be twisted by captious persons into a reflection upon him. He sat at the bottom of his table, and he never took his eyes from the plates on the right hand and the left, except when he was calling Tom, his groom to change them, or to fetch them that he might put more on each. Even Lady Kickloose, who was a very lovely woman, could not make demand keep pace with the quick abundance of supply. Hence it was the more unreasonable, and I might even say despotic, on the part of the new Mrs. Henderson, that she kept on calling down the table—"Sam, look at father's plate, he never will mind himself, you know;" or—"Sam, can't you see that Aunt Maggy has not got a morsel?" or—"Mr. Henderson, Lady Kickloose has never had one drop of gravy!" [354]

"All right, my love. Beg pardon, I am sure. Tom, why don't you move a little quicker?"—poor Sam Henderson would reply. But I thought it was not "all right, my love," that a man who was doing his best for us all, and getting but a snap or two for his own mouth, should be hurried and flurried in this sort of way, and almost accused of inattention to his guests. I could scarcely help saying—"Do let him alone;" but I knew the proprieties too well for that.

"You are right, ma'am; she does look beautiful," I heard my uncle say to one of the three unmarried aunts; and then he gazed at her with as much admiration, as if she had been—no matter who, but some one very different.

And I was pleased to see a large piece of greens drop from his mouth into his grand breast-frill, which put him out of countenance for half an hour. In my poor opinion, his admiration was as much out of place as that piece of greens, though I will not deny that our hostess was what is called a very fine young woman. She wore a dress of green satin, which I never could endure any more than Kitty could; and the way it was cut below the neck and shoulders filled me with surprise that Sam allowed it; but perhaps he could not help himself. I was glad to see Miss Parslow looking shocked, and I glanced at her and then at it, but she did not think fit to comprehend. Uncle Corny on the other hand surprised me by treating it as a joke rather than a scandal; gentlemen wore cut-away coats, he said, and why should not ladies wear cut-away gowns?

Presently I happened to catch some words from the lower end of the table, which drew my attention from Sam's wife, and brought it back to my own affairs. The dinner was a very good and solid one; not fifty varieties of unknown substance, such as we too often meet with; and yet quite enough of change for the most inconstant person. There was very nice white soup, and mock turtle—not the real, such as my Aunt Parslow gave, but quite as good, if not better—then a cod of great size and high character, with oysters as fat as mushrooms; and after that a saddle of mutton at one end, and an aitch-bone, not over-boiled, at the other; one lying down, and the other standing up. Foreigners may disguise their stuff, which by their own confession requires it. But

an Englishman likes to know what he is at, that his conscience may go with his stomach.

These things are trifles, in a way of speaking; but if they lead up to a pleasant state of mind, it [355]
is not friendly to neglect them; and my Uncle Corny, who had kept himself to bread and cheese at his proper dinner-time, was rejoicing, as a just man does, in the victory of his merits. Such joy is generally premature; if he had only known what was to come, he would have thrown down knife and fork, and waited.

For as if by magic, there appeared, in front of Sam himself, and almost making him look trivial, the most magnificent bird that ever alighted on any table. I asked a young lady what it was; and she said—"The swan of the Romans." It did not become me to contradict her; but I thought that the Romans must have owned a breed of swans superior to ours, for this one had a peacock's tail spread out. Everybody looked at everybody else, while Sam turned his cuffs up, and sharpened a new knife.

"Round with the champagne, Tom! We will drink my wife's health." As he spoke, he had his eyes upon the peacock's tail; and rude as it was, all the company laughed.

A pair of large tongues had been put before me, and as I began to carve them, I heard a lady say—"No fear. Downy will be flush of money now. Be down on him sharp; that's the way to do it."

"Are you sure it will come off?" asked the gentleman she was talking to; and I saw that it was Mr. Welch, a great man of the ring, speaking earnestly to Lady Kickloose.

"What is to prevent it? The fatal day is named. It is too good for him, as everybody says. But you know where marriages are made."

"And where they end, with a fellow of that sort. But I can't take it down—even now I can't. Such a lot of brass, you know, my lady! And what has he got to show for it?"

"Brass—and his mother;" replied the lady, who had picked up the pithy style of the turf. "The old Earl is a duffer. Mother Bull can walk round him any Saturday."

"Yes; but young ladies have wills of their own. It is out of my line, but I have always heard that Lady Clara could have the pick of England. What can there be in Downy, to fetch her so?"

"How can I tell you, Mr. Welch! Such things happen continually. All we have to do is to follow them up. I never liked the man; but that is no reason why she shouldn't. Bread-sauce, I suppose goes with peacock."

Sam was in his glory all this time, and the dinner went on very merrily, with plenty of laughing, [356]
and glasses clinking, and even the most demure ladies smiling. My uncle, who had cherished a pure contempt for sporting men, began to think better of them, and more and more as his opinion was asked, delivered it on subjects he had never heard of. Aunt Parslow also was exceedingly good-natured, and held a very interesting talk with a lady who had heard of her father. And I took the opportunity, before we went away, to remind Mrs. Henderson of our old doings, when she was the belle of Leatherhead; and I thought that she looked at me very nicely, and felt very deeply for my present sad condition; and after all I could not contradict my uncle, when he said—with five and sixpence in his pocket, which he had won by very fine play at whist—that we had been treated most handsomely and kindly, and if he should be asked to their Christmas dinner, he meant to make a point of going.

CHAPTER LV.
RELIEF OF MIND.

But what I had heard about Downy Bulwrag rooted itself more and more in my mind. Since the departure of Tony Tonks (who would never have been invited to that grand dinner, for even racing people must draw the line somewhere), I had made up my mind to go and see the arch-enemy, as soon as ever he should be in his proper health again. And with an eye to that, I had written to Mrs. Wilcox, requesting her to let me know of his first re-appearance.

It was not my desire to fall upon this villain, at a time when he could not defend himself, for I did not intend to mince matters with him, if once I could come to close quarters. And even of those who insist most strongly on the Christian duty of forgiveness, and look down from the greatest height upon the littleness of resentment, probably few—if they cared to speak the truth—would have put up with things as I did.

It was all very fine for the people to say—"Take it easily, my dear friend. With patience, and the will of God, you will find everything come right; and by-and-by, you will be surprised at your own excitement about it." [357]

The thing that surprised me most of all was my own power of endurance; and sometimes I felt quite hot inside, at having two strong arms, and doing nothing with them. "It was not thus you won your Kitty, but by knocking down Sam Henderson," the springy part of my conscience said sometimes to the spongy half of it; "if you let rogues have their way, you are only a rogue yourself, and a coward."

This reproach I did not deserve. No fear of bodily harm to myself had crossed my thoughts for a moment; but the dread of some reckless act had been perpetually with me. It was easy enough to do violent things; to cut myself off for ever from all hope of love and happiness, without much chance of even learning the secret of my misery. The enemy I feared, in the burst of pent-up fury, was myself.

I began to forget this discretion now. That the man, who had ruined my life to gorge some filthy spite of his own, should now jump up in the world, and crow, and dance, with gold in his pockets, and love in his arms, while I lay a widower on two chairs; that he should have grins on his vile yellow face, while my Kitty was weeping her eyes out somewhere; and that every one should take it as a thing of course, and praise his sagacity and worship him—if justice had broken her beam like this, what law could there be to bind any one? The scoundrel had come to gloat upon my sorrow; I would just return the call, and have a word with him.

Fearing the loss of my self-command, I took not even a walking-stick, nor the true Briton's mainstay, an umbrella, although the day was showery. Neither did I change my working-clothes, but without a word to any one, saddled old *Spanker*, and started directly after breakfast. In an hour, I dismounted at the door of Mrs. Wilcox, and gave the sharp boy my horse to lead about.

"Whatever can be the matter with you, Master Kit?" his mother inquired very kindly. "You don't look a bit like yourself, sir. Do come in; I have got a sight to tell you."

"Thank you; when I come back will do. I am going to pay a little call—not more than half an hour." Before she could answer, I was out of hearing.

"When I rang and knocked loudly at the door of the old house, a man servant came, and I was glad of that; for I could not have forced my way past a woman.

"I wish to see Mr. Bulwrag," I said. [358]

"Never sees any one at this time of day. He has not finished breakfast yet," answered the man.

"It does not matter. I must see him. I have heard that he is quite well again."

"Oh, yes, he is well enough;" the man gave a smile, which meant—a great deal better than he deserves to be—"but you must call again in the afternoon."

"Thank you. I intend to see him now. Show me the room, if you please, my friend."

"That is the room. But you must not go in." He offered no resistance, when he saw that it would not stop me; and I knocked at the door, and then entered.

Donovan Bulwrag wore a dressing-gown, braided with gold, and was lighting a cigar, after making (as the dishes showed) a long and goodly breakfast.

"Holloa! Who are you?" His tone was rough and arrogant; but I saw by his eyes that he knew me, and his heavy mouth was twitching. "What the devil do you mean, by coming in like this?"

"Are you in your usual health and strength?" I would not have touched him, if he had answered, "No."

"To be sure, I am. But what business is that of yours? I always kick insolent cads out of the room."

"I will not foul my tongue with any words to you. My business is to lead you three times round this room, by the nose. Now try to stop me." As I spoke, I was putting on a gardening glove.

He struck at me with all his force; but I dashed up his fist with my left hand, while with the right I got a firm grip upon his bulky nose. In vain he let fly at me, right and left; I did not even feel his blows, though the marks were plain long afterwards. Then he tried to grapple me; but I would not have it. Three times round the room I led him, while he roared and shrieked with pain, and then I flung him backward into his easy chair.

I cannot say how I was enabled to do this; and I doubt whether any one can explain it. But before I felt the difficulty, it was over; and I was fit to do it again, if needful.

Downy Bulwrag had never been amazed before, because he was a cold-blooded fellow; and that made it all the worse for him, when he could not avoid it. I am thankful to the Lord—who has always guided me, when I do not depart too far from Him—that this happened so; for my heart [359] was up, and my brain had not a whisper left in it. Life and death are mere gossamer, at such moments.

On the table lay a long sharp ham-knife. If Bulwrag had said a word, or even stirred, he would never have done one or other again. That knife would have been in his heart. And I—well, the gallows and the devil would be welcome to me afterwards. He saw my eyes dwell on that blade, and he was cowed. He knew that he had a madman standing over him; and happily for both of us, he fell into a faint.

“Blackguard,” I shouted, “you have had a narrow shave. This comes of meddling between man and wife.”

I seized the long knife, while he pawed with his fat hands, and flung it just clear of his big yellow head. The blade cleft the panel of black oak behind him, and quivered, and rang like the tongue of a bell.

Without another word I left him thus, flinging the door of the room wide open, that every one might see his condition. The footman, or whatever he called himself, fell back against the wall, and let me pass, which was the only wise thing he could do. Then I walked away quietly, and found my horse, and declining all talk with Mrs. Wilcox rode back to Sunbury with a great weight off my mind.

CHAPTER LVI.
ANOTHER TRACE.

So far as my experience goes, it has never been an easy thing to find a man in whom the sense of justice is adjusted perfectly. That is to say, not overdrawn, nor strained to a pitch that is at discord with all human nature; neither on the other hand so lax and flabby, that it yields to every breath, and has no distinctive tone. Therefore I cannot expect to be approved by everybody for my recent act; but the glow of a tender conscience told me that I had not behaved amiss.

Yet the remembrance of my own rage, and utter loss of self-command, frightened me more than I can express, for a single word, a look, a gesture, even a flicker across my own will would have made me then and there a murderer. What a thing for Kitty to hear—if ever she should hear [360] of me again—that my unhappy love of her had been cut short by the hangman! I formed the sensible resolve to keep out of Bulwrag's way henceforth, unless he should come to seek me; and then his blood must be on his own head.

At first I did not tell my uncle of that brief but hot engagement, because, as I came to think about it, the folly of it dawned on me. For the fierce enjoyment of a minute, I had sacrificed all hope of tracing such faint clues as we had won, and I had shown the arch-enemy in the most palpable form, my suspicions of him. This was unsound policy, and I was loth to confess it yet, lest my chief friend should be discouraged, as well as angry with me. However, the whole thing soon came out, and with so much more tacked on to it, that I was forced to recount the simple facts. But instead of being vexed, as in my opinion a truly wise man must have been, my uncle shouted with delight, and shook his thick sides with laughter.

"So you pulled his nose! Kit Orchardson pulled the nose of the future Lord Roarmore, and the son-in-law of the Earl of Clerinhouse! Show me how you did it. This is too fine!"

"No. I scarcely pulled his nose. I cannot be said to have pulled his nose. All I did was to take him by the nose, and he came after it wonderfully."

"I see, I see. He just followed his nose; and a lawyer could prove that there was no assault. A man follows his nose without assault or battery. Well, I never thought you were so clever, Kit."

"Because I never boast," I answered calmly; and it struck him for the first time that this might be so.

"What will he do?" he asked; "whatever will he do? He can't very well put up with it; and yet how can he get satisfaction? You wouldn't fight him, I suppose, even if he deigned to ask you."

"I never thought of it. Let him try. He has done the wickedness. What I have done is nothing."

"Well, I think it was something good—the very best thing you could have done; much better than knocking him down, or even cow-hiding him, as the Yankees say. How your Aunt Parslow will be delighted! She is coming over here to-morrow. You know what you put into her head. She will call on the parson again about it. The poor girl is very ill; worse than ever. I hope he will agree to it."

"Aunt Parslow seems very fond of Sunbury now," I replied, with a curious glance at him; "why [361] should she always be coming over here so?"

"You had better ask her. I daresay she can answer for herself. You must not expect to pull everybody's nose."

It had lately appeared to me, more and more, as if my Aunt Parslow were beginning to set her cap at my Uncle Corny; or rather—to put it more politely—as if he were doffing his wide-awake to her—a wide-awake proceeding, no doubt, on his part, and a proof of capacity on hers; but not a thing at all to my liking, nor in any way savouring of those lofty feelings which are so essential to wedlock. And without any mercenary motives whatever, or even a dream of self-seeking, I had felt (with good grounds for it) a delicate and genial interest in my dear aunt's affairs. If after countless years of single blessedness, she thought to double the rest by a joint-stock company, all I could do was to wish her well, and hope profoundly for her happiness. There were few better men than my Uncle Corny, and no woman better than my Aunt Parslow; and they might rub on together rarely, if each would let the other rub, fair turn and turn about. But I feared that they scarcely had the give-and-take for that, and being both of strong metal, it would come to groans and sparks.

Nevertheless I must put up with events; and the little inquiry I had offered, as above, had not been received with gratitude. The surest way to bring this wild idea into fact, would be for me to show opposition to it. But I knew that Aunt Parslow was still romantic, as all women of true nature are. She had felt her own love affairs in early days; but she would not want to think that Uncle Corny had felt his; and I resolved to let her hear of them by his own sighs; if he could be brought to sigh about anything but markets.

When she arrived the next day, I saw that she was in fine spirits. But a little ashamed, as it seemed to me, of the exceedingly spirited dress she wore, quite as if she were going to the races. Moreover, she had brought *Jupiter*, as if to introduce him to some one who might influence his future life; and at this I ventured to express surprise, in a friendly manner, and with my hand upon his head.

“Oh, he does love a change, and it does him so much good!” she exclaimed, as if she had been in her teens; “and I should like to hear what Mr. Orchardson thinks of him. He is a good judge of dogs, you said.”

Alas, if one ever tells a story, how quick it is in kicking up its heels! In charity, I had said something of the kind, when I wished to make goodwill between them. Here was *Jupiter* come to prove me a liar, and perhaps to sway my destinies. [362]

“Don’t get out with that lovely dress on,” I said very craftily. “Let us go down to Mr. Golightly’s; I know that you want to see him. I will jump on the box, and show coachy the way. It will save you a lot of trouble.”

Accordingly we drove on to the parson’s, and I went in to announce her. She had called upon him twice before, and he liked her, and was grateful for her good intentions.

He received us kindly; but we could see that his heart was in nothing he was talking of. He looked most sadly worn and thin, and his eyes fell every now and then, as a short low cough came from another room.

“And how is your sweet Bessy?” Miss Parslow asked; “you know she is quite an old friend of mine. What a favour you could do me, if you only would! I have taken such a liking to her.”

“And she to you. I will go and fetch her. I fear you will find her looking very little stronger.”

“Call this furniture! I call it hardware,” my aunt said in a low tone, when he had left the room; “no wonder the poor girl is all bones. Now back me up, Kit, about Baycliff. It is your prescription, you remember.”

It was as much as my aunt could do, being of a very kindly nature, to keep a smile upon her face, when the sickly girl came towards her. And the father looked from one to the other, and tried to make some little joke, but his eyes were sparkling with something else.

“You know what you promised me, my dear, if your good father would allow it;” Miss Parslow stroked her silky hair, and looked into her soft eyes, as she spoke; “and now everything is arranged and settled, I am sure you will not throw me over. The rooms are taken, and I cannot go alone; it would be so miserable for me. Your father will come to see you every week, and you shall teach him to catch prawns. And where do you suppose it is? Not at any strange place at all, but a place my nephew knows quite well, and the very same house that he was in. And he would come down, and be near us.”

“Oh, that would be nice. I should not feel strange. Kit is so kind and gentle to me. I like to be where Kit is.”

She came and placed her thin hands in mine; for I had become like an elder brother to her. She knew of my sorrow, and I of hers. It was not this world that she grieved to quit, but her father all alone in it. [363]

It was a terrible pain to me, and almost more than I could bear, to find myself in this lovely place, without any love to respond to it. At every turn there was something to recall, at every view of gliding boat, or breaking wave, or flitting gull, some memory of a trifle said, and misery of having no one now to say it. But for the good of others I was forced to put these fancies by, for we could not have found another spot so suitable for the poor sick child. And as it proved, there was something even here to compensate me.

It had not been thought worth while to take any lodgings for me in the place, as I could not be spared throughout the week from the busy fruit season at Sunbury. Whenever I found time to run down to Baycliff, I could get a bed at the inn, and spend the day with my aunt and her delicate charge. This suited me also much better, because I did not like to be long away from the neighbourhood of London, where, as I always felt somehow, the strange mystery of my life must be cleared up, if it ever were so.

Mrs. Perowne was a very nice person, and deeply interested in our affairs. Kitty and I had lodged with her for a week, and although we could not afford to take her best rooms, she treated us exactly like first-floor people, and would have kept us for nothing, as she assured us, if only she could have afforded it. And now it rejoiced me to do her a good turn, by inducting my aunt at three guineas a week, which was nothing for her to think twice of. Six of the Leatherhead dogs came down for the refreshment of their systems, and Miss Golightly was delighted with them, and spent half the day on the sands scratching their heads. The weather was all that could be wished, for we were come to the end of September now; and the summer as a whole had done its utmost to atone for the atrocities of the year before.

