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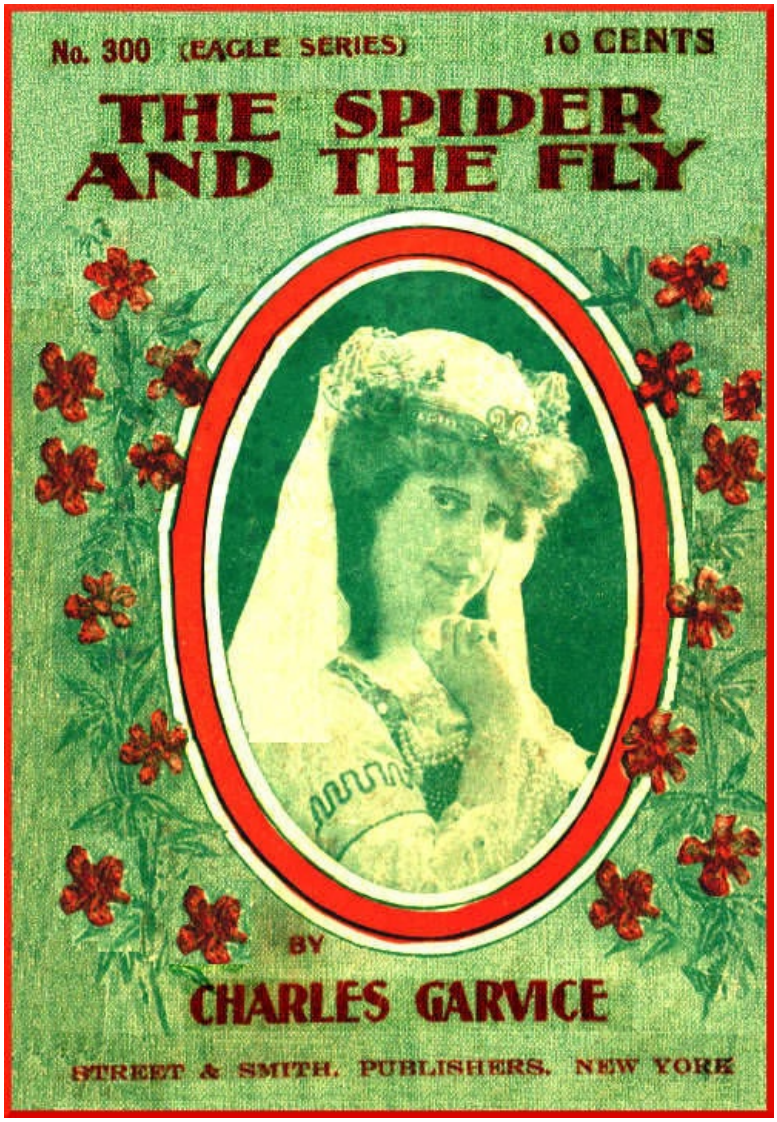

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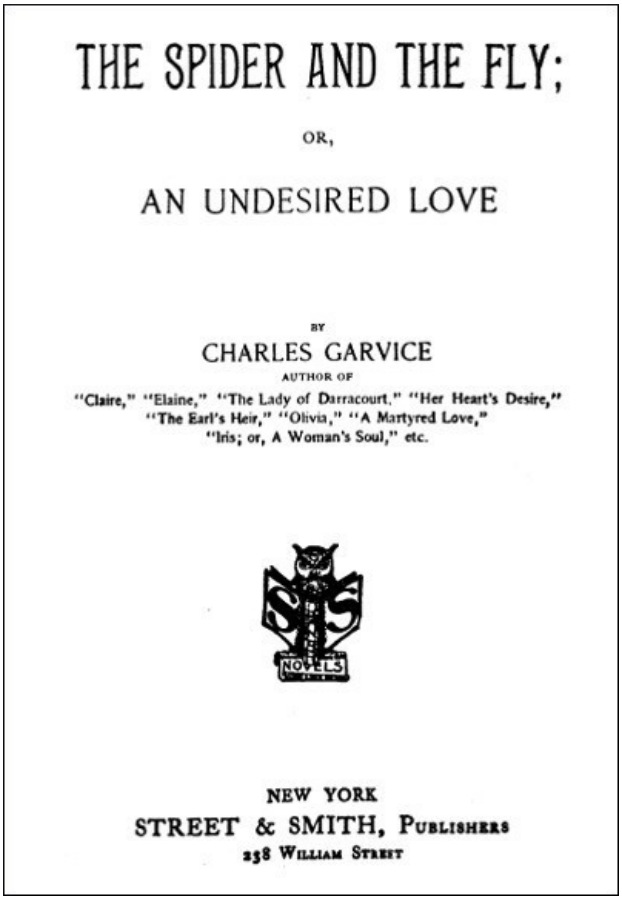