Mrs. Perowne and Miss Parslow now were as good friends as any two people can be, with money coming weekly between them. And they never spent less than an hour a day in talking of my loss and wondering. Till it chanced that the landlady called to mind a little thing that happened after we had left her, and to which she had paid no attention at the time. But my aunt considered it of some importance, and begged her to tell me all about it, the very next Saturday I should come down.

“Well, Mr. Kit,” she said, upon the Sunday morning, for, I had been too late on Saturday to see them; “it may have been a week after you were gone, or it may have been no more than one day, [364]

but at any rate there came to this house a very quiet gentleman, not over young, about fifty you might say, and not over tall, but about half-way between five feet and six feet, and he asked for you—Mr. Orchardson by name, and then the new Mrs. Orchardson. And when our Jenny told him that you were gone, he sighed, Jenny says—though you never must be certain of anything that Jenny says—just as if he had lost his pocket-book. And then he asked for me, and he was shown up here, the drawing-room floor being vacant, as you may remember; and I came up to see him, but I happened to be a little flustered, about having all the house on my hands so. And when I found that he was not even looking out for lodgings, perhaps I was a little short with him. But whether or no, he did not push on with his questions as some people do. But he took up his hat, and begged me to excuse him for intruding upon my valuable time, and away he went with a very solid walk, and I was sorry afterwards."

"But what was he like? Can you at all describe him? Even his dress would help a little." I thought it most likely that this was the man who had come for my Kitty in Philip Moggs' boat, and taken her doubtless in Clipson's cab from Shepperton to Woking Road.

"I think I should know him, if I saw him again; but I won't be quite sure," replied Mrs. Perowne; "he was a gentleman I should say decidedly, though not in a fashionable cut of clothes; and I think he had gray hair, though I won't be sure, because so many people have that now. He looked highly educated, and his voice was very nice, and he wore a broad hat with a cord to it."

"Why, it must be the Professor himself," exclaimed my aunt; "according to all I have heard of him, and according to your description, Kit. He came to see how you were getting on, and whether you and Kitty had fought yet."

"Oh, that reminds me of a curious thing; and I thought it so odd," said the landlady; "he did seem to think that you must have quarrelled, or at least that there was something unpleasant between you, I remember now that he did quite well, because I was astonished at such an idea. For if ever there was a young couple suited—intended by the Lord for one another—"

"It cannot have been the Professor," I broke in, "for the simple reason that he must already [365]
have left the shores of England. We had a telegram from Falmouth proving that. And her father would never for a moment have imagined that Kitty and I had fallen out already. What did this man say, to show that he supposed it?"

"Well, I don't know that he did exactly that; but he inquired particularly about your health, or rather I should say your state of mind, as if you were not quite—you know what I mean—as if you were rather flighty, sir."

"Well, and so I am," I answered smiling; "a great many people would have flown off altogether, if they had been through half what I have. And now this again is another wicked puzzle for me. The only thing certain is that I shall never find it out. I always come just a bit too late. I hear of a thing when it is no good. I inquire of people, when they have forgotten everything."

This was rather rude of me; for Mrs. Perowne had done her best to assist me; and she could not be blamed for not talking by the hour with a stranger, about her late lodger's affairs.

"Did he say what he meant to do?" I asked, for really all these things were very tantalizing; "did he give you any idea why he should take such an interest in us? Did he ask where we were? Did he mention my uncle? Did he go on, as if—"

"I am truly sorry, Mr. Kit, I am indeed. But I can't tell you another thing about him. And I am not sure that all I have told you occurred. Some of it may have come out of my own head, I can't carry everything, I can't indeed."

Mrs. Perowne was almost crying, and it was plainly useless to question her further. Such is evidence, even with people who are not fools, and who do their very best. Yet in a court of justice, an unhappy witness is badgered and insulted by some brazen-headed fellow, who could not tell a tale himself in its true order, if he had just read it in a spelling-book.

The only conclusion I could come to was that Mrs. Perowne's visitor and the passenger in the boat and cab, who had taken my wife away, were one and the same person, acting no doubt under Bulwrag's orders. But why he should have shown himself in the first case plainly, and made his second visit in that furtive manner, was more than I could even pretend to explain.

Another thing which I could not explain was of a different and delightful order. Rejoicing in the [366]
sea-air and in the sea itself, Bessy Golightly grew stronger every day. The wan delicacy and waxen clearness began to flush with a rosy gleam, her eyes looked darker and yet full of light; and her lips instead of drooping at the corners crisped their pretty curves with a lively smile. Miss Parslow was as proud as a hen that has struck an ant's nest, and took her to the china shop every day to be admired, and to the station to be weighed. And whenever her father came to see her, with "six hours allowed at the sea-side," he spent all the six in looking at her.

CHAPTER LVII.
A VAIN APPEAL.

"POSSIBLY I might do something with him," said Mr. Golightly to me one day; "I have not much power of persuasion; but if I put a few simple truths before him, and showed him the wickedness of his present course, and how wanton is the injury he has done you, without even the shadow of good to himself, he might try even now to make amends. I can easily get an introduction to him. I suppose you would forgive him, if your dear wife were restored. It would be a noble thing to do."

"Too noble for me, I greatly fear. But he will never forgive me. If he hated me, when I had never harmed him, what is he likely to do now?"

As yet I had concealed from this conscientious pastor my recent act of rudeness, for I could not expect him to look upon it as the discharge of a Christian duty. But now it seemed better that he should have the story from me, than from some one who might give an unkind turn to it. And he sensibly perceived that as the thing was done, it was useless now to remonstrate.

"It was not a magnanimous act at all," he replied with a grave shake of his head; "but allowance must be made for provocation; even Mr. Bulwrag must feel that, if he has at all a candid mind. I should not let that discourage me in the least, if you think fit to accept my services; and after all your kind acts to me and my dear child, it would be a very happy day for [367] me—one of the happiest of my life, if I could really help you. Let me try, I entreat you; it can do no harm, and it may do good."

"You would only expose yourself to rudeness. He is rough and contemptuous in his manner, and has no respect for any one."

"His rudeness would not injure me. But I do not think that he would show any. I am well acquainted with a cousin of the lady whom he seeks to marry. He was my churchwarden at Knightsbridge, and I became much attached to him. Mr. Bulwrag, for his own sake, will not be rude to any one so introduced."

This of course made a great difference; and as Mr. Golightly pressed the matter, I consented gratefully, though without seeing even the smallest chance of any good to come from it. However, it would enable me to hear something of that scoundrel, after whom I now began to feel a sort of stupid hankering; such as the young robin has for the cat; or the mallard on the mere about the strange proceedings of that dog among the reeds.

A more unpromising embassy might no man ever undertake; and having still some pride alive, in spite of deadly blows to it, I begged my reverend, and revered, as well as much beloved friend, to understand, and to make it understood, that he went as no envoy of mine, but simply at his own suggestion. "That shall be plain enough," he said, "he shall not even know that I asked your leave."

It must have been a strange and curious thing to see this encounter of two men, as different as any two men can be, and as far apart as heaven and hell. Not having been there, I cannot describe it; and I could not have done so, if I had been present. But from what was told me afterwards, the result was much as follows.

Donovan Bulwrag received his unknown visitor politely. He offered him a cigar, but whether in sport or courtesy was not plain, and then he said with his usual slowness, leaning back in his chair, and thinking—

"Sunbury, I think Sir Gilbert says; Sunbury a pretty village on the river. I know it a little, but I ought to know it better; for my mother's family lived there. And an aunt of mine—Miss Coldpepper—must be one of your oldest inhabitants. But owing to family circumstances, we do not see very much of her. How is she? I hope she supports the Church, as all people of property [368] should do."

"The Church requires no support"—Mr. Golightly was always annoyed at the idea of the Church being patronized; "except what she has from above, Mr. Bulwrag, and from the proper zeal and gratitude of her dutiful children."

"To be sure. That is exactly what I meant. I trust that my aunt is a dutiful child. But I know with sorrow that we do not all value our privileges, as we should. You find that the case sometimes, I fear."

"Too often, I regret to say, I do." Mr. Golightly was always grave with any one who spoke gravely. "But we do not restrict the opportunities of doing good to parishioners. We have many useful institutions in our parish. Perhaps you would like me to mention a few. And if with your very kind feelings towards the Church, and anxiety about your aunt's discharge of Christian duties, you should feel impelled to contribute, I happen to have the subscription-lists of six of the most meritorious, all in urgent need of funds; and I carry the receipt-forms in my pocket."

Downy was caught in his own net very neatly, and the parson heard him mutter—"Confound that Sir Gilbert. This is a little too bad of him."

"Ah, I don't quite see. I am sure this is most kind of you—but with the many claims upon my small resources—perhaps it would be better to allow my mother the benefit of this opportunity."

“You must not blame Sir Gilbert. I did not come upon a begging errand. I intrude upon you for quite a different purpose. A sad and most mysterious thing has happened in our parish.” Mr. Golightly watched him closely, to note the effect of every word. “A lady newly married to an excellent young man, of one of our oldest families, suddenly disappeared last May, and has not since been heard of.”

“You need not tell me that. I know all about it,” Bulwrag replied without any change of face, but in quite a different tone, and speaking quickly. “I could not help knowing it, considering that the girl’s father was my mother’s husband. She married without our knowledge, and is gone without it. My mother, who has been most kind to her, never met with such ingratitude.”

“I do not intrude into family matters. I have nothing to do with that part of the case. I am here simply to discharge my duty. I come by nobody’s suggestion. Only as the clergyman of the parish [369] I feel myself bound to do all I can, to restore peace and happiness, and to right a great wrong.”

“It is very good on your part, and I wish you all success. It would appear to be rather an affair for the police. I am sorry that I have an important engagement. Would you like to see my mother on the subject?”

“No, thank you. My business is with you. I will speak plainly, and as an old man to a young one. All who know of this mysterious affair, believe that it is of your doing. Hear me out, and without anger, as I speak. If from some ill-will to either of those two, or for any other reason of your own, you have contrived to part them, be satisfied now with what you have done. For many months now, you have caused the deepest misery, doubt, suspense, and almost despair. You have crushed two young hearts, which perhaps never will recover. You have desolated a simple, innocent, and tranquil home. Remember, I beseech you, what is manly, good, and just. I will not urge religion, because perhaps you have little sense of it. But even so, you know how short our time is here, and how paltry it is to injure one another. Even now, if you will do what is right, I will pledge myself that you shall be forgiven. Your share in it shall not be published to the world. You will have had more revenge than the bitterest foe can long for, and you will escape the penalty.”

The clergyman urged that last point, because he saw whom—or rather what he had to deal with—a thing that could not be called a man. For during his description of our misery, he had detected a glow of fiendish exultation in the crafty eyes he was observing. This proved to him more clearly than if he had seen the deed, that the guilt lay on that brutal soul.

“It is a sad loss to us, my dear sir,” replied Bulwrag, looking at him steadfastly; “that we have not the privilege of living in your parish. Not only for the sake of the deep interest you feel in the private affairs of your parishioners, but also because you possess very largely that extremely rare gift—eloquence. I should be trembling in my shoes, if I had anything to tremble for. But knowing no more than you do, and perhaps much less, about this strange affair, I am simply astonished at your waste of words, and if you were not a clergyman, I should say—your impertinence.”

“I have never been charged with impertinence before. Even if I am wrong, there is nothing of that about it. But if I have been mistaken, I have done you much wrong as a gentleman; and I will [370] beg your pardon, if you will do this. Take a sheet of paper, and write these words—‘Upon my honour as a gentleman, I have had nothing whatever to do with the disappearance of Kitty Orchardson. Signed, Donovan Bulwrag.’”

“It would be easy enough to do. But I do not choose so to degrade myself. If you think again, you will see that you were wrong, in proposing a thing so disgraceful. If you will not apologize without that, I must even put up with your insult. I believe that you are a good man, Mr. Golightly, and deeply attached to your parish, sir; but impulsive, and hasty, and illogical. A fault upon the right side, no doubt; but too hasty, sir, much too hasty. I must beg you to excuse the same fault in me—for I cannot wait another moment.”

When Mr. Golightly came back, he declared that but for that glow in Bulwrag’s eyes, he could well have believed in his innocence. For he had never known any one meet a charge, when conscious of guilt, with such entire self-possession, and unfaltering readiness. And he feared that there was no such thing as mercy in his composition.

“He is a foe to be dreaded, Kit,” he continued, looking at me sadly. “There is nothing, however bad, that he would stick at; he is resolute, calm, and resourceful. I have met with some men—not very many—in the course of my work as a clergyman, who seemed to have forgotten and foregone all the good, all the kind, all the tender part of the nature which God has given us. St. Paul describes such beings—one can scarcely call them human; and so from a different point of view does Aristotle. It is useless to deny that they exist, although one would like to deny it—people in whom there does not remain one particle of good feeling to appeal to. Yet according to memoirs of some great Christians they have been such at one time. I will not deny it, though I have never known an instance. It is possible that by the power of Grace such an one may be converted and live, as a brand snatched from the burning; but—”

“But I hope Bulwrag won’t be so at any rate. And I don’t think there is much fear of it. I hope that he will have his portion—”

“Hush, Kit, hush! I pray you not to imitate him. Why is he as he is, but from indulging the evil part in early days, and famishing the better side? But I have brought you some news of your [371] father-in-law, the learned and good Professor Fairthorn. You have looked in vain, I think, in that

scientific journal, as it seems to be called, which you took in on purpose. I saw this quite by accident in *The Globe* as I came home; and although it cannot help you, I thought you might like to see it."

He handed me the paper, and I read as follows, among the short paragraphs of news received that morning:—

"The steamship *Archytas*, as our readers may remember, proceeded on a cruise of investigation and deep-sea soundings last April or May, being fitted out specially for that purpose by a well-known learned society. Our Government, with its usual penurious system, has left all these questions of prime importance to our commerce and intercourse with the world, entirely to private enterprise; and we acknowledge with shame that we never could have laid a cable across the Atlantic, without the knowledge for which we are indebted to the broader and more enlightened policy of the United States. Unhappily these are now involved in an internecine struggle, which must retard for many years the progress of civilization; and we think that England owes a debt of gratitude to the learned association, which has thus stepped in to man the breach by voluntary efforts. Some uneasiness had been felt concerning the safety of this gallant band, which is under the charge, as we need not say, of one of our most distinguished savants, the well-known Professor Fairthorn; for no tidings of the *Archytas* and her gallant company had reached this country for many months. But we are happy to announce, in advance of our contemporaries, that the exploring ship was spoken, in latitude and longitude not decipherable on the telegram—for it can hardly have been 361, and 758, which are the apparent figures—by the clipper-ship *Simon Pure*, which arrived at Liverpool last night. The *Simon Pure* took letters from her, which will be received with avidity, also instructions that any letters for the members of the expedition should be addressed to Ascension Island, if posted in Great Britain before the end of November. We hope to give further particulars shortly."

Without loss of a day, I took advantage of this opportunity, but rather as a matter of duty, than of hope or promise. And as my letter led to something, I will venture to insert it here, though a very old-fashioned production.

"My dear and respected Father-in-law,—You will be surprised and shocked to hear that shortly after your departure, your daughter Kitty, my dear wife, left [372] me apparently of her own accord, without a word of explanation, or any cause that I can even imagine. We had lived in perfect happiness and love; no cross word had ever passed between us; instead of growing tired of one another, we had become more and more united. I am well aware that the home I could give her was not such as she, with all her attractions, might have aspired to. But she knew that, before she married me; and to all appearance she was perfectly satisfied, and as happy and lively as the day is long. And we had every hope, with kind friends round us, of improving our condition from year to year. And I say, on the honour of an Englishman, and on the faith of a Christian, that never, in thought, word, or deed, had I wronged her, or been untrue to her. In short, she was all my life in this world, and I loved her even to infatuation, and fondly believed that she loved me likewise.

"Yet on the evening of May 15th, 1861, when I returned to our cottage, at the time arranged, and in full expectation of finding my dear wife, she was gone without a single word; and from that day to this, although I have sought, and others have sought high and low, not a trace of her can be obtained, except as mentioned afterwards, and not a line has come from her.

"It is the deepest mystery I have ever heard, or read of; and when it will end, God only knows. She was much too sensible, and pure, and loving, to have left me thus for any trifle, or for the sake of any other man. Sometimes I fear the very worst,—that she may have met with some fatal accident, or have been decoyed away and killed. But who could do that to my innocent Kitty? Surely not the vilest man ever born. My suspicions rest very strongly on a person well known to you, Donovan Bulwrag; but I cannot bring it home to him.

"We believe that we have traced my wife, after a search of many weeks, to Woking Road Station on the London and South-Western Line; but there all further clue vanishes; and we cannot identify, or even guess at the elderly man, who appears from our inquiries to have taken her thus far. My uncle Cornelius Orchardson, and my aunt, Miss Parslow of Leatherhead, have spared no pains or expense, in helping me in my hopeless search; but nothing comes of it, and I almost despair.

"I need not ask you, if you know anything which can throw any light on this horrible puzzle, to write to me immediately. But my hopes are very faint, because you were far at sea before it happened; as was proved by your kind message, received from the captain at Falmouth, which my dear Kitty read [373] with me, and for which I beg to thank you.

"With all good wishes for your success in the important work you are engaged on, and hoping for your speedy return, I am with all respect and love, your unfortunate son-in-law,

“Kit Orchardson.”

After finding out how much it would cost, I posted this letter with my own hands; and the gloomy winter closed upon me, with nothing but its dreary round of heavy ponderings and lonesome work.

CHAPTER LVIII.
UNCLE CORNY'S LOVE-TALE.

"A DISCONTENTED and sour man," said my Uncle Corny, one Saturday night when I had dropped into supper, "is as likely as not—unless he prays to God every morning of his life—to turn into a Liberal. I have known a lot do it, and being nabbed on the nail by the shady lot who are always near the corners, never get any chance again to come back into honesty. Kit, is that sort of thing going on with you?"

"Not likely," I answered, for my principles were sound; "is it likely that I would join a party including Lord Roarmore and his grandson? Conservatives commit no outrage."

My uncle considered that statement gravely. He was too large-minded and candid of nature to accept it without the support of fact. He was probing his memory, to see if this were so.

"Well," he said at last, "there is some truth in it, though it seems at first sight to go a little too far. I have known many very tranquil Radicals, and one or two Tories of an energetic turn. All I feared was that you might be driven by the vile wrongs you have suffered into that miserable frame of mind, when people are hatched into Radicals. They injured me, not quite so much as you, my lad, but bitterly, very bitterly. Yet I carried my principles sound through it all."

"Oh, uncle, you promised to tell me the story of the wrong done to you, in your early days. I have often longed to hear it; but was afraid to ask you, because of the trouble it has been to you. [374] But if you could bring yourself, without feeling it too much, to tell me how that matter was, it would be a great satisfaction to me, and do me a lot of good, I do believe."

"Well, my boy, it is a frosty night. How soon the year comes round again; though I do not think we shall have a winter fit to compare with the last one. But the east wind is coming up the lane pretty sharp, and we are likely to have a week of it. Let Tabby take the things away, and bring another log or two. You had better come down here, if the frost goes on. You will get frozen up there all alone."

"Not I. I can keep the fire up, and I believe it is warmer up there than here, because of the wind from the river. How glad I am Bessy is still at Baycliff. They never feel the cold wind there. But go ahead, uncle, according to your promise; I don't know how many times you have cheated me. Tabby, look sharp, and go home before it snows now."

"Well, you must put up with my in and outs. I can lay a tree in straight enough, but I am out of my line telling things. And you wouldn't believe, to see me now, that I was ever a brisk young chap, proud of the cut of his boots and breeches—for we used to wear no long slops then—and blushing at the mention of a pretty girl, and wondering what they were made of. But though you would not think it now, nor anybody else, except the young women that are dead and gone, I was quite as much the swell of Sunbury then, as you were before you fell into your bad luck; not so tall, of course, but I daresay quite as strong, and the master of any lad about the village.

"Somehow or other, I was like you too, and your father as well for that matter, in not making up to any damsel in the place; although they were pretty ones then, I can tell you, as pretty as any of the young ones now, and prettier too to my eyes, and ever so much modester and more becoming. But the queen of the neighbourhood, in my opinion, ay, and of the county, too, was Myra Woodbridge, the daughter of a farmer near Bedfont, who held land under Squire Coldpepper. If I was to tell you what she was like, you would think I was trying to put you out of all conceit with—with almost everybody in the world. And her looks, although they were so sweet and gentle, were not the best part of her, or not the only good one. A kinder-hearted, truer-hearted maiden never lived; and you could talk to her by the hour, without her being tired, or you either of what she had to say.

"Naturally enough, all the young men round about were hankering after this fair maid; and it [375] did not go against her that her father was well off, having made a deal of money in the great war-time, by contracts for fodder for the troops, and so on. Myra was his favourite child, and pretty sure to come in for a good share of his wealth some day. She could play the piano, and sing like an angel, and talk French, and keep accounts, and do anything. The difficulty was for me to get near her, till I thrashed a young miller from Uxbridge who annoyed her, and then I thrashed two other fellows who were after her, for they never summoned people for such little matters then; and that made her begin to think kindly of me; and we used to walk by the brook, every Sunday evening.

"All was going on quite as well as I could wish, and old Robert Woodbridge was quite coming round to the coaxing of his lovely daughter, and the banns were to be put up just before the grass was cut, so that we might have our wedding-day between the hay and wheat—when suddenly everything was thrown abroad, and both our lives were spoilt for ever.

"Give me the sugar, Kit; I did think I should have some one to mix for me, in my old days—a faithful companion of many years, or perhaps a daughter or a grandchild. But God's will be done. It is useless to take on.

"Squire Coldpepper's daughter, Monica, the younger of the two very handsome ladies, had taken a violent fancy to Myra; and now, when her elder sister Arabella was carrying on, against her father's will, with that dashing young buck—as they called them then—the Honourable Tom

Bulwrag, Miss Monica, who never cared much for her sister, any more than two firebrands rubbed together, she must needs send for my sweet Myra, to come and stay at the Hall, for some purpose of her own, whether to plot against her sister, or be company for herself, or what else, I cannot tell.

"Myra was very loth to go, for she knew the tempers she would have to deal with, and having a right pride of her own, she could not bear the way they treated her, partly as a friend, and partly as a servant—for she might not have meals with the family—and partly no doubt as a sort of go-between, or what they call a buffer nowadays. And being a mean lot, as everybody knows, their practice was to make her earn her keep by sewing and doing handy jobs about the house, like a servant without any wages. But whether she liked it or not, she must go, for her father durst not disoblige his landlord, that peppery Squire Nicholas.

"Unluckily, while she was in the house, that strange thing happened that I told you of. Tom [376]
Bulwrag was to have run away with the elder girl, Arabella; but when everything was ready she burst out about some trifle, and I am blest if he didn't make off with the other; thinking, I dare say, how sweet she was for taking his side in the shindy. It was out of the frying-pan into the fire, and served him right, said everybody. If the elder was a firebrand, the younger was a Fury; and which is the worst, I should like to know?

"But they might have fought it out between themselves, and no harm done to good people, if Miss Monica had not carried Myra Woodbridge with her. She was forced to have some one perhaps, for her own sake, little as she cared for opinion; but one of the servants would have done as well, or better if she had been older. How Myra allowed herself to be taken, I could never quite understand, for it was not likely to help her father in the good graces of his landlord. Perhaps she thought herself in duty bound to stand by the one who was fond of her, or perhaps she hoped to see that things came right, and thought there might be a worse mess of it with no one of common sense to help; at any rate she went off in the chaise, and never had chance to come back again.

"You can understand what a storm there was at the Manor, when the truth came out. Our Miss Coldpepper had been locked up, and could not get out till they found her; and then she was in such a state of mind, that she could not speak her meaning clearly. The runaways had at least six hours' start, and it was hopeless to go after them; and in those days there were only coaches, no railways, and no telegraphs. Squire Nicholas swore himself into a fit; and it shortened his days, as the doctors said, though he vowed he would live all the longer for it.

"Myra was of a gentle nature, as a woman should be; yet proud to resent any charge against her, when she knew she was innocent. The obstinate Squire, a pig-headed man, put all the blame upon her, or pretended to do it, to screen himself and his own lazy ways with his daughter. Till any one who listened to him would believe that the whole thing had been devised and carried out by a daughter of one of his tenants. So that when she wrote to her father—for the others left that job to her—to say that they were all at Bath, and doing as well as could be expected, Squire Nicholas sent a most thundering message, through old Robert Woodbridge, that Myra had better [377]
never come near Bedfont, or he would have her in prison for conspiring. Of course this was rubbish; but it frightened the poor girl, and made her doubt what justice was.

"Then she wrote to me, a most pitiful letter, begging me to think the best of her—as if I could think anything else—saying how sorry she was for leaving home in that impulsive, foolish way, under a mistaken view of right. Some day perhaps you will have a letter of that sort from your Kitty. And she asked me, as she could not ask her father (who would not forgive her till he saw her), to oblige her by just sending money enough to bring her back to Bedfont. 'I came away with only half a crown, and there is none to be got from you know who'—the poor thing said, for she was most careful not to write names that might lead to mischief.

"But like a woman, exactly like a woman, who thinks that the whole world knows everything about her, or else is afraid of their doing so, the only address that she gave was 'Bath, in the County of Somerset.' It was hard to send money by post in those days. You must enclose and risk it. But what was the use of putting money in a letter directed to 'Miss Myra Woodbridge, Bath'? There was nothing more precise in her letter to her father, and it took me three days to find out that, for the old man was gone from home on business. I went to Squire Nicholas, to see if he knew, but he only stormed at me, and told me to go to—a place he was fitting himself for. So that four days were lost before I could start, with your grandfather's leave, for the west of England.

"When I got to Bath, it took me two days more, as an entire stranger in the place, to find out where the Bulwrags had been stopping. And when I discovered their hotel at last, they had left it on the day before, and no one could tell me what their destination was. I came back to Sunbury in very bad spirits, fearing greatly that I never should see my dear again.

"And so it turned out; although I had one more letter from her, which was enough to break any one's heart almost. I have it upstairs, but I shall never show it. God only knows what a man goes through. When my time comes, you will find it, Kit; and I wish to have that, and the other, with me. There is more than a twelvemonth between the two; and the second is dated from a German city.

"I could not understand it at the time, because I had no more thought of any other woman, than you have since you lost your Kitty. Afterwards I found out the whole. The poor girl became [378]
indispensable to them. She alone eked out their resources, and kept them from going to the dogs,

before Bulwrag learned some roguish way of turning money. And to keep her from quitting them and going home, they lied through thick and thin to her, about her father and about myself, and backed up their lies with forgeries. They vowed that her father would never receive her; and that I was married to a Sunbury girl. Her father could make no inquiries about her, for he had been taken with a paralytic stroke; and her brothers, jealous wretches, did not want her nearer home. As for me, I could do nothing, any more than you can now. I knew that they were all upon the Continent, and trusted in her good faith and loyalty, for many a sad day. And although she had been deeply hurt and wounded at my silence, which of course had been twisted to their selfish ends, I believe that she was faithful to me, to the very last.

"The old man died on the very day when I received her second letter, and I went to his funeral with it in my pocket. The brothers looked askance at me, and smiled a sour smile, as much as to say—'You don't cut in for any of it'—and I did not even speak to them about their sister. But they soon came to grief, by the will of the Lord; and the farm is now occupied by George Fletcher.

"In reply to that letter, which astounded me, I wrote to say that every word she had heard was false. That I had never forgotten her, as she supposed (although she did not reproach me with it); that I cared for no one else, and should never do so, and hoped from the bottom of my heart, that her illness was not so serious as she believed. If she would only write that she wished to see me, I would go to her anywhere in the world. Then I told her of her poor father's death, and that he had loved her always, and been yearning for her. She was on her deathbed, when she received that letter, and it comforted her dearly, and she died with it in her hand.

"Now what do you think my dear girl died of? It is almost too bad to tell you, Kit; and I can scarcely command myself to do it. I cannot prove it. If I only could—but vengeance belongs to the Lord in heaven. Slowly, but surely, it will fall; and a part is already upon them. Monica Bulwrag killed my Myra, not on the moment, but by slow death. That was why she was so scared with you. That is the reason that her power passes into terror, when she tries to face any of us.

"That scoundrel, her husband, growing tired of his wife, began to pay attentions to Miss [379]
Woodbridge. He began very craftily, for like his son, he was cunning as well as furious; and the poor girl scarcely suspected it, or could not bring herself to believe it true. But his wife, knowing well what he was, saw through it; and you may suppose how her passion raged. She came in one day when they were together, Myra standing innocently by the window, Bulwrag gazing at her in his vile licentious way. That woman lost all self-command, at the sight. She strode up to Myra, and with all her weight and strength struck her on the bosom with her clenched fist. Myra fell backward and lay stunned upon the floor, her head being dashed against the sill as she fell. But it was not that which killed her; but the heavy blow on the chest, the most dangerous part of the delicate frame.

"No doubt, she would have left them, if she could, though she might have to beg her way home again; and she even left the house, but could not get far. There had been some fatal harm done inside, by that blow of a brute beast; and the days of the best girl that ever lived were short in a land of strangers. She had trouble in breathing, and some fainting fits; a good doctor could have saved her, I do believe. But those brutes were afraid to have medical advice, even if they desired it. She pined away, and died. She did not care to live, until it was too late to do it. But she died in happiness. Thank God for that. She died with the knowledge that her father had been her father to the last, and that I had never failed her.

"Well, my boy, it was a bitter time for me; and my heart was full of fury, as well as anguish. But it is arranged for us, by a Higher Power, that these crushing strokes come upon us, from a mist. We know not the manner of their descending, we hope that they are not as they appear to be, we call up our faith in Heaven's justice to protect us, and we moan when it is useless. Nevertheless, for all of that, I believe that truth and equity are vindicated before we die, if only we live long enough. And if not, let us be content. We are fitter for another world, than those who have destroyed our life in this."

I saw that my uncle had been overdone, brave, and strong-hearted, and stout as he was. People who complain, can support that habit; and a habit it becomes, never touching them inside. But he was of a hardy and courageous fibre; yet now he leant over his long pipe-stem, and his pipe had gone out, like the vapours of the past.

CHAPTER LIX.
A COOL REQUEST.

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It was natural that my hatred of that heinous race should be doubled. Violence and falsehood in the fiercer times, cunning and falsehood in these latter days had robbed two generations of honest growers of all that they valued most on earth. No one, however light and careless, could help being struck with the strange resemblance between my uncle's sad history and my own. It was now quite manifest why he had striven against my affection for Kitty at first, and then when he saw that it could not be checked, had sympathized with me in the dark results. His wrongs must be avenged, as well as mine; and the sweet repose of Christian contentment must not be indulged in, till justice had been fed. The fatal point was that I could see no way; but the way was being paved for it, without my knowledge.

It was out of my power, and outside my nature, to play the spy upon anybody; but we managed through good Mrs. Wilcox to keep a sharp eye upon Downy Bulwrag. I rode up to see her at least once a week, fearing above all things that he might give me the slip, and be off to some foreign quarters, possibly even to my darling's prison. That she was immured in some out-of-the-way place was now my settled conviction, and I pondered a thousand wild plans for roaming the world at large in search of her. The money would have been at my disposal, for Aunt Parslow was most generous; but where to begin was a boundless question, and where to end would have been endless.

The only thing possible was to wait; and the thing most reasonable was to hope, though impatience vowed it otherwise. The spring came back to a heavy heart, and there was no spring in my voice or gait.

One April evening I went down to the Halliford brook for watercress for my Uncle Corny's supper. He had not been very well of late, and fancied this, or disliked that, in a manner quite unusual with him. I was uneasy, and begged him daily to seek the advice of Dr. Sippets, but he only laughed, or bristled up, as stubborn as a rusty nail in heart of oak. Then I told him not to smoke so much, and he replied by filling his biggest pipe.

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I passed the place where I first had Kitty in my arms, a year and a half ago. Then all had been storm, and flood, and roar. Now all was calm, and sunny silence, broken only by the lapping of the brook. I leaned against the old carved stone, from which she had leaped into my embrace, and the budding shadows of the alder bush, like bars of sad music, stole over me. It seemed to me, in my disconsolate mood, that the young leaf had better spring back into the bud, and the flower get quickly through its work, and die. But my thoughts were interrupted by a grating voice.

"Halloa, young man, you look down in the mouth! Not much luck for you in my house, by all accounts. Ha, that was a scurvy trick?"

I answered not a word, for I disliked the man, an ill-conditioned, evil-omened fellow—old Harker, who had meant to live rent-free for ever in Honeysuckle Cottage. He looked very shabby, and shaky, and uncombed, as if he slept in a hay-rick, and washed himself with it.

"Ah, you wouldn't be quite so uppish, my brave young cock, if you knew all that I could tell you. Give my love to old bonfire-raker. Hear he'll come to ashes himself pretty soon."

This was so mean and ungrateful of him, after all my uncle's forbearance, that I seized him by the collar, as he stepped upon the bridge, and brought him back and made him look at me.

"Now, Harker, you'll just have the kindness," I said, "to speak out, like a man, what your meaning is. I am not going to hurt you, if you do the right thing. Otherwise you shall have a wash, and not before you want it. Out with it. Out with everything that you can tell me; though I don't believe there's much of it."

"Very likely not. And I would not say a word of it—such as it is—for any fear of you; but only because he has treated me shabby. Promised me five pounds, and only gave me one. That wasn't arkerate, you know. Why it hardly paid for shoe-leather. What will you give me, Master Kit, to tell you all I know of him, and all his tricks about you?"

"That depends upon what I find it worth. In the first place, who is the he you talk of?"

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"As if you didn't know? Well you are a pretty muff, if you don't know when a man hates you. I have no love for you, mind, because of the scurvy way I was treated; but I would not go out of my way to hurt you, without being paid for it. What will you give? You will be glad to know it; though I don't promise you it will help you much. I am always arkerate, I am."

I promised him a pound, if it should prove to be of value, or a crown if I could make no use of it; and although it could help me but little for the future, I considered it worth the larger sum, when I had heard the whole of it; because it cleared up so many little points which had puzzled me up to that moment. This man Harker, by his own confession, had been employed for weeks to keep close watch upon us, and report all our doings to Bulwrag. That demon discovered that this low fellow bore a grudge against us, because of his expulsion from the cottage; and what better spy could he wish for than one who had lived in the place, and knew every twig and stone? It is awful for a simple man (who lives without much thought, and says and does everything without

looking round) to find that all his little doings have been watched, by an eye that was anything except the eye of God. We had kept a very distant sort of outlook upon Bulwrag; but that was different altogether, and as a rogue he must long have been accustomed to it. To think that in our gardens (where every tree knew me, and the line of every shadow was known to me) I could not even move without somebody behind me, was enough to scatter all delight, and simplicity, and carelessness.

Harker told me all about the secret of the door into Love Lane. I knew that it was bolted, I was sure it had been bolted, I could almost swear that it had not been opened by any honest person from the inside, for a long time before Kitty vanished through it. It ought to have been locked as well, of course; as Tabby Tapscott (who had the true feminine knack of hitting a blot) observed. But now all that became plain as a pikestaff. That sneak of a Harker knew a dodge for undoing the bolt from the outside, by tapping on a sprung piece of tongued board, when the bolt (which was loose in the socket) would glide back.

I remembered what appeared to be a pretty turn of Kitty's, when I asked her to come and take a walk in Love Lane. "Not unless you seem to want it, my dear. We have our love inside, and it is not a gloomy lane." For she always loved fruit-trees, and fair alleys, and the way one looks up at the sky through balls of gold.

However, that sort of thing was out of Harker's line; and I asked him a few questions, with a [383]
sovereign in my hand; at which he kept glancing, as a dog of better manners assures his master that he loves the hand ever so much more than the tit-bit inside it. He told me—for his mind was made up now—that he had suspected Bulwrag's scheme, but had nothing to do with the final stroke, except that he had opened the road for it. I conjured him by all that he valued—if he valued anything besides himself—to tell me where my dear wife was likely to be now, if indeed she were in the world at all.

He had no fine feeling to be appealed to, and having had a bad wife—his own fault, I dare say—could not at all enter into my concern. But he took a great weight from my heart by declaring that there was no fear of Kitty being made away with.

"'Tis a bit of revenge, and nothing more," he said; "the man is so deep and slippery that you can never circumvent him. You are a baby altogether to him. Although he employed me for weeks together, he never let me into any one of his devices. He never does anything as you expect it. When you find out this, if you live long enough to do it, you will find it come contrary to all your guesses. If you ask what I think is the best way, I will tell you. But it might be quite wrong for all that, you know."

"Very well," he said, when I had asked most earnestly, and promised him five pounds, if it turned out well; "you just do this, and see what comes of it. Collect all your money, and get your uncle to sell a good piece of his land for building, they are talking of that sort of thing, you know; and there is sure to be a railway by-and-by, and the old Topper's land is the best in the parish. Then when you have raised a thousand pounds, take it in a bag, or a purse with open meshes, and lay it on his table—not too near him, mind—and then be very humble, and say, 'Mr. So and So, you have beaten me out and out, and I give in. You shall have all this, and I'll cry quits, and give you any undertaking you require, as soon as I get my wife back again.' It is my belief, Master Kit, that you would have her in a week; for that sort of man will do anything for money."