"The Spider and the Fly" is the title under which this story originally appeared, serially, in an English publication.

[5]

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

CHAPTER I.

A SWIM FOR LIFE.

It is sunset; a dusky red is spreading out from the horizon and throwing a duskier reflection upon the sullen sea and its more sullen shore. A weird, awful shore it is, encumbered with huge rocks and strangely hewn stone.

A grim, shuddering waste, made grimmer and more terrible by strange, stray specks of humanity, that, seen in the falling sunlight seemed rather distorted creations of fancy than actual human beings; from stone to stone they pace, stepping with a peculiar, halting, laborious gait, and looking sullenly earthward as if their eyes were chained to the hateful, barren shore and the looking upward were death.

Look closer and gain fresh cause for wonderment. There is a strange likeness in these dim figures. They move alike, their gaze is directed sullenly downward alike, they are dressed alike. A sad, dingy, gray garment, half shirt, half tunic, relieved in all cases by a patch of crimson across the arm, upon which is stamped, in letters of black relief, a number. Their feet are shod with

thick, heavy, iron-soled boots; a coarse, hideous cap is upon their heads, and the hair beneath it is cut almost to the skin.

The faces—ah, no! who could describe those faces? Who can speak of those crime-stamped brows, those passion-distorted lips, and those despairing eyes?

Listen! There is no sound but the sudden crash, crash of the falling stone that the coarse-grained hands are pushing, and the bent, gray-clad shoulders are heaving, from the quarries. One other [6] sound still, heard only at intervals when the stone is silent, and that is the tramp, tramp of the sentries, who, like the figures of Death and Eternity in the old Roman temple, forever, day and night, march to and fro on the battlements, forever, night and day, keeping watch and ward on the terrible, gray-clad figures, that despairingly toil upon the barren plain below.

It is the convict station at Portland, and the figures are the shadows of some of England's vilest criminals.

The sun sinks lower, the warders, stationed at measured intervals between the various gangs, yawn with weary impatience and long for the sound of the prison bell. When that rings, which it will do within half an hour, the gangs will have finished their work for the day and the march for the gloomy prison upon the heights will commence.

The warders yawn impatiently, but the silent, gray-clad figures feel no impatience. They have nothing to long for, nothing to hope for.

One and all toiling on this particular plain toil on till death, and that has been longed for so long that it seems so far off as to be hopeless.

Death comes to men free and happy, but them it seems to avoid; it leaves them to their most awful punishment of life.

The quarter has chimed, the warders have grown more impatient, perhaps less vigilant, or does this tall, thin figure with No. 108 stamped upon his arm only fancy so? For he has broken the rule which says that no man shall separate himself from his particular gang, and is crouching behind a bowlder. Is he resting? His hazel, hunted eyes flash from the nearest warder to the sentinels upon the battlements. His hand grasps the chain at his leg to deaden its rattle as he glides along. His eyes drop from the sentinel and travel swiftly but keenly along the grim rank of the next gang. They rest upon one gray-clad figure numbered ninety-nine. His breath comes faster, he crouches until his breast touches the ground, and, though his lips are too tightly pressed for speech, his eyes seem to speak in the intensity of their gaze.