This was altogether a new view to me, and I began to suspect things immediately. Possibly this man had even been sent to propose a bargain in this sly way. I could raise the thousand pounds, by selling out what I possessed; and my wife was worth more than all the money in the world, or even than my own life to me. But my pride, and sense of right, swelled against the low idea; and I [384]
knew that even Kitty would condemn so vile a bargain.

"If that is the only way to do it, it will never be done," I answered sternly; "but tell me one thing—did you see her go? Did you see the man who came to fetch her?"

"No. It was managed too well for that. They got all they could out of me, and trusted me no further. I did not even know that it was going to be done. I was ordered off to Hampton, on that very day."

Seeing some one in the distance coming towards us from the village, I gave the man his sovereign, and let him go, after learning where he might be found in case of being needed. And before I could even think the matter over, Mrs. Marker was crossing the planks towards me, dressed very prettily, and smiling at me pleasantly.

"What memories this spot does evoke!" She had taken to rather fine language lately, and seemed to become more and more romantic. "Oh, Mr. Kit, Mr. Kit, is it possible that I meet you here again? Alas, I fear that you seek this spot, to heave the sad sigh, and to shed the briny tear."

I replied that I was only come to look for watercress, but was very glad to meet her; for we always had been friends, and perhaps she could tell me many things I wished to know.

"Whatever I know is at your command. My deep and heartfelt but unavailing pity has followed your fortunes for many a long month. Why the bridal morn seems but yesterday, so to speak; and yet a rolling year has passed over us since then! Robbed of your bride in less than half the honeymoon, and before she understood the price of sugar—you remember that she was to have laid it in cheap, second whites before it went up for preserving. Oh, Mr. Kit, we well may say

inscrutable are the decrees of Heaven. But all shall be well yet, all must be well, if we trust in the Lord, and gird up our loins with trembling. Excuse the remark if too personal, but my heart does bleed for you. Any new light shed upon this dark dispensation?"

"That is the very thing I was going to ask you. But first of all, tell me, dear Mrs. Marker, are you convinced, are you absolutely certain, that my Kitty would never prove false to me?"

I never put this question to any of my own sex. But it always did me good to receive from a woman, who must understand women so much better, the strong confirmation of my own strong [385] faith. To their credit be it said that not one of them refused it.

"Fie, fie! How can you ever bring yourself to ask the question? Though I am sure, I am not surprised, after all that has happened. But I will tell your Kitty of it, and we will have a laugh together. For the triumph of the wicked cannot last much longer. I suppose you have heard what the wretch is doing?"

"Not very lately. I was going to ask you. We were told in the autumn, by a lady who seemed to know, that everything was settled, and even the day fixed for his marriage with a very rich young lady, the only child of a very wealthy Earl? But it seems to hang fire, and I cannot discover that anything is settled even now. Do tell me what you have heard of it. Miss Coldpepper surely ought to know."

"I should think she ought, considering what he has done. It appears that the lady is quite willing; she is under some foolish spell, and thinks him such a hero. But her father, though he seemed to give in at first, heard something, which induced him to change his mind. And now he insists, as is only fair, upon something being brought in by the gentleman as well. They are doing all they can to get over the hitch. And what do you suppose he had the impudence to do? He came down here about a week ago—drove down in a handsome cab all the way; nobody was to know it of course, but I did; and then and there he had the face to ask his aunt to declare him the heir, and to bind herself to it, of all her estates and property. It quite took my breath away when I heard it—that any one should have such assurance. And after all that has happened in the family."

"A nice lord of the manor he would make. Did his mother come down with him?"

"Not she. He was too wide awake for that. The sisters can never be in one room half an hour without fighting. He went on about the honour of the family, and adding to the estates with the old Earl's wealth, and taking the name of Coldpepper, and I don't know what else—for of course I was not there; but she told me of it afterwards, and she laughed very heartily I can tell you. 'It is a mere business arrangement,' she replied, 'and it must be done in business form, if at all. Write to my solicitors on the subject, proposing exactly what you have proposed to me. Give your reasons for wishing that it may be settled so, and add that there could have been no occasion for [386] it, if your mother had not run away with your aunt's lover, after locking her in a dark hole where she might have died. You may be quite certain of my consent, as your mother was, when she turned the key on me. Don't let me detain you, for fear of losing time. Solicitors are never very rapid in their work.' He could scarcely have been disappointed, but Charles said he did look savage, when he showed him out. And now, what do you think his next card is?"

"How can I tell? Perhaps he'll come to Uncle Corny, and ask him to sell his garden, and settle it upon him."

"You are not so very far out after all. Your Kitty has a very rich aunt in the north—no relative of his in any way, not even a connection, for she is related to Kitty on her mother's side. But she has the reputation of being rather soft, and so off he goes without telling anybody. But we heard of it; we hear a great deal more now; because we've got a maid whose sister lives there, and waits upon the two young ladies who are always chattering about their brother; and our Mary can't do without her Anne, for more than a week, because they are twins. Every Sunday our Mary goes up to the Park, or their Anne comes down to the Manor. And perhaps you may know what ladies'-maids are, Mr. Kit. They really seem to take a deeper interest in the family they serve than the one they belong to. So we know all the young ladies know, and perhaps more than their mother knows; for being so masterful she has things kept from her, as is only natural. And I can tell you one thing, Mr. Kit, which you won't be sorry to hear perhaps, or at any rate didn't ought to be. Mr. Downy Bulwrag is in more trouble; not about money I mean, but something worse, or at any rate deeper than money is. His sisters know this; but they don't know what it is, or else they are afraid to speak of it."

I thought of Tony Tonks, and the man called Migwell Bengoose, who appeared to Tony to be an English sailor, fallen into foreign ways; and I thought it very likely that he might have brought bad news.

"He goes away at night," continued Mrs. Marker, "without a word of notice to anybody, and he sneers, or is grumpy, if they ask him about it; and he has been seen with very shabby-looking people, though he used to be so particular about that. And he carries one of those new-fangled pistols, that go off a dozen times with one load, and every one is afraid to go near him almost, because of his temper and all that. From all I am told, you may depend upon it, he is not enjoying [387] himself, Mr. Kit, so very much more than you are. And that is not very much, to go by your face; sorry as I am to see it, sir, after saving me from the jaws of death."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Marker; you saved yourself, by your presence of mind, and a light young

foot.”

“You say things beautifully, Mr. Kit. It was always your gift as a child, I have heard, though not old enough here to remember it. And now, sir, remember that you have one good friend, who will never be happy, till you are. A feeble friend, but a warm one, and able perhaps to do more than you think. Nothing shall go by me that you ought to hear of. Good-bye, sir, good-bye. Everything will come right, and you shall pay me, for telling your fortune.”

CHAPTER LX.
ALIVE IN DEATH.

Downy Bulwrag was indeed in trouble—not brought on by his evil deeds, as good people might have imagined; or at any rate not so caused directly, according to present knowledge, although in the end it proved otherwise. It had seemed an astonishing thing to me, considering his haughtiness and shrewd perception, that he should have deigned to expose himself to that quiet rebuff from Miss Coldpepper. And then that he had gone upon another quest of money, even more humiliating, showed that there must be some terrible strait, some crushing urgency in his affairs.

He was not a man who lived extravagantly; he was rather of the mean and close-fisted order, even in his self-indulgence. From what had been said at Sam Henderson's dinner, it would seem that he had fallen into certain racing debts; but I could not believe that these were crippling him, for he generally managed to work them off, and come out with a balance in his favour. But there was another thing in the background, of which I had no knowledge yet; and when I speak of it now, it must be understood that I do so from later information.

That account in the *Globe*, which the clergyman showed me, had been followed by further particulars in the Journals of the following day, and by one or two extracts from private letters [388] brought to England by the *Simon Pure*. But the ships had been parted by a sudden gale, after a very brief interview, and some despatches, which were not quite ready, had lost their chance of delivery. There was nothing of interest to me, except what I had seen at first; and no letter from the Captain to my wife arrived by post, which surprised me for the moment. But that was explained by the likelihood that he might have been hurried with official reports, while intending to send his private letters with them, and thus had lost the chance of despatching either. And as any such letter must have missed its mark, there was no great disappointment.

But the *Simon Pure* landed near Liverpool, as I came to know long afterwards, an unhappy and afflicted man, welcome to no person and to no place on the face of the habitable globe. An elderly man of great bodily strength, and bulk of frame, and large stature, he had better have gone beneath the earth—as the father of poets has it—than linger on it, lonesome, loathsome, shunned, abominated, and abhorred.

His sins had been many, and his merits few; he had lived for his own coarse pleasures only; he had never done good to man, woman, or child; yet he might have called any man worse than himself, who refused to grieve for his awful grief—for this man was a leper.

The captain of the *Simon Pure* was humane as well as resolute. This Spaniard, as he called himself, had lurked under a tarpaulin, till the boat of the *Archytas* was far away, and the gale began to whistle through the shrouds and chains. Then he came forth and showed himself, holding forth his hands, defying the sailors to throw him overboard. For a month he had been treated well by the crew of the exploring ship, who were all picked men of some education, and ready to listen to reason. He had managed to quit them without their knowledge, and cast his lot among a less enlightened crew.

The boldest feared to touch him, but with nautical skill they encoiled him in ropes from a distance, and were just beginning their yo-heave-oh chant, when the captain rushed up and dashed them right and left. With his own hand he unbound the leper, and led him forward, and allotted him a place on the forecastle, where none might come near him, except to bring him food, and where he must abide, if he cared to live. His chief desire was to get back to England, and finding himself well on the way for that, he indulged in strange antics, and shouted and roared, as if all the ship belonged to him. When the moon was high—for the moon appears to [389] have strange power over those outcasts—the sailors were afraid to keep the deck, with his wild songs flowing aft to them; for he had belonged to a colony of Indian lepers, and had learned their poetry.

As soon as the ship was in the Mersey, he contrived to be quit of her. Perhaps he was afraid that his condition would be made known to the authorities, who might find it their duty to observe him, though they could not legally confine him. At any rate he escaped any such trouble, by dropping into a boat, and landing on the south side of the river. A purse had been made for him by the sailors, not a very heavy one, for they were short of cash, but enough to carry him to London—at once the fountain and the cesspool of diseased humanity.

Donovan Bulwrag had been unable, after his recovery, to put up with the control and order of his mother's house in Kensington. He had taken private rooms again, in a little street near Berkeley Square; and though his mother was not well pleased, she had now to contend with a will as strong as her own, and even firmer. He must have his own way in this, he must be indulged at every cost, rather than driven to mutiny when all depended on him. If once he were married to Lady Clara, all would be wealth and prosperity. She had hoped to see it done ere now, but a wicked chance had crossed her.

It was nearly twelve o'clock one night, towards the end of February; and Bulwrag, having returned from his club much earlier than usual, was sitting by the fire in his dressing-gown, with a cigar in his mouth and a bottle of very old Cognac on the table. He was not in a pleasant humour, for the luck had been against him, and foreseeing worse he had come away, for he was growing superstitious.

He was dwelling gloomily on the dull necessity before him—the “brilliant prospect,” his mother called it, but he disliked his intended bride; and this good thing (alone perhaps) may be said in his favour—he was not wholly mercenary. I would fain hope, though without much faith, that he may have felt some true regret at the cruel wrong he had done me—for verily the expiation was nigh.

Suddenly the front-door bell rang sharply, and the poor weary maid shuffled down the stairs. She had told him, when he came in that night, that a tall strange-looking gentleman, with his face muffled in a white cravat, had called about nine o’clock and left word that he would come again that evening. He had given his name as “Senhor Diaz,” and Bulwrag, after wondering vainly, [390] concluded that it must be some one connected with the sailor Migwell, whom he had seen in the autumn.

Slow heavy steps approached his door, and the maid was dismissed with some gruff words in a foreign language quite unknown to Donovan. Then the door was opened without a knock, and a big man stood and looked at him.

“Who are you? And what do you mean by coming at this time of night?” Bulwrag spoke in his roughest tone, for the man was shabby and repulsive.

The visitor coolly took a chair, handling it in a peculiar manner, for he seemed to have bags on, instead of gloves. Then he crossed a pair of gigantic legs; and Bulwrag saw that he wore no boots, but loose slops of hide with the hair on, in size and shape much like the nosebag of a horse. His hat was flapped over his ears and forehead, and he spoke not a word, but gazed at Downy with large red eyes, having never a hair of lash or brow to shade them. Bulwrag shuddered, and drew his chair away; he had never been looked at like this, and could not meet it.

“In the name of the Devil—” He could get no further; for the eyes of this monster, and the strange formation under the cloth, where his face should have been, declared that he was laughing.

“You have learned to swear. Valedon—very good”—the voice sounded dead through the mufflings, and the accent was not like an Englishman’s—“chip of the old block. I was famous for that, at your age, young man.”

“What do you know of my age? Who are you? What are you? What brings you here at this time of night? What do you want me to do for you?”

Even Downy Bulwrag was hurried and confused, and lost his resources in the presence of this man; and a fearful idea made his blood run cold.

“Ha, he knows me not. He is not a wise son”—the stranger still kept his red eyes on him —“where is the voice of nature, that I am compelled to introduce myself?”

“Speak out. Do you mean to stop here all night? Don’t cover your face up, like a thief. In the name of God, who are you?”

The stranger slowly uncovered his face, sliding the bandage from his cheek-bones downward, with a clumsy movement of his bagged hands; then he rose to his full height and stood before the [391] gas, and looking no longer at Bulwrag, waited to be looked at by him. His face was transformed into that of a lion.

“You must go to a hospital. Don’t come near me. Pull it up again, for God’s sake.”

“It is God who has done it, if there is a God. And why should a man be ashamed of it? Embrace your father—as the Frenchmen say—in a few years you will be like him.”

“Don’t come near me, I tell you again. I have a revolver in this drawer; none of your pop-guns, but a heavy bullet. I don’t want to hurt you, if you will only go away.”

“My son, I do not intend to go away. It grieves me to hear you speak of it. Surely you never would cast off your father, for such a sweet trifle as leprosy.”

Bulwrag began to recover himself, which was more than most men of his years would have done. Nature had not endowed him with the largest head in London, without putting something inside it. His sitting-room was small and plainly furnished, but having been used by convivial men, it possessed a long table (now set against the wall) which would slide out to still greater length with levers. He drew this across the room, extended it, and closed the gap at the end with the one in common use. Then he threw up the window at his side of the room, after fastening back the curtains, and requested his visitor to throw up the other; for the house was a corner one, and the room had “cross-lights.”

“Couldn’t do it, my son. Would you like to see my hands? No? Very well, you must take them upon trust. I have three fingers left, but the spot is upon them. However, you are a brave fellow, so far, though infected with popular ignorance. Nine out of ten would have rushed away, shouting ‘Murder!’ But you may put away your shooting-irons, as the Yankees call them. A hole in my body does more good than harm, under the circumstances. Once for all, my complaint is not contagious, or at any rate not among well-fed people; and you are well-fed, if ever anybody was. Give me a cigar; you will do that gladly for your own interest, I dare say. I can smoke it with my bandage on. Now a glass of good brandy—no water with it. You may break the glass afterwards, if you think proper, as the fools did on board the *Simon Pure*; but never in the *Archytas*. Ah, that

was a ship of science!”

“The *Archytas*? Do you mean to say you have been in her?”

“Without her and her glorious captain, my son, you would never have seen your beloved [392]
parent. And more than that, if there had not been a beautiful young lady on board that ship, I should never have been here. Ah, you may well be surprised to see me. If ever any man has been knocked about—seventeen wounds I could count, till this affair took five away. And one of them laid me five years by the heels, laid me under ground, it was said everywhere. I suppose you heard that I was dead.”

“Yes, and on very good authority too. But I was too young to know much about it. Do you know what has happened in the family?”

“Ah, the Spaniards are the men for proverbs. ‘Believe no man dead till he comes and proves it.’ But women can always believe what they wish. Curse the woman, she has caused all my troubles. But wait a little longer.”

The deep thick voice, and the glare of his father’s eyes, made Downy tremble. “Surely you will not—in this condition—you will go to a hospital and get cured—you will leave the management of things to me.”

“Will I? No doctor in the world can cure me, or lengthen the months of my rotting away. And I got it by goodness, I took it by goodness. If I had stuck to my nature, I should have been sound. No more goodness for me in this world, and none in the next. Can a leper go to heaven?”

For a while they sat silent, the old man puffing his smoke through his muffler, and lifting the glass between his great wrists every now and then; the young man absorbed in this awful puzzle, with his vast head drooping on his breast. It had never even crossed his mind to ask whether this man might be an impostor. He felt that every word was true; and now what possible course remained for him? At length his father spoke again.

“Come, cheer up, my hearty, as the sailors said to me, though they took care to say it a long way off. You don’t seem delighted to have found a father, and a man of such renown and rank. Why, I am the Marquis of Torobelle, and you are the heir to the title. Lord Roarmore doesn’t sound much after that. But alas, I have nothing to keep up the title, and I dropped it among the Indians. I shall have to trouble you a little in that way; one cannot live on glory. Oh, but they treated me infamously, when I could do no more for them. They drove me across the Rio Negro into Patagonia, and paid a tribe of the wandering Indians never to let me back again. They passed [393]
me on to the Moluches, and I tried to make my escape from them, but was caught and left for dead again, till a woman took pity on me. Then I married her, and lived on putrid fish with a roving horde of the Eastern tribes, in a miserable country, where no white man goes. Then I took the disease from the diet and the nursing of my poor woman in her illness, and for five years I was shut up in the leper’s den—as they called a reeking peninsula, which explorers know as Saint Jacob; at the back of a place called the Bottomless Pit. There was no getting out; there were thirty of us, sometimes more, and sometimes less, sometimes we got victuals, and sometimes we starved, and I was the only white man there.

“Although we were quite close to the sea, and almost surrounded by it, we were far away from all chance of ships, on a desolate, barbarous coast in a curve a hundred leagues out of the line of traffic. And there I must have wasted into a sandy skeleton, for there was no possibility of escape inland, unless a good angel had been sent to fetch me. For the ship was taking soundings, or something of the sort, having come far away from the usual course, to find the truth about the bottomless gulf; and all I could do would have gone for nothing, except for that young lady. They were giving us a wide berth, as if we all were savages, when luckily for me she brought her spy-glass to bear, and declared that she saw a white man among the rest. The others laughed at her, for you may be pretty sure that there was not much white about me just then; but she stuck to it, and ran for the Captain, and insisted that a boat should be sent to see about it. Oh, I could worship that girl, I could; though it isn’t much good to me, after all.

“Come, you ought to say you will take care that it is, and devote all your days and your money to the welfare of your persecuted parent. You must have expected me long ago, or at any rate had some hopes of it, for I sent you a message several years ago, and some documents too from Mendoza, before I was banished finally. A knockabout fellow swore to find out all about you, and deliver them the next time he was in London. Do you mean to say he has never done it?”

“Not till last autumn; and it was so old, I thought nothing more would come of it. A sort of half Englishman, half Spaniard. But a faithful fellow, and thought wonders of you. When he first came [394]
with your message, he got into a scrape before he could deliver it. He stabbed a man at the Docks, and had to bolt again, and he fought shy of London for years after that. But to see you like this was the last thing I could dream of. You said not a word of this in your letter.”

“Because I had not got it then. I took it from misery and starvation, and living among the savages. Ah, I have seen a good deal of the world, and met with some wonderful people. How small even London seems to me!”

“Yes, I dare say; and how small the world is! You could tell many a tale no doubt, but none more wonderful than your own. Do you know who it was that fetched you off—the Captain of the *Archytas*?”

“Give me more brandy. It is good enough for that.” The great stranger shook himself—though he might have had more manners—and his clothes rattled round him like mildewed pea-pods. “I knew nothing about it at the time, of course; but since I came here I know everything. Why it was the man who stepped into my shoes, and a devilish sight too good to do it. Ah, he has had his hair combed, once or twice, I doubt. Better almost have turned leper at once. How good he was to me! No haughty airs, no shudders, no ‘keep your distance, dog!’ He was not at all sure of contagion, till he looked at his books in the cabin. But it made no difference to him. He could not tell who I was; he took me for a Spaniard—‘Diaz’ was the name I went by—but he treated me as a Christian, as Christ himself would have treated me.”

The poor man lifted his hat as he spoke, from his naked yellow head, and the glare of his eyes was clouded. The power to weep was gone, but not the power of things that move to it.

“And he did a good work for himself,” he resumed, looking fiercely again at Downy; “he did himself a better turn than me, without knowing anything about it. Every one of my troubles has been through that woman. She never knew what a man’s wife is. She wanted to be man and woman too. The Pulcho Indians would have taught her something. Top-knot come down. Your husband is a leper, and the man you have eaten up for years goes free. I am only waiting till the proper time comes. I have had a fine time of it; and so shall she.”

“But I suppose you don’t want to hurt your children;” Donovan spoke in a surly voice, for he saw that this man was not one to be soothed; “what harm have your children ever done you? By [395]
appearing now you would simply starve us; and what could we do to help you then? You have been in London for weeks, I dare say, and you have learned all you could about us. Did you learn that we are living in Fairthorn’s house, and on Fairthorn’s money? And what becomes of that, when you turn up? Did you learn that I am likely to marry a lady of great wealth and good position? What becomes of that if you turn up? You have not let my mother know a word as yet?”

“Not I. Not a syllable yet, my son. What a strange thing it seems to have a son again! No, I don’t want to hurt you, or the two girls either. I have managed to get a look at them. How they would have stared, if they had guessed it. I consider them to be a credit to me, and I hope they are better than their mother. And you are a credit in a certain way—a strong, plain-spoken fellow. Not much humbug about you, I should say. And of course, I can’t expect much affection. But I dare say you are sorry about your poor father.”

“Father, I am. I am broken down about you. I have always thought well of you, and made allowance for you.”

“God knows that I have wanted it, my son. I will do all I can to help you now. I will live in some hole, and not show myself, for a time. But only for a time, mind you. My revenge I will have, when it can’t hurt you so much. But you must give me money, to support me till that day. What will you pay, and how long will you want?”

“Three months, perhaps four; and pay two pounds a week. It is all I can afford, for I am awfully hard up. After my marriage, five pounds, if you like. Give me your address. You can have two weeks’ money now. It is all I have by me. But don’t come here again; these people are very suspicious. I will arrange to meet you somewhere.”

The poor cripple managed to take the money, and after a few more words departed. Then Bulwrag flung the other window up, cast the tumbler out of it, and lighted some pastilles. Then he took a draught of brandy neat, and went upstairs to sit in his bedroom, and brood over this calamity.

CHAPTER LXI.

ZINKA.

[396]

Of all those things I had no knowledge, till it came upon me suddenly; except that I heard from time to time, both through Mrs. Marker and Mrs. Wilcox, and even Miss Coldpepper, that Donovan Bulwrag was going on strangely, and no one could understand him. He was in such a state of mind that even his mother feared to cross him, and his sisters were afraid to ask him anything about it. And no one could tell what his motive was; but all agreed that he was now as anxious to marry Lady Clara, as he had been careless about it last year. This—as so often seems to happen—diminished the ardour of the other side, and the Earl insisted more and more that he should bring something solid into settlement. The estates of his grandfather, Lord Roarmore, were evidently encumbered, and that ancient nobleman himself, now approaching his ninetieth year, was almost incapable of business.

Though I had been terribly afflicted for a year, without the satisfaction of deserving it, there was one thing beyond denial, to wit that I had met with most wonderful kindness from friends, and neighbours, and the world at large. If any one says to me henceforth that there is no such thing as good feeling, or good will, and that everything is selfishness, I shall tell him that he judges all his neighbours by himself, and I wish to hear no more of him.

And now when the fatal day came round, which would fill up the twelvemonth of my misery, no less than six people were thoughtful enough to give me the offer of being from home, when it must be a bitter home to me. Uncle Corny, Aunt Parslow, and Mr. Golightly, Sam Henderson, and Mrs. Wilcox, and Widow Cutthumb, all entreated me to come to them, if I did nothing more than hear them talk. Mrs. Marker, if she had lived in her own house, would have added her invitation; and Mr. Rasp the baker—though now getting on, almost beyond recognition—got his wife to write to me, and say that they would have a little card-party in the evening.

But there were too many young ladies there for me, to be seen in the shop behind jam-pots, in a style we could never enter into; and if I had meant to go to any place at all, that would have been the last of them, because I should have felt what Kitty would be thinking—"Well, he does [397] enjoy himself, without me!"

"Come to the Derby," Sam Henderson said, meaning it all for my good, no doubt; "and see old Chalks win with *Nutmeg-grater*. He is at 40 to 1—makes it all the surer—the finest foal my old *Cinnaminta* ever threw. Quite a moral, my son; I shall make four thou. Get on, while you can. Kept him dark as night. Tony came sniffing, but we gave him snuff. Before the flag falls, he will be at 4 to 1. Invest, my son, invest, if you wish to tool your Kitty in a four-in-hand."

"Sam, you are up, or you would not talk so." He saw that he should not have said it, and was dashed.

"Well, old fellow, I beg your pardon. But as sure as a horse has got four legs, you will have her back again within four months. Lay you ten to one, in fivers."

"Do you think I would bet about a thing like that? Sam you are a good friend; but this is not like you."

"Only wanted to keep your pecker up. The pluckiest fellow gets in the dumps sometimes. Never take it crusty, when a cove means well. Sorry you won't come to us to-morrow. Sally gives a rare spread at nine o'clock. But every man knows his own ways best. I shall look you up, on my way home. Expect to have some news, but won't bother you till then. Good news, fine news for you, Kit."

He spoke to his glassy little nag, and was off, before I could ask him what he meant. And I said to myself that it could only be some nonsense, to keep my spirits up.

The day of my trouble, the 15th of May, happened to be the Derby day that year, and our quiet little village was disturbed with joy. Every one who could raise a pair of shafts, or even of shanks, was agog right early, and I heard their shouts over my uncle's wall, while they set forth as merry as Londoners. I resolved not to leave my work all day, except for a crust of bread and cheese, that there might be no room and no time for moping, which sits on our laps when we cross our legs. But when it grew dark, and I went home alone, I tried in vain to whistle, and my heart felt very low.

What was the use of keeping up? It was only a sham and a self-deceit. Ten years were as likely to go by as one, without bringing any consolation to me. All the prime of my life must pass in sorrow, empty, mysterious, lonely sorrow. Perhaps when I grew old and could care for no one, having no one to care for me, when it mattered very little how my life was to finish, the matter [398] might be cleared up, all too late. Even my uncle Corny's trouble, heavy, incurable, and life-long as it was, seemed light in comparison with mine; because all its history was manifest, and all suspense was over. How much longer must this misery drag on? If my Kitty were not dead, she must have come back long ago. Or perhaps she had forgotten me and married some low villain.

"*Nutmeg-grater, Nutmeg-grater, Nutmeg-grater*, for ever!" Two merry fellows were shouting for their lives, as they walked in wavering latitudes among the flowering pear-trees.

"Let me tell him." "No, I'll tell him." "What do you know about it?" "Why you never saw him in

your life.” My heart gave a jump, for I thought it must be some grand news, by this fuss about it.

“Right you are, Kit. Right you shall be. *Nutmeg-grater*, and Kit for ever!” they shouted as they saw me sitting in the dusk, on a big flower-pot outside my door. “Shake hands, old fellow; shake hands, here he is. He knows all about it. Major Monkhouse, let me introduce you. Mr. Kit Orchardson, Major Monkhouse, the two best fellows in the world together, and *Nutmeg-grater* is the third.”

I saw that Sam was a little in advance of his usual state, and the Major not behind him. They were flourishing their hats, full of skeleton dolls, and striking attitudes, and spinning round now and then against each other.

“What are you come to tell me, gentlemen? Is it about the race?” I asked, trembling to think it must be something more.

“The race be d——d!” cried Major Monkhouse, one of the most courteous of men, when sober, as I discovered afterwards. “As between man and man, sir; as between man and man, you know —”

“The Major’s hat is full of money,” said Sam, as if his own were empty; “when that is the case, a confounded good fellow is better than ever, sir—better than ever.”

“Shake hands,” the Major shouted; “Sam, shake hands!” And he took mine by mistake, but it made no difference. “You have such a manner of expressing what you call it—equal honour to his hands and head. This gentleman must not mistake my meaning. Mr. Archerson, excuse me, you understand my sentiments. You might ride him, sir, with a daisy-chain.”

“Sit down, gentlemen.” I was trying to be patient, and thought that the safest position for them.

“Not a drop, Kit, not a drop, my good fellow. I am all but a total abstainer now. And as for the [399]
Major, why, his doctor tells him—”

“No good, sir, no good at all. ‘Dr. Bangs,’ I says, ‘you may be right; but you don’t catch me taking any of your confounded stim—shim—shimmulers.’ Sam knows how hard he tried; but it wouldn’t do, sir.”

“Oh, but you were come to tell me something. I thought you came out of your way on purpose —something of importance to me?”

“Right you are, Kit, right as usual. There never was such a boy to hit the mark. Set you up, Kit, set you on your legs again—no more poking, no more potting, no more pottering under a wall, no more shirking the Derby—mind you, a d——d ungentlemanly thing to do. Why we wouldn’t have known it but for that!”

“Never should have seen her, without that,” said Major Monkhouse, solemnly; “put away too secretly among the lost tribes. Ah, she is a stunning woman!”

“Now will you tell me what you mean?” I felt that I should like to knock their tipsy heads together; “this may be a very fine joke to you. But no excitement excuses it.”

“Excitement! Cool as a cucumber, sir;” cried the Major, with a countenance by no means cool, “I should like to know what you mean by that insinuation.”

“Leave it to me, Major; leave it all to me. Our friend Kit is a little hasty,” said Henderson, whispering to me—“Don’t mind him, a very grand fellow—but has had too much. Major Monkhouse, it is our place to make every allowance for married men. They never know very well what they are about.”

“By George, sir, you are right. Mr. Archerson, shake hands. I honour you for your integrity, sir. Sorry for you, very sorry, and apologize with candour. Every Englishman adds to his self-respect by that.”

“How he puts things! It comes of being in the Army. Now go to sleep, Major, it will do you a lot of good, while I tell friend Kit all we have been doing for him.”

By this time my hopes were reduced to proper level, and I had ceased to glance through the trees behind them, in search of somebody who might never come again. For these two men had come in with such a flourish, that the wildest ideas ran through me.

“A drop of ice-cold water from your pump,” said Sam, “and then I’ll tell you something that will [400]
please you. My coppers are hot, because I have taken next to nothing; and the dust—you should have seen it! You have heard of the celebrated Zinka, haven’t you, the most wonderful creature that was ever born? Well, my dear friend there, the very finest fellow that ever stepped this earth, sir—don’t deny it, Major, but go to by-by—I met him at the corner on Monday, Kit; and old Pots was there, and that made me talk of you. ‘Tell you what,’ he says, ‘let us see the great Zinka. She can’t help being there on Wednesday. It is the only day in the year you can catch her; but the stars always bring her to the Derby. If he won’t come, you bring something of his, something he has worn, or had about him. If it is bad news, why we need not tell him, and if it is good, why it will be new life to him.”

“Of course I jumped at it, and it shows what a fool I am that it had never occurred to me. Zinka

is the queen of all the gipsies, although she is only five and twenty, the most beautiful woman on the face of the earth. Don't tell Sally that I said so. Why she is Cinnaminta's daughter, that my old mare is named from. So you may suppose that she knows everything. If we could only get her to spot the winners for us—but she won't, she wouldn't for a hundred thousand pounds.

"Well, I prigged your handkerchief yesterday, my boy. No professional could have done it neater; and a queer thing it was that it should be your wife's with her maiden name done in her own hair. Nothing could be luckier, and we had a rare laugh at it. Zinka was on the downs, not like a common gipsy, but half a mile away towards Preston, in a beautiful tent of her own, for she never mixes with the common ruck. It takes an introduction, I can tell you, and a good one too, to get a word from her. But the Major managed that, for he knows something of her people. There is no flummery about her. You cross her hand with a five pound note, and a crown-piece in it, and you tell her what you want, and whatever you give her to hold she keeps."

"You don't mean to say that a dirty Gipsy woman has got one of my Kitty's pocket-handkerchiefs?"

"Dirty Gipsy woman! She's as clean as any queen; and for majesty and breed—oh, I wish you could have seen her. A thoroughbred filly three years old is more graceful than any woman that ever stepped. You can't expect two legs to go as well as four, you know. But Zinka—well, to see Sally walk after that! And Sally ain't clumsy in her paces, neither. But what do you think she [401] said? When we had told her all about it, she shut her great eyes for a minute, and her lashes came down to the brown roses on her cheeks, and then she whispered—

"'I can see a great ship coming over the sea, no smoke to it, only white white sails. And in the front of it I can see a beautiful young woman, looking towards England with tears in her eyes. The ship is sailing fast, but her heart is flying faster; and she never looks back, and answers no one, only to ask how much longer it will be.'

"'And how much longer will it be?' we both asked her, because it was the very thing that you would want to know.

"'I cannot say, perhaps three, four weeks. The sun is very hot, and there is a black cloud before them. Perhaps it will swallow them up; I cannot tell. No there is a great bird with long white wings; it will take them through the cloud, and they will be safe. There, it is all sliding from me, like a mist! But I can see her eyes still, and they are full of tears and smiles.'

"Not another word could we get out of her, Kit. There were tears on her own cheeks, when she opened her eyes, and she did not know a single word she had been saying."

"I wish you had asked her where the ship was to land, and what was the name of it, and how she came there, and whether it would be any good for me to go to meet it, and who it was the lady was thinking of all the while, and how long the storm that was before them was to last, and whether the people on board—"

"Come, Kit, that is all the thanks we get. Major, do you hear him? No, the chap is fast asleep. Between you and me, Kit, he has had a drop too much. But a man in a small way doesn't win five hundred, every day of his life, you know. By-the-way, I heard that Downy was hard hit again. But Pots took my tip, and has pocketed a thousand. Why, you never congratulated me, my boy. I shall throw up the book now, and invest it in my place. But we must be off, or Sally will blow up. Such a spread! You had better come. *Cinny* walks into the dining-room, and drinks a bottle of champagne, and there will be some rattling good chaps there."

"There may be a thousand, Sam; but none better than yourself. I congratulate and thank you, Sam, with all my heart. Few fellows would have thought of a friend at such a time. But excuse me; I can't come to-night, indeed I can't. I want to think of this all by myself. You say that this beautiful queen is never wrong. And what a heart she must have, what a fine heart, Sam! I should [402] like to have seen the tears on her lovely cheeks."

"Oh, I say! Come, come, Kit. But she has never been known to be wrong, my dear fellow. All the tribe call her—well, I can't pronounce the name, but it means something like 'the infallible divine.' And she does it all so simply! There is no humbug about her. Come along, Major; why, you must be starved."

I was partly ashamed of my own superstition; yet I could not help saying to myself—"They believe it; and they are ten times cleverer than I shall ever be."

CHAPTER LXII.
HASTE TO THE WEDDING.

THINGS were not going very smoothly now with Mr. Donovan Bulwrag. Three of the four months allowed him by his father had passed already; yet no date was fixed, or seemed likely to be fixed, for the great event which was to make a wealthy man of him. The old man was urgent, and could not be brought to postpone his revenge to the convenience of his son, for he had learned already that this chip of the old block was of a grain quite as crooked and cross-fibred as his own. His violent and vindictive heart was burning for the day when he should trample on the pride of the woman who had been his ruin, and had married again and lived in luxury, while putrid fish was his diet. Neither was revenge his only motive. Some provision must be made for him, something better than two pounds a week, and a wretched den in London, as soon as ever he chose to apply to his aged father's men of business; and this he could not do (without upsetting all his plans) until he had revealed himself to that haughty woman.

"If you choose to make your own son a beggar, and to turn your daughters into the streets—you must. That is all I can say. I can do no more. I lost a lot of money to-day, all through you. I should never have invested sixpence, but for you. It does seem a little too hard upon a fellow, when he is doing all he knows to please a man who never helped him."

It was on the night of the Derby day, and father and son were holding their usual weekly interview in the Green Park. The older man was much better dressed and cleaner than he had [403] been; but the other kept at a prudent distance, and took care to smoke throughout the time. He had looked into books, and found that the disorder is sometimes contagious, and sometimes not.

"Whose fault is it that I have never helped you?" the cripple asked disdainfully. "Don't walk so fast; my feet are not like yours. You make me even pay for my cab both ways. I came to please you. You shall pay for my cab. And you shall pay for it a little further too. I demand to be established on the premises. You have plenty of room; and as you said once, it can be done without any one the wiser. How can I tell that she won't run away, the moment you are married? And I want to be where I can see my daughters. In a lonely rambling, ramshackle house like that, you could put me up easily. Why, I saw the very place, when I went round there after dark. Who ever goes near the Captain's workshops? Three of them quite away from all the other rooms. I only want one, and I will have it. It would save me ten shillings a week, as well as cab fare. They won't take me anywhere, in the vilest den, for less than that, when they see what I am. Christian country isn't it? Why, the Pulcho Indians are better Christians than you are. Get that room ready by this day week."

"If I do, you must give me another month's grace. It will be a terrible risk to take. Every one watches us so about there; we have gained such a reputation."

"And I shall increase it, my son, as soon as known. Your mother never cared what was thought of her by any one. She will now have a fine case to defy the public with. I go into that room, this day week. My goods are not as manifold as they were. I had twelve horses at my command at San Luis. Ah, we all have our ups and downs. I am on the up scale now."

Downy was very loth to receive his father so. He knew that it might be done safely enough, if the old man would only be cautious and discreet. But that was the very point he was sure to fail in. He would have been a great man by this time, perhaps a Dictator of three sprawling States, if his prudence had been equal to his strong will and valour. Some day his history may be written; and if it should be done with any skill, the reader will be likely to conclude that he has come across yet another instance of good material thrown away.

"I don't like it," said the dutiful son; "why can't you stay where you are, till it is over?" That is [404] to say, his own wedding-day.

"Because I believe that you will make her bolt. At least, nobody can make her do anything unless she chooses. But if she heard of me, she would bolt like a shot. And a nice fool I should be after that. It is no good arguing. In I go, this day week; or else I leave my card at the front door."

Donovan Bulwrag contended vainly. His father was as stubborn as himself, and a hundred-fold as reckless. What had this afflicted mortal to be afraid of now? His sense of paternity must have been strong, and the staple of his nature something better than hardware, that he should have lain still so long in his misery, poverty, and ignominy, rather than assert himself, and shock the public, and destroy his son's last hope of high position.

Downy showed more than his usual craft, in this difficult crisis of his fortunes. He extorted from his father, before he let him in, a pledge that he would keep himself out of sight, and never move without his leave, for at least another month. The room in which he stored him was cold, and dark, and damp, and entirely out of view from all the people of the house; yet quite like a palace to the poor old man, after all the low dens he had been lurking in. He was smuggled in at night, and had to wait upon himself, receiving all his food from his son's hands alone. The window had been fitted with dark wooden blinds, for some of the Professor's experiments, and the obscurity was deepened by the great ilex tree.

The Earl of Clerinhouse, though one of the wealthiest men of the day, lived a very quiet life. His health was not strong, and he hated all display, and had no turn for sporting, or gambling, or politics, or any other form of noise and push. He cared not for books, or art, or agriculture, or

women, or the drama, or the pleasures of the table. He was satisfied to take the world as he found it, and to keep himself out of it, whenever he could. Not for the sake of saving money, for no one could charge him with avarice; and when he saw good to be done, he did it in the most generous and even lavish style. The few who knew him intimately loved him deeply for his gentleness, simplicity, and good will; and often it was said of him, and not untruly, that he had never spoken harshly to any human being.

His father had been a great city man, keen, energetic, and enterprising; but though the present Earl retained his interest in great houses founded by his father, he never concerned himself about the money-market, and entered into no speculations. The one ray of romance in his quiet life had fallen across it when he was quite young. When the bright suns of Sunbury were in their zenith, he had been dazzled and smitten for a while by the lustre of Miss Monica. Happily for him, his suit was vain; he had too little “go” in him to suit her taste; and he married a lady better fitted for him, who left him a widower with one daughter. But the arrogant beauty retained and asserted—when it became of importance to her—a certain strange influence upon his tranquil mind. [405]

He had never liked Donovan Bulwrag, and shrank from entrusting his treasure to him. For his daughter Clara was the treasure of his life, the only object for which he cared to preserve his feeble vitality. Lady Clara, now in her twentieth year, resembled her father almost too closely. She was gentle, simple, and unpretending, apt to think the best of everybody, and to yield to a will more robust than her own. She was likely to make a most admirable wife for a strong and good man, who would cherish her; but with a coarse, unfeeling husband, she was certain to pine away and die; for her mind was very sensitive, and her constitution weak.

Seeing little of the world, and knowing less about it, this graceful and elegant girl had been induced, partly by the mother’s heroic commendations, to fix her affections upon Downy Bulwrag. How any girl could like that fellow it is hard to say; there was something so disgusting in his countenance to me, and his slow, deliberate, sarcastic speech, as if he thought over every word he uttered, and passed it through his mind to make it nasty. However, she considered him a hero; and so he was—a hero of cold cunning, and hot wickedness.

“You have at him, and I will have at her,” said this hero to his mother, as they drove to Berkeley Square; “it can’t go on like this. Why, I scarcely dare go out. Why, the fellows at the *Fan-tail* were talking all about me, when I dropped in for an hour last night. I knew it by the way they began about the weather, and that ass of a Grogan whispered—‘Hush! here he is.’ I shall tell her I am off to Nova Zembla next week; and you lay it on thick about what Dr. Medley said. Work the old muff upon that tack, and about the feeble heart-action, and the nervous system, and all that stuff. But let me have the little doll all to myself.”

Mrs. Fairthorn sighed, for she had quick perception, and some good behind all her badness. “I fear that the little doll is too good for you,” she answered; and he smiled at her. [406]

How they managed it, matters little; but they thought they had managed it rarely well. No doubt they told lies pat as puddings, and plentiful as blackberries. Tho Lord, who settles all things well—as we sometimes find out in the end—allowed them this little bit of triumph, to increase their discomfiture. But after all, I have no ill will, and am sorry that they had so much.

“How beautifully everything has gone off, Don!” said the lady, when she had settled her stately form in the watered silk again; “you see what a little tact can do. I put it as a favour to that poor thing. The objections have come from those wretched lawyers. The poor Earl would not hear a word about the money. I can’t think what I have been about, not to take the bull by the horns long ago. But the fault was yours. I could never trust you. Well, I was never more pleased in my life. It will be in the *Morning Post* to-morrow. Did you see how the poor Earl looked at me? I can wind him round my finger.”

“The Professor may go to the bottom with his trawl; and then who knows what might happen?” Donovan spoke with a bitter smile; he had never entirely forgiven his mother for her second marriage.

“Don’t be so shocking, Don. I am ashamed of you. Well, a month is not very long to wait; and there is a great deal to see to. Fizzy and Jerry will be bridesmaids, of course, and I must not be quite a dowdy. How that pest of a Dulcamara will ko-tow! She threatened me with the Queen’s Bench yesterday. I am not sure that I shall give her any order. I should like to break her heart, and I know how to do it. If I put the whole into Madame Fripré’s hands, Dulcamara would never look up again. But her cut is so inferior to Dulcamara’s. Well, I need not make my mind up, until to-morrow.”

“I think you had better keep the whole thing quiet, and pull it off without any fuss at all. The Earl hates pomps and vanities, so does Clara, and so do I. We had better have no humbug.”

“And be married at a registry office, I suppose. None of that mean, shabby work for me. Everything shall be left in my hands, and I’ll see that things are done properly. If it was only to vex your Aunt Arabella, after her trumpery rudeness to you, I should insist upon decency and comfort. I know how to cut her to the heart, and I intend to do it. The very day before the wedding, I shall write—‘Dearest Arabella,—We have been disappointed at the last moment by the dear Duchess of Coventry. Her Grace is afflicted with a bilious attack. Would you mind taking her place to-morrow, and excuse the brevity of this invitation?’ I should like to see her passionate face, when she gets that.” [407]

“Don’t be a fool, mother. You know, after all, you and I are the proper heirs to her estates, though she can dispose of them as she likes. She dislikes us; but she is an upright woman. It would be mad to offend her fatally.”

“She has cheated me out of house and land. There is no primogeniture among women. I simply did the thing she was going to do. She has rolled in money, and let me roll in the dirt. None of her posthumous benevolence for me! You will never see me grovelling at that woman’s feet.”

At the rehearsal of her wrongs, her violent temper rose and swelled, as a dog’s wrath waxes with his own bark. She stood up in the carriage, and crushed her head dress. This doubled her fury, and she turned upon her son.

“And you—I should like to know what you are doing in my house—my house, if you please, not yours. You think I know nothing about it, do you? No more of it! From this very hour, you drop your disgraceful bachelor ways, or I fetch the police and rout out those rooms. Now, remember what I say. When I say a thing, I do it.”

“You are altogether wrong. There is nothing of the sort;” Downy answered in a stern voice that cowed her; “to the last day of your life, you will repent it, if you dare to go meddling there.”

“*Dare* is not a word to use to me,” she answered in a sullen tone, and closed her lips. If she feared any one in the world she feared her own son Donovan. The difference between her will and his was as that between a torrent and the sea. Hers was force, and his was power. Sometimes she was sorry for her haste and fury; but in him there was no repentance.

He left her to herself, and said no more. In one thing they were much alike. Neither of them had great faith in words, whether used to them or by them. Having little faith in what they heard, they expected little for what they said. It was no affront to either of them, but an act of justice, to doubt every word of their mouths, because their mouths were wells of leasing.

“You will have to clear out, poor old chap;” said Downy that night to his father, whom he now [408]
regarded with rough affection, as well as fitful pity. “All settled now, about you know what. In three weeks or so, I shall have to slope. Who would bring you your grub, but your dutiful son? What is it about the ravens? And worse than that—she has smoked you already. In spite of all pledges, you have been out at night.”

“Who could stay mewed up, night and day? Let her smoke what she likes; I have got a pipeful for her.”

“Yes, and for me, and yourself too. Bedlam, or hospital, or workhouse for us all, if she finds you here, before the job is done. After that, have it out, when you like. No dutiful son interferes between his parents. If this is broken off, there will be no shilling left, for you to have sixpence out of.”

It may fairly be hoped that he had some other plan, though as yet he durst not mention it, for saving them both from the awful meeting of which he spoke so lightly.

“How am I to know that it is settled even now? You have put me off so many times. I might as well be on the *Simon Pure* again.”

“I will show it you to-morrow in the paper, announced for an early day—and it needs be an early one.”

“Sorry to doubt you. Not at all a truthful family. Three weeks more, my son; and that’s every hour. Let her come spying, if she likes. She never could keep her nose out of anything, or perhaps I shouldn’t be quite as I am. I am sorry for my lady; I only hope the pleasure will be mutual.”

CHAPTER LXIII.
THERE SAT KITTY.

WHILE these things thus were growing near me, as I learned soon afterwards, in our place there was no sign yet of anything encouraging. My Uncle Corny, who had always vowed that he never would bet a farthing, was now in a highly grumbling state, because he had not backed *Nutmeg-grater*.

"A horse bred and born in our own fields—a colt I have seen through the hedge fifty times, without caring to count his legs almost, and he goes and wins five thousand pounds, and how much do I get? Not a penny. I think it was very unkind of Sam; unnatural, and not neighbourly, to let Ludred get all the good of that, and not a threepenny bit come to Sunbury!" [409]

"Now, Uncle Corny, you talk of justice, and every one calls you a superior man;" I said, with the desire to mollify him, but the method misdirected; "how many times have I heard Sam Henderson tell you to put a bit of money on that horse? But you said—'None of your gambling for me!' And now, because the horse has won, you think you have been ill-treated!"

"Kit, you stick to your own affairs. What do you know about things like this? I want none of their dirty money. I pay my way, by honest work. They are a set of rogues, all together. You never see anything clearly now. Your wits are always gone wool-gathering. Why, your own Aunt Parslow won a box of gloves. And you are satisfied with my getting nothing."

It was true that my wits were wool-gathering now, but they travelled a long way for nothing. Ever since Sam, and Major Monkhouse, brought me the story of that strange vision, it seemed to be dwelling in my brain, and driving every solid sense out of it. All day long, and all night too, the same thing was before me—a ship with white sails piled on one another, like a tower of marble arches, the blue water breaking into silver at her steps, and upon the forefront a figure standing, with arms extended and bright eyes yearning, and red lips opened to say—"here I am!"

I went to the post, three times a day, for we now had three deliveries, and who could wait for old Bob's slow round? And often in the middle of a mutton-chop, which Tabby would grind into my listless mouth, at a shadow on the window, or the creaking of a door, I was up, and had my hat on, and was listening in the lane.

Any one would laugh at the foolish things I did. I kept the kettle boiling, day and night, until there was a hole in it, and I had to buy another; I dusted all the chairs three times a day; I kept a bunch of roses on the window-sill, and cut a fresh tea-rose, every morn and evening, to go into Kitty's bosom, when she should appear. I ordered a cold chicken every day from Mr. Rasp, and garnished it with parsley, and handed it over with a sigh to Mrs. Tompkins, when nobody came to taste it; and I made Polly Tompkins sleep with a string round her arm, and the end hanging out of the window. Every man on the place swore that I was cracked, except Selsey Bill, who stuck a spade up at my door. [410]

"Afore the rust cometh down the blade of that there tool, you'll be a happy man, Master Kit," he said; and as he spoke, his little squinny eyes were bright with something that removes the rust of human nature's metal.

At last I was truly getting genuinely cracked. Another week of burning hope and weltering dejection, of tossing to the sky and tumbling to the depths of darkness, must have left my dull brain empty of the little gift God put in it.

When a whole month had expired from the day when hope awoke, reason fell upon me like a flail, and hope was chaff. I made my usual preparations, with a bitter grin at them, and set the roses in the window, with contempt of their loveliness.

"The last time of all this tomfoolery," I said; "to-morrow I shall work hard again. Everything is lies, and tricks, and rot. Kitty has taken up with some fellow, and they are laughing at me in some gambling-den. I have a great mind to smash it up altogether. I shall sleep where that *Regulus* slept to-night. Much good I did by stealing him. Hard work is the only thing worth doing."

It was the first time that I had ever dared to think such a shameful thing of my pure wife; and I hope that I did not think it now, but said it by the devil's prompting. If any one had said it in my hearing, he would have said little else for another month. And I could have knocked my own self on the head, with great pleasure, when I came to think of it.

We laugh very nicely—when they cannot hear us—at women, for not knowing their own minds; but no woman ever born, since they began to bear us, could have gainsayed herself, as a man did, that day. I wandered about and lay under trees, for now it was the 15th of June, and the weather warm and sunny; then I climbed up trees and watched the river, and the roads, and even the meadow-path, where the cows were, and the mushrooms grew. Then I went and had a talk with Widow Cutthumb, and when she began to run down the race of women, I went so much further, that she grew quite sharp, and extolled them, and put all the blame upon us. It was waste of time to reason with her; so I let her have her own way, as they always do.

Then I went to the butcher's, and saw a fine sweet-bread, the very thing for any one just come from a long journey, and perhaps a little giddy from the rolling of a ship. With a sigh of despair I pulled out half a crown, and made him lend me a basket and a clean white napkin. Then I could [411]

not run home with it quick enough, for it seemed as if some one would be dying without it; but as soon as I got to our door, I set it down, and could not bring myself even to enter the house. Away I went, and got into the loneliest place I could find; and being rather light of head from grief and want of food, fell over an old apple-trunk, and fell asleep beside it.

When I awoke, the sun was set; and the men (who were now working overtime, to be ready for the strawberries) were all gone home with their frails upon their backs, and their little ones coming down the road to meet them. Dizzily I pushed my way into a grassy alley, and sauntered homeward, wishing only to go home for ever.

The front-door was open, which did not surprise me, for I often left it so, and the basket containing the sweet-bread was gone, and the roses were moved from the window. The sound of my boots did not ring as it used, and the air seemed less empty, and softer. In a stupefied hurry, I opened the door of the parlour—and there sat Kitty!

Kitty looking at me, with a strange and timid look. As if she were not certain that I would be glad to see her. As if she doubted whether I could love her any more; as if her soul in earth and heaven hung on the next moment.

I could not go to her, and I could not say a word; and to tell the truth, I don't know what I did. But I must have spread my arms, by some gift of nature; for before I could think of it, there she was; weeping—as I never could have thought it possible for any one, even in this world of tears, to weep.

Then she put up her hand, with the fingers thrown back, and stroked my cheeks gently, and said—"How thin! How thin!" Then she threw both arms around my neck, and drew my face down to her lips, and covered every inch of it with sobbing kisses. I pressed her sweet bosom to mine, and our hearts seemed to beat into one another.

"Oh, Kit, my own, own dear old Kit! Can you ever forgive me? Ever?"

She said this I dare say fifty times, scarcely allowing me to speak, for she said it was not good for me; withdrawing and feigning to be ashamed of her passionate love every now and then; and then rushing into my embrace again. Then she stood up, and threw back her beautiful hair, and [412] said with the glance which she knew I adored—

"Well, how do you think I am looking, love? Don't you think it is high time to tell me?"

She was wearing some foreign dress, beautifully cut, which set off her figure; and she knew it very well.

"I never saw you looking half so lovely," I replied; "though I thought it impossible to improve you."

"Sun-burnt, and freckled, and mosquito-bitten. But never mind, dear, if you love your own wife. We'll soon make all that right again. Oh, I have been too wild! Feel how my heart is jumping."

She was threatened with hysterics; but I soothed her gently, and she rested on my breast with her eyes half closed. As I looked at her, I felt that in this rapture I could die.

"Darling, I can hardly believe it yet;" she whispered, playing with my fingers to make sure; "see, this is my wedding-ring, I never took it off. What fine gold it is, not to tarnish with my tears. The drops that have fallen on it—oh, I wonder there is any blue left in my eyes at all! Do you think they are as blue, dear, as when you used to love them?"

"They are bluer, heart of hearts. They are larger and deeper. The tears of true love have made them still more lovely."

"But yours are so worn, and sad, and harassed! That can't be from loving me more than I love you; because that is simply impossible. But you never have been—tell me, tell me all the truth. Was there any truth whatever in that horrible tale? Remember I shall love you just the same. If you tore me to pieces I should love you."

"What horrible tale? I have never heard of any horrible tale, except your going away."

"And you don't know the reason! Oh Kit, oh Kit, have you taken me back like this, without even knowing why I went?"

"Darling I have not the least idea why you went. I was too glad to get you back, to think of anything else."

"Well, you are a true love! You are a husband such as no woman on the earth deserves. I don't think even I could have taken you back so, if you had run away from me, and I knew nothing of the cause."

"Oh yes, you would, Kitty; I am sure you would. I believe in you, just as you would in me, and talking has nothing to do with it. But how did you expect me to know all about it?" [413]

"Why, of course, by the letter I sent you from Ascension. The moment we got your letter—the moment I could stop crying, crying, crying—I wrote you such a letter, darling. Oh, I thought it would have killed me with wonder, and with joy. It was almost as sweet as this—not quite, not quite; nothing else can ever be quite so sweet as this."

“Then were you with your father? Were you with him all the time.”

“To be sure I was, dearest. Do you think I would have gone with any one else, away from you—away from my own husband?”

“But I thought it quite impossible for you to be with him. He was far in the Atlantic, dear, before you ran away.”

“Before I ran away! Oh Kit, oh Kit! And you thought I had run away with somebody else! Oh, what has my misery been, compared with yours? No wonder you are thin, dear; no wonder you are gaunt. Why, I can’t think how you can have managed to keep alive. I am sure I should have been dead, buried, and forgotten. Thirteen months, a year and a month, to be thinking your own new-married wife had run away, like a bad woman! Oh dear! Don’t stop me; I must cry again, or I may do something worse. And you have not even got my letter yet.”

“No. But I dare say it will come by-and-by. I expected no letter from you, of course, because I had no idea where you were; but every day I hoped for one from your father. But they told me the mails from Ascension are uncertain, because they take their chance of passing ships. Sometimes they don’t come for months together.

“Now will you read this?” she cried, jumping up with her old impetuosity; “I am very glad I kept it, though it makes me creep every time I touch it. That explains everything. Who wrote that?”

“It is like my writing; but I never wrote a word of it, and never saw, or dreamed of it before.”

“Whoever wrote that letter, Kit,” my wife said very solemnly, “ought to have his portion for ever and ever in the bottomless pit, where the fire is not quenched. I could never have believed that any human being could possibly have conceived such wickedness. But don’t read it now; it would take too long, and spoil our perfect happiness, darling. We must not be so selfish. No more [414] kisses, until we have done our duty. Just put me into trim again, and let me do my hair up, and we must both run down to Uncle Corny’s. Nobody has seen me yet, but you. What do you think I did? I was quite resolved that no one should see me, but my own husband. So I left my things at Feltham, and ran all the way—flew all the way, I ought to say, and came through Love Lane all alone. Oh, we will never part again, not even for a day, Kit, or half a day. You must never let me out of your sight any more.”

“And not out of my arms, when I can help it,” I said, as with my dear wife still enclasped, and her hair waving over my bounding heart, I took her through the quiet alleys of the summer night, just to show her for a minute—for I could not spare her more—to the loyal and good Uncle Corny.

CHAPTER LXIV.
A MENSÂ ET TORO.

It is out of my power to say, because I have never studied human nature—having more than I can properly get through with trees and animals—but according to the little I have seen, the spirit of revenge is stronger in women, than it usually is in us. Whatever wrong a man may have done me, if he only says that he is sorry for it, or if without that I have got the better of him, I am quite content that he should go, and settle the question as between him and the Lord. I wish him no ill, but what he may do himself; and even if I hear of his getting his deserts, I feel no elation, but endeavour to be sorry.

But my Uncle Corny, who understands the fair sex—at least according to his own account—declares that they not only cannot forgive a deadly wrong done to them, but continue to think that the world is a bad place and sadly neglected by Providence, until they see the people, who have made them unhappy, paying out for it, as they ought to do.

My Kitty was the very best of all her sex—which is saying a great deal more than some men may imagine, and means much more than if it were said of them—but still I could see that she [415] was not contented even with our new honeymoon (which was ten times sweeter than the first one, though that had been most delicious), from a lofty desire for perfect justice; which a man is quite satisfied to do without, knowing (as he does) that otherwise he never could have satisfaction at all.

And yet I could see that she trembled, whenever she had hinted at that little drawback, for fear of the danger that it might involve to me; for she never seemed to think that I could take care of myself, as well as she took care of me.

It is not for me to say, how these things are, or rather how they ought to be; and I am free to acknowledge that if Downy Bulwrag had come down meddling with my wife again, I should have killed him; and risked the chance of being hanged for a fellow unworthy of it. And when I read aloud that wicked letter, in the presence of Kitty and my uncle, the next day, there were times when I longed to have him by the throat, and prevent more lies coming out of it. For the Devil himself must have stood at his elbow, and gone into his brain as well, while he was about it. And he had made the ground ready for his lies to grow, by a black mysterious note beforehand, signed —“A well-wisher in Sunbury.” This we had not in our possession yet; but Kitty knew the effect of it upon her father’s mind.

As I read the vile forgery, bearing my name, Uncle Corny fell back in his chair, and shut his lips. Then he closed his fist also, and from time to time he kept stamping with his boots, as if his feet were tingling. But Kitty put her tender hand into mine, and her breath was short, and her bosom heaved, and her eyes flashed like the summer-lightning, or sometimes filled with heavy drops.

> My dear and respected Father-in-law,—“I have a sad confession to make to you, which I ought to have made long ago, but I knew that I must have lost your daughter by it. I will not pretend to excuse my conduct, for I know that I have behaved shamefully. But I could not foresee the frightful danger to which she is now exposed daily. My heart is almost broken, for I love her wildly, savagely, and in plain truth madly.
>
> “Last Autumn I committed a very base act, and I am justly punished for it. To keep your sweet Kitty here a little longer, and give me more chances of seeing her, I was mean enough to steal Miss Coldpepper’s favourite dog, a mongrel called *Regulus*. I hid him in my uncle’s garden, while the country [416] was being searched for him; and thus, as perhaps you remember, I obtained the honour of your acquaintance. But I was punished for that sneakish trick. The cur bit me thrice in the legs and thigh, and I am doomed to a horrible death I fear; for the dog has gone mad, and the disease was in him then.
>
> “I have been, without any one’s knowledge, to the first authority in London on such matters, and he says that I ought to be watched, and must hold aloof from all family ties for a while. He asked if I was married, and then he told me the most horrible story I ever heard; and he conjured me, unless I wished to kill my wife, to separate from her for at least two years. When I would not promise that, he was anxious to write to her relatives himself; but I gave him a false address, and nothing came of that.
>
> “I hoped that he might be mistaken, but now I feel that he was only too correct. Your Kitty is not safe with me another day. I have the most awful sensations sometimes. The malady has got hold of me too surely, though nobody yet suspects it. I have felt a wild desire to tear her to pieces; and the only atonement I can make for my offence is to beg you to take her immediately. You are likely to be away for about two years; and when you return, if I am still alive, which is most unlikely, I may safely reclaim her.
>
> “I implore you not to let her know the cause of this sad parting. It would keep her in awful suspense and misery, and perhaps be as fatal to her, as I

myself should be. She is so good and dutiful, and trusts me so entirely, that if you say it is my wish, for reasons you approve of—however she may grieve about it, she will not rebel. Come for her, or send for her, without my knowledge, without the knowledge of any one near our place; for if the story got abroad, I should go mad at once. My only hope lies in perfect quiet; therefore she must not write to me, and I must not hear a word, even from yourself, about her. She must not stop to pack up clothes, or anything whatever; for if I came in, I should destroy her, if I saw it. But order particularly that she shall take every farthing in the house she knows of, to equip her for her long voyage in a seaport town. The money is her own; and she must take it.

"I send this by hand, as I know not where you are; but the bearer knows how to find you. There is no answer, except to do what I implore most pitifully, if you wish to save your only child from a fearful death, at the hands [417] of the one who loves her *so madly*. I pray God that you may be yet in time. I feel a little calmer after writing this. This morning I was in agony at the sight of water. May the Lord have you, and my darling in his keeping. Oh, how base I have been, but I have done no murder yet!

"Your heart-broken son-in-law,
"C. Orchardson."

When I had finished, my uncle spoke; for Kitty could only press my hand, and sometimes look at me, and sometimes turn her eyes away and blush.

"These are the things," my uncle said, "that make one ashamed of being called a man. No snake could do such a thing, and no dog would, however mankind might train him. And the bit of piety towards the end! The father was a blackguard, the mother a Fury, the son is the Devil with all his angels. Oh Kit, Kit, I am old, and have met with a great deal of wickedness, but none like this."

"But you know, Uncle Corny, you must not be disturbed," said Kitty going up to him, and kissing his forehead, in her sweet and graceful way, "just because there happen to be bad people in the world. It has always been so, and I fear it always must. And you must not imagine that Kit meant any harm, by—by just borrowing Auntie Coldpepper's dog. He did it—oh, so cleverly—just for the sake of seeing me; and he quite changed the character of that dog. But how can that bad man have found it out?"

"Through Harker," I exclaimed, "through that wretch of a Harker, who was always spying on these premises. Sam Henderson knew it, most likely through him; but Sam would never have spoken of it."

"It is true, then," said my uncle. "Well, I thought it was a lie. I am surprised to find that I have a dogstealer for my nephew."

"It was Tabby made him do it. And I am very glad she did. But the first thing Dr. Cutler said to me, when my heart was nearly broken with his message, was—'Did your husband steal that dog?' And of course I said 'Yes;' for Kit had told me all about it, when we were at Baycliff; and no doubt that convinced the good doctor that all the rest of that sad wicked letter was true. You know, Uncle Corny, that it was impossible for my father to leave the ship, and he sent his old friend Dr. [418] Cutler to fetch me. Oh, how I did cry all the way! I thought there never would be any more happiness for me. And of course they never told me why I was to go. I thought that Kit must be tired of me; and yet I could not quite believe that, you know. Oh, Kit, I shall never be tired of you."

"Don't cry, my darling," said my uncle kindly. "We have had enough tears to drown that devilish letter. Now sit on Kit's lap, to make sure of him, and tell me your own adventures, for I have only guessed them yet."

"Oh, I had no adventures, and I never noticed anything, only to ask how far we were from England, and to count the days till we should have finished all the work. I made a little calendar, as the girls do at school, the girls I mean who have real mothers, and I blotted out every day when it was over, and thought—'one less now before I see Kit again.' Of course I asked my father what had made him send for me, and he said it was my husband's most earnest entreaty, and if I loved him I must ask no more, but keep up my spirits and obey his orders. Father never showed me this letter, or I think—though I can't be quite sure—that I should have doubted about it. The writing is exactly like Kit's in some places, but in others it is different, and the style is not like Kit's. That wicked man stole several letters of Kit's; I suspected it then, and now I know it.

"My father had not the smallest doubt, of course, but he was puzzled when I spoke about that telegram, you know what I mean—the one from Captain Jenkins at Falmouth, to say the ship was on her voyage, and to send good-bye to us. He had sent no such message, and had spoken no such ship, and said that it must be some extraordinary mistake. But you see now it was another piece of falsehood, to make it look impossible that I could be with my father.

"It was father himself who went to Baycliff to inquire, knowing that we had been there, and being near it. But he could not come here, and so he sent Dr. Cutler, who knows all this neighbourhood well, and managed it all to perfection with the help of some one, who was sent by

agreement to meet him. Oh dear, when I think of that dreadful time; and I was not allowed to leave a line for my husband, except what I wrote, on the sly, in the Prayer-book. Well, that did him some good, at any rate; didn't it, my own darling?

"I am quite ashamed to talk of my own sorrow, when I think of what Kit has been through for [419]
me. But I am sure I ate nothing for at least a month, and Dr. Cutler, who was in charge of the health of the ship's company, became quite uneasy about me. As for their experiments, deep-sea dredging, and soundings, and temperatures, and all that, I did not even care to look at them, and I am not a bit more scientific than when I went out, though perhaps I shall talk as if I was, by-and-by. The only thing I felt any interest in was the rescue of a poor afflicted man—I think they called him a Spaniard, though he seemed to me more like an Englishman—who was kept as a prisoner among some savages in a desert place in South America. He was terribly afflicted with some horrible disease; and the sailors would not go near him, until they were ashamed when they saw me do it. We were all very kind to him, but he left us, and got on board another ship bound for home.

"Oh, how I used to tremble, Kit, whenever we saw a ship in the distance, hoping for news of you, my dear, and of Uncle Corny, and everybody. But we met very few ships, being generally employed in out-of-the-way places, and only landing anywhere two or three times, for water, or fruit, or vegetables.

"But when we got to Ascension Island, which is an English place, you know, what a joyful surprise there was for me! I shall always bless that little rocky spot, for it gave me back my life again. When father received my husband's letter, for the first time in his life, he was in a real fury. Something or other had occurred before, besides that affair of the telegram, which made him a little doubtful about this wicked, wicked letter. And now he saw at once that he had been imposed upon most horribly. We were all afraid that he would have had a fit, but Dr. Cutler saved him.

"'My poor injured child!' he kept on exclaiming; 'wretched for at least a year, and injured for life, by this monstrous villainy!' He would have thrown up his command at once, if he could have done it honourably, and brought me home by the very next ship. But if he had done so, the cruise must have ended; for Lieutenant Morris, who was next to him, was invalided at Fort George. I was quite ready to come home alone, by any ship, English or foreign; but as it happened, Dr. Cutler received by the same mail an urgent request from his wife for his return; and so the very gentleman I ran away with brought me back to my husband. It was a long time before we could get a ship, and then it was only a sailing vessel, and oh how slowly she seemed to go! Then about [420]
a month ago, we had a very heavy storm, which drove us I don't know how far out of our course, and I thought that I never should see Kit again. But now it seems all like a horrible dream. Father will be home, in November, I hope. I intend to work hard to help Uncle Corny; and Kit will soon be well again, with me to mind him."

CHAPTER LXV.
HER OWN WAY.

"You must not let it drop, Kit; you can't let it drop," said Aunt Parslow, as she sat in our parlour, the next day, having ordered Parker's fly, as soon as she received my letter; "for the sake of your sweet wife, you are absolutely bound to expose this horrid miscreant. I doubt if there ever was such a case before, though nothing ever surprises me. It was very nasty of you to steal that dog—why, you might have come and stolen *Jupiter*, on the very same principle of a pretty girl—and you have been punished, even more than you deserved. You deserved a month in the stocks perhaps, with all the dogs in the village sniffing at you; but you did not deserve to lose your own wife, just when you had time to get fond of her. I am not for revenge; I am too old to fancy that we can do much to right ourselves, even if the feeling was Christian; but I belong to an honourable family, in which the fair fame of a lady was never neglected."

"I declare I never thought once of that; it never occurred to me in that light," I answered with perfect truth; for my Kitty's fair fame seemed to me so entirely above all question, that it could not need any assertion; "but since it is capable of being looked at so, there is no doubt what my duty is."

"No husband of proper spirit could doubt for a moment what his duty is." Miss Parslow spoke very severely; but my wife looked at her reproachfully, and ran up to me.

"No, Kit, no. You shall not go near him. There is nothing too bad for him to do. I have lost you quite long enough already. What do I care what anybody says? Miss Parslow, you have been wonderfully kind, and it is impossible to thank you. Don't spoil it all, by putting this into his head." [421]

"My dear, we shall send the two policemen with him," my aunt replied rather sarcastically; "we know how precious he is, and we won't have him hurt. Or perhaps your Uncle Cornelius might go. He has no wife, to make a to-do about him. Look, here he comes with somebody, to tell us something! He walks like a man of thirty-five, and how polite he always is!"

Uncle Corny had brought Mrs. Wilcox from his house, and that good lady was in great excitement. She fell upon Kitty, and kissed and hugged her, until I thought really there had been enough of that; and then she turned round, and addressed us at large, casting forth her words with vehemence, and throwing out her hands, as if to catch them.

"Ladies, and gents, oh ladies and gents, such a thing have just come to my knowledge through Ted, which is the most intellectuous boy, though my own child, and was never such myself. I set off straightway, when I heard it, and beg to excoose of my present disapparel, to catch the three ten 'bus, or else wait another hour. And if there is a good horse on the place, which by the look of it there must be many, I do beg of Master Kit to put him in at once, if not too late to prevent bloody murder. Them police is so slow, so slow; though I never join in a single word against them, for all morshal men is fallible."

"I can't make out what it is," said Uncle Corny, when we all looked at him, for an explanation; "this good lady must be allowed her own time; I am afraid that I have hurried her."

"Not at all, Mr. Orchardson, not at all. Nothing could be more gentlemanly, and I will say the same of all Sunbury. But the wedding was to be to-morrow, gents, regardless of expense, at eleven o'clock, at the church of Saint Nicholas, the Virgin. It was not for me to forbid the banns, though knowing of holy impediments. Very handsome it was to be with six bridesmaids, Miss Frizzy and Miss Jerry for two of them. Cook, who is a very self-respected young woman, though Ted says she have turned forty-two, and no concern of his if she is even two and forty, she dropped in promiscuous and told me all about it, and all was as merry as a marriage-bell. But just as I was having my bit of dinner, in she comes with her cap-ribbons flying off, and her apron-strings burst, being rather stout with running.

"'For God's sake, come up, Mrs. Wilcox,' she says 'or there'll be murder done, murder done, and nobody to see it.' [422]

"I was there in two minutes, as you may suppose; and there was madam, tearing up and down the front walk, with her black silk cloak on that makes her look so tall, and her face—oh, you should have seen the colour of it, and the flashing of her eyes, and the waving of her arms. 'I insist upon knowing. I insist upon going in. Am I going to be locked out of my own house? To-morrow, indeed! Don't talk to me of to-morrow. How dare you prevent me from entering my own door? I'll find out your disgraceful tricks, and expose you. You are not fit to marry a respectable girl. I'll send for a policeman, and have the door forced.'

"'You won't do anything of the kind,' her son Mr. Downy made answer quietly, although I could see that he was awful pale, and he sat on a kitchen chair in front of the door, with his broad shoulders set against it. 'I tell you it is for your sake that I will not allow it. You may walk about all night, but you won't walk in here.'

"Ladies, and gents, she kept pacing up and down, like a Beelzebub more than a mortal woman, raving and ranting to such a degree, that a crowd of people came and looked over the gate, and they began to cry, 'Bravo, Rous!' 'Go it, old lady!' 'Hit him hard, he ain't got no friends'—and all that stuff; you know how free and easy a London crowd is. Then she marched up to the gate, and

looked at them, and they fell away ashamed, and she walked into the house. But have her way she will, before the sun goes down. She has sworn it, and she never breaks her oath."

"It is no concern of ours," said my uncle very sensibly; "what have we to do with such family quarrels? What made you come to us, Mrs. Wilcox?"

"Two things, sir; in the first place, you know more of the law than any gentleman I know. You remember how you told me that last winter, and every word you said came true as gospel. And what is more than that, poor Miss Jerry, and Miss Frizzy backed her up in that same, she says to me—'Oh, Mrs. Wilcox, do try to get that nice young man from Sunbury, that married poor Kitty Fairthorn. He has more power over mother than any one on earth. She is afraid of him, that's the truth, though she'd box my ears if she heard me say so. 'There might be time enough,' she says, 'if you'd set off directly, and I'll pay all expenses.' Well, I thought it must come from Heaven that [423] I should be thinking of the uncle, and she of the nephew; and so come, both gents, I beg of you; there'll be murder between them, if you don't; for the police can't interfere, you know."

"Kit, let us go," said my Uncle Corny, as some new idea struck him; "we cannot interfere of course, but we can see the end of it."

Kitty was very much against my going, and I would not have left her, unless Miss Parslow had promised to stay with her, until our return, although it would compel her to send back the fly, and beg a bed for the night from her old friend Sally.

My uncle took a big stick, and so did I; and in a quarter of an hour we started in the tax-cart, with Mrs. Wilcox on the cushion. I was the driver, and my uncle sat behind, for there was no room for three of us, all rather broad, in front. And certainly I was the calmest of the three, for the good lady was in a dreadful fright and fret; and my uncle sat heavily, with his chin upon his stick, taking no notice of the roads or streets, but dwelling on the distance of bygone sorrow. The wrong he had suffered was greater than mine in one way, and less in another; greater, because it was incurable; lighter, because less cold-blooded and crafty, and not inflicted on him through his own wife. But I, with my Kitty recovered, and still in the new delight of that recovery, had triumphed already in the more important part, and was occupied rather with contempt than hatred. And it seemed to me too an extraordinary thing, and the last I should ever have predicted, that I should be entreated by the daughters of that most naughty and headstrong woman, to come and exert for her own good my imaginary power over her.

We put up our cart at the *Bricklayer's Arms*, where Ted had been pot-boy—or potman he called himself—and then we all hurried towards Bulwrag Park. The midsummer sun had just gone down; and as the red light glanced along the broad stately roads, I thought of the words of that violent lady—"before the sun goes down, I will have my way."

We passed between some posts into the open space, coveted vainly by builders, where the old Scotch firs (which had been my Kitty's landmark) still waved their black pillows against the western sky. Then a number of people came rushing by us, driven by that electric impulse, which flashes through the human heart that human life is passing. With the contagion of haste we began to run.

"Can't come in. Nobody allowed past this rope." [424]

A posse of policemen had drawn a cord across the road, outside the old gate, because that was a very poor obstacle; and now I dare say there were a hundred people pushing; and in five minutes there would be a thousand.

I said, "I am Professor Fairthorn's son-in-law, and the two young ladies have sent for me. And Mrs. Wilcox is an old servant of the family, who was sent in haste to fetch me."

They dropped the rope at this, and let us in; being reasonable, as the police are generally, unless you rub their coats up the wrong way of the cloth.

But what a sight we had, when once we turned the corner! Having never been brought up in battle-fields, but only where apples and pears grow, I found myself all abroad, and felt my legs desirous to go away from one another. But my uncle laid hold of me, and said—"This is what it comes to. The man, who has been a man, may look on at the Devil."

Mrs. Wilcox turned back; for her nerves were rheumatic; but they would not let her pass the rope again. I was looking round, and saw it, with a desire to do the same; but my uncle had me by the collar, and I knew that he was right, though I would rather not have known it.

"Stop, and see the works of God," he said. And I answered—"No, I would rather not, if this is a sample of them."

For before the front door there were things going on, which made it impossible to let that house after it came into our possession, even to a most enlightened widow from America—or at any rate she took it, and then threw it up again. There were as good as three corpses laid out upon the lawn, with a doctor attending upon each and two policemen; and one of them also had a magistrate.

Uncle Corny drew me forward, as I shrank behind the bay-tree, where Kitty had been with me, when the great snow began. "You are only fit for a turtle-dove. Where is your gall?" he whispered.

It may have been a very low default on my part. But when my worst enemy lies on the ground, I would rather lift him up, than walk over him. My uncle was of sterner stuff, or less live softness —for his injury had been more deadly. He tried to drag me forward; but I would not budge, though I might make a beggar of myself by that refusal.

"Are you afraid to look at death, you white-livered young fool?" he whispered, and his face was [425] black with the pitch of fury.

"I have been through ten times worse than death," I answered, looking at him steadfastly; "and the lesson I have learned is mercy."

Before he could answer, with the bitterness of justice, which to him was greater, two young women ran across the grass, and they both caught hold of me and shrieked. I could not make out what they said, because it was mixed up with sobs, and they cried both together; but I left myself to them, and they drew me on to the place where their mother lay stretched upon the walk, with a medical man bending over her.

"Dr. Wiggins?" he asked; and I answered, "No, not a doctor at all." And he said, "Clear out; I shall take the four ounces on my own responsibility."

"A friend of the family. A true friend of the family," Miss Jerry exclaimed, to my great surprise; but he answered—"Then let him get out of the way; and the sooner you go away too, the better."

The sour-faced woman, a faithful retainer, was supporting the poor lady's head on a cushion; and I scarcely allowed myself a glance at the proud face, now so deathly. But that one glance told me for ever what all human pride must come to.

"Oh, come and see Downy! He can't be dead too. Oh, come, and forgive him before he is dead."

Which of the girls said this I know not. But I took up my hat, which I had thrown on the grass, and followed them to their brother.

There lay the man who had robbed me of my wife, the cold-blooded, godless miscreant, robbed by his own hand for ever of all hope of due repentance. Within a few yards of him lay his poor father, dead as a stone, and cold as ice, slain by the wickedness he had begotten, shot through the heart by his heartless son.

Donovan Bulwrag looked at me. He was sensible still; though before the waning light upon his ghastly face should vanish, light and darkness would be one to him. He knew me, and I am grieved to say, for his own poor sake, that he hated me still. He had not heard of Kitty's return, I suppose, having been so absorbed in his own affairs, and he muttered through the red foam that streaked his lying lips—for he had fired the ball through the roof of his mouth—

"How like—darling Kitty—run away—with officer?" [426]

"She is with me. Her father found out your tricks, and sent her home. She is well and very happy. She ran away with no officer."

"Let him alone, sir; don't excite him," said the surgeon who was stooping over him. "I must have you removed if you come near him." Then with another turn of thought he said,—"If there has been ill-will between you, make it up; he cannot last half an hour. Will you take his hand if he wishes it?"

"With pleasure; but I know that he does not wish it. Do you wish me to take your hand, Mr. Bulwrag? If you do, look at me, and nod your head."

To my amazement, the dying man turned his eyes on me, and nodded his head. His eyes were clouded with the approach of death, and I saw very little expression in them. Then he moved his left hand feebly towards me, while the other dropped, as if through exhaustion, to the ground. My right hand lay in his clammy palm, and bending forward, I watched his face for some token of good will and penitence.

Suddenly a red glare as of lightning filled his eyes, his features worked horribly, and his great teeth clashed as he tried to jerk me towards him. Luckily for me I was poised upon both feet. At the flash of his eyes I sprang aside, a redder flash blinded me, and a roar rang in my ears, and upon the bosom of the dying man lay the short thick curl, the love-lock Kitty was so fond of playing with. The ball had passed within an inch of my temple, and my forehead was black with the pistol-smoke.

"Narrow shave," said the doctor, "that will be his last act. I hope he will have life enough to know that it has failed. I had not the least idea he had got that revolver under his coat-flap. What are the police about? It's not my place to see to a thing of that sort. And he might have shot me while he was about it! There he goes! I thought so. Serve him right."

The great head fell back, and the square chin dropped, a dull glaze spread upon the upturned eyes, a wan gray haze as of icy vapour crept across the relaxing face, and Donovan Bulwrag was gone to render an account of his doings in the flesh.

Mrs. Wilcox ran up with a sob, and fetched the heavy eyelids downward. "Poor young man! He have run his course. I hope he has gone to heaven," she said.

But my Uncle Corny looked at me, and at the fallen pistol. "I wish him only his due," he said; [427]

“and I hope he has gone to the Devil.”

CHAPTER LXVI.
ONE GOOD WISH.

THERE must have been a fearful scene, about an hour before we reached that spot. Two powerful wills were in collision—one hard as steel, the other trenchant and resistless as red-hot iron. For many days the conflict had been gathering force and fury, as the rising wind collects its power, before the outbreak of the storm.

The mother was resolved to pierce the mystery of her crafty son. The son was equally resolute to keep his fatal secret. And the father, turbulent and headstrong, wrapped in his own vindictive mood, cared not when the outbreak came, but looked forward to it grimly.

It had been impossible for Downy, as he had naturally foreseen, to keep entirely to himself the presence of a stranger in the house. Although the room was far away from the part his mother occupied, and darkened for the Professor's use, and secluded by thick shrubbery, it soon became needful for the jailor to secure a confederate. With some misgivings, he took the sour-faced woman into his confidence, knowing her to be close and faithful, as well as clever and resourceful. But unluckily for himself he did not trust the woman wholly. Skinner, as she was called in the household, did not know the real import of the plan she aided. Falsehood was her master's nature, and he did no despite to it, by relapsing into truth. He told her a chapter of lies; and she had no inkling that the stowaway, whose face she was never allowed to see, was the husband of her mistress.

Thus she was not on her guard so strictly as she would have been, had she known the truth. To learn the existence of a secret is to be halfway towards it; and the pride as well as curiosity of the mistress was soon afoot. But the room was securely locked, and vain was any prowling round it; till indignation and sense of outrage grew no longer bearable.

After that public outbreak of passion, which had scared the cook, and Mrs. Wilcox, the lady of [428] the house retreated to her room, and was taken or feigned to be taken ill. Her son was sent for, in great haste, and found her prostrate, and broken down, scarcely able to speak, and quite unlikely to attack his stronghold again. His sisters implored him to take a cab, and follow the course of the only doctor who could relieve these perilous pains; and after seeing to his locks and bolts, he departed on that mission.

No sooner had the front gate swung behind him, than up jumped the feeble sufferer, wrote a few lines to the nearest blacksmith, and sent the boy in buttons to take them, with orders not to lose a moment. In a quarter of an hour the blacksmith and his foreman were at the obnoxious door, with sledge-hammer, crowbar, cold chisel, and wrench.

Some one within seemed inclined to help them, for they heard a heavy bolt shot back; but the door was fastened on the outside also with a heavy chain and padlock. The smith laid hold of this chain with his pincers, and so kept the padlock against the post, where a few swinging blows from the foreman shattered it, like an egg-shell. In a minute they cast the door back on its hinges, and a narrow dark passage was before them.

"Let no one follow me," said the lady of the house; "but wait till I return to you." She closed the heavy door behind her, and passed through the gloom to an inner door. This was neither locked nor bolted, and she turned the handle and entered.

The room was lofty, but very dark. Not only the bulk of the ilex-tree, but close blinds, fixed in the window-frame, obscured the fading sunlight. The lady marched in with a haughty air; she would soon let this poor vagrant know who was the owner of this house and who the gutter-squatter. But suddenly she stopped, and speech was flown from her tongue to her eyes; she could only stare.

Against the high mantlepiece, whose black marble covered with dust was as dull as slate, a tall and bulky man was leaning, peacefully smoking a long cigar. The cigar was fixed between two strips of muslin, concealing the chin, lips, and nose, if any. A slouched hat, with a yellow feather in it, covered the hairless crown; and only the knotted forehead, and the fierce red eyes, showed that here was a human face alive.

But the massive cast of figure, and the attitude, and slouch and even some remembrance of the [429] fierce red glance, told the haughty woman who it was that stood before her. In a moment, fury changed to fear, and triumph became trembling. Without a word she turned to fly; but a great muffled hand was laid on her.

"No hurry, faithful wife! You have insisted upon seeing me. Come to the light, and you shall have that pleasure."

The great figure swept her to the window with one arm, while she vainly strove to cry, or even to fall upon her knees. Then throwing back the blind, the leper drew her closer to him, and tearing off his swathings held her so that she must gaze at him.

"This is your work. Are you pleased with it? True love is never changed by trifles. Embrace me, my gentle one. You always were so loving. How you will rejoice to show a wife's affection, and to tend me daily; for I mean to leave you never more. Monica, gentle, loving Monica, whisper your true love where my ears used to be."

With the mad strength of horror, she dashed from his arms, and away through the passage, and would have escaped—for the poor cripple could only limp in pursuit—if she had not closed the outer door. By the time she had opened, he was upon her, and they staggered together across the broad walk, when their son from the gate rushed up to them.

“Oh, save me, save me from that beast!” she cried.

“Off, and get back to your den!” shouted Downy.

“A nice son, to part his own parents!” As the old man spoke, he struck his son in the face with his maimed right hand, while he clung to his wife with the other.

Then Donovan Bulwrag, in a fury of the moment, drew his revolver, and shot his father through the heart.

The old man fell on his back a corpse, while the mother was dashed on the grass, and lay senseless. Donovan looked at them both, gave a laugh, put the muzzle in his mouth, and shot himself.

I have no intention to moralize—as a man always says when he begins to do it—but there ended three misguided lives; for although Mrs. Bulwrag recovered slowly some of her bodily health and vigour, her mind was never restored to life again. That hectoring will, and domineering spirit, lapsed into the weakness of a weanling child; and if ever the memory of those haughty days returned, it waned into a shudder, or an abject smile. When Captain—or as he now [430]
is called Sir Humphrey Fairthorn came home from his celebrated enterprise, he made due provision in a private asylum for the lady who could no longer pick his pockets. The marriage settlements fell to the ground, with the downfall of the marriage, and six acres of “the most magnificently situated building land in London,” returned to the heritage of Kitty’s mother.

When my uncle and myself came sadly home from that shocking and distressing scene, the power of it lay upon us still, so that we did not care to speak.

“Thank God,” said my wife, as she fell upon my breast, after trying to sponge off the blaze from my temple, which would take some days to heal; “thank God that he is dead at last!”

Those are the only words of hers I have ever felt displeased with. At the moment they seemed harsh to me; by reason of the pity, which the eye engenders, but the tongue cannot advance. If she had come from that piteous sight, her heart would have been too soft for this.

“It is a good job for everybody else, and a bad one for him,” said Uncle Corny; “he is gone where he addressed himself. He labelled himself—‘To the Devil with care—to be delivered immediately.’ And then he goes and acts as his own porter. You need not look sentimental, Kit. What is England coming to? Lord bless my heart the stuff they talk about ‘the sanctity of human life!’ A good man’s life belongs to God, and a bad one’s to the Devil. And they have got themselves to thank for it.”

A very broad saying is seldom deep; but the general vote was against me. And all being on the right side, of course, they backed it up with buttresses.

“Think of that poor man,” said Kitty, who was always first to see things; “from what you say of his sad condition, and his size, and figure, I am quite sure it is the afflicted prisoner we rescued from the savages. You may talk of things not being guided by a Higher Power, and you may look black if it is hinted that a man shouldn’t shoot his father, and then try to kill my darling Kit; but what can you say, when it comes to light, that but for his own wicked plot, the cruelest and the wickedest that ever entered human heart—or brain, for he never could have owned a heart—if it had not been for that, no doubt, he would have married a lovely girl—though some may call her too pale and thin—and probably have stolen all her money, and no doubt broken her poor heart, [431]
as he did his utmost to break mine? And then in the very stroke of death, he tries to murder Kit again! Oh, how can I be sorry that we are safe from him at last?”

“Kitty is right,” Miss Parslow said; “Kit would have killed that man, if he caught him shooting Kitty. And that would have been the very next thing he would have done, if the Lord had spared him.”

To this I could make no reply; for verily I believe it would have been.

“Take your wife home,” said Uncle Corny, who always saw the right thing to do; “she is much excited. Avoid this subject, until you can speak of it calmly. Thank God for all His goodness to you; and let her nurse your wounded hair.”

This made Kitty laugh and pout; and without another word I led her home.

I led my Kitty home, without any fear of losing her again, until, by the will of One who loves us, we bid each other a brief farewell. We live at Honeysuckle Cottage still, and wish to go no further, adding to it, as little growers, like roses, cluster round us. We might lead a gayer and noisier life, if that were to our liking; but we have seen enough of the world to know how nice it is, at a distance. Whatever the greatest people do I can read to Kitty in the evening; and she smiles or sighs in the proper places, without neglecting our own affairs. The puff of the passing world comes to us, like that of a train in the valley; or even as the whiff of a smoker in the lane comes over our wall with a delicate waft, albeit his tobacco is not first-rate.

Moreover we like to be, where pleasant friends drop in, and say—“What a sweet calm is here!” And where Uncle Corny still toddles up at supper-time every evening, and lays his now quivering hand upon the curls of his sturdy Godson Cornelius, and says, “You shall have all this place, my boy; for your rogue of a father is too rich to want it, with all that property in London. Let him grow houses, while you grow trees. Keep the old place on, if you can; and sell your own fruit, if you want to get the money.”

Inditing of the higher fruit, that suffers no decay, and is meted in no earthly measure, the Rev. Peter Golightly enters, followed by his blooming daughter. He blesses all the little ones; and so does she, by kissing them with her pure sweet lips.

“That’s right, Miss Bessy, keep your lips in practice;” exclaims Uncle Corny in his rough old [432] style; and a healthy blush mantles where the hectic colour was; for the gentle young lady has won the heart of the vicar—not of Bray, but a parish very near it.

But which of them all can be thought of twice, with Kitty looking at me? My words must be plentiful indeed, if one can be spared for any other. Yet for two good reasons I will not attempt to praise her. Being a busy man I must forego all hopeless efforts; and again what would success be? Simply that, which according to the proverb, is “no recommendation.”

So all who are well disposed can wish me nothing more complete than this, that I may live with her long enough to discover some defect in her. And in return I will inflict no moral but that of all true love—let every Kit be constant to his better self—his Kitty.

THE END.

———————————
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Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired. Varied hyphenation was retained as printed.

Table of Contents, Chapter XXXV, "216" changed to "219"

Table of Contents, Chapter XXXVI, "229" changed to "226"

Table of Contents, Chapter LXIX, "381" changed to "380"

Page 33, "Miss" changed to "Mrs." (said Mrs. Marker, while)

Page 66, "hat" changed to "that" (that of me)

Page 79, "loftly" changed to "lofty" (second his lofty ideas)

Page 85, "nodody" changed to "nobody" (nobody, and whistling to)

Page 103, "Sunbuy" changed to "Sunbury" (all the way to Sunbury)

Page 149, "carricatures" changed to "caricatures" (and get caricatures)

Page 163, "see" changed to "she" (she felt an interest)

Page 167, "filmn" changed to "film" (film of a gossamer)

Page 167, "or" changed to "for" (for the resources of)

Page 169, "skrinking" changed to "shrinking" (save itself from shrinking)

Page 182, "tracts" changed to "tracks" (she has made tracks)

Page 197, "passed" changed to "pass" (have seemed to pass)

Page 198, "Put" changed to "But" (But presently they spied)

Page 212, repeated word "of" removed from text. Original read (active one of of the word)

Page 224, "bissects" changed to "bisects" (edge bisects the pips)

Page 230, "darw" changed to "draw" (draw the slow mist)

Page 237, "Sargeant" changed to "Sergeant" (Sergeant Biggs did not like)

Page 246, "hat" changed to "that" (that it was useless)

Page 255, repeated word "I" removed from text. Original read (I I have known of a lot)

Page 263, "th" changed to "the" (my own Kitty all the)

Page 274, "foilage" changed to "foliage" (foliage in warm weather)

Page 301, "o" changed to "of" (of them then)

Page 368, "opportunites" changed to "opportunities" (restrict the opportunities)

Page 374, "Baycliffe" changed to "Baycliff" (is still at Baycliff)

Page 382, "litte" changed to "little" (so many little points)

Page 392, "of" changed to "off" (a long way off)

Page 403, "sometmes" changed to "sometimes" (contagious, and sometimes)

Page 406, "preception" changed to "perception" (had quick perception)

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