Perhaps No. 99 feels their gaze, for as he stoops with the gang to heave the hard, cruel stone he [7] lifts his small, villainous eyes and sees the dark, piercing ones fixed so earnestly upon him. A start, imperceptible, thrills through him, and, as he raises his shoulder, he contrives to lift one hand as a signal that he has seen and understands.

No. 108 seems satisfied, he drops his eyes with a sigh, and waits with sullen impatience.

The stone is upheaved. The gang moves round and pauses to gain breath.

A few of the miserable figures drop upon the stones.

No. 99 flings himself sullenly upon the stone behind which crouches No. 108, and so effectually conceals the piercing eyes from the warders' catlike vigilance.

"Jem," says a low, hoarse voice from below the stone. "Can you hear me? Don't turn your head, and speak low."

"I hear," replies No. 99, with a hoarse voice.

"Jem, there's a chance; don't start or I'll kill you. There's a chance, but it wants working. I've been wanting to speak to you for six weeks. Warder No. 24 drinks like a fish. He'll be drunk to-night—to-night at seven. I've the stuff in the corridor. Our cells are opposite. He carries the keys in his breast pocket. At half-past seven to-night, Jem, he or I will be a dead man. You know me and my stroke. If I can get a clear blow with the iron jug and without noise we are free. Once in the corridor with his keys, we can gain this cursed cliff. Don't speak—he's looking this way! The tide comes in at ten; we must swim for it—go this minute, or we are lost."

A warder leaps along the stones; No. 99 rises as if rested; No. 108 crawls like a serpent back to his proper gang.

Crash, crash, the last stone is lifted for to-night; the bell chimes the hour, the gangs form with listless, weary sullenness into lines, stalwart warders, well armed, order them sternly to march. Another dreary, hopeless day of toil is done.

The sun has sunk, the red glow has left the sky, darkness has fallen upon the surging sea and barren shore.

The tramp of the sentinels can just be heard above the rattle of the falling beach. It is too dark to see them, but two figures are crawling under the beetling cliffs, they crawl hand in hand, fearful [8] of losing each other for a moment. Not a word is spoken, their movement makes no sound. Five, ten, twenty minutes pass, and then they stop and draw long, husky gasps of relief.

"Jem," says one, "where are we?"

No. 99 shakes his head and peers into the darkness.

"Under the cliff," returns the other. "Right under the guardhouse, I think; if so, far enough."

"Quite far enough, captain," is the hoarse reply. "And now we are here, what's the next move?"

The other remains silent for a moment, while he fumbles at his leg, then touches his breast and face.

"What's the matter, guv'nor, are you hurt?"

"A little," is the reply. "I'm bleeding like an ox."

No. 99 emits a grim, guttural laugh.

"There's enough of that with both on us," he says. "It's like our luck as the beast should turn. I thought you'd struck him straight, too, guv'nor."

"So did I," is the curt retort. "No matter; we are here and that's luck enough."

"But we can't stop here."

"We must till the tide's up, and it's coming now, half an hour and the fishing yawls will be in front of us."

His companion shudders.

"The fishing yawls!" he repeats. "D'ye mean we're to swim for them, guv'nor, through this, in the pitch dark? Why, it's death!"

"Or freedom. Death! Jem, my man, you're worse than an idiot. What's the name you'll give to what we've left behind us? If that's life, we take death, Jem, and be thankful for it."

As he speaks, with a bitterness beyond description, he stoops and fumbles at his leg again. The sharp ears of his companion catch the grating of steel on iron.

"What's that, guv'nor?"

"A file," was the reply.

"Where did you get it from?" asks the other, with undisguised astonishment.

"I made it, Jem," replies his companion, quietly.

"What with?"

"An old piece of iron and my brains. It's a good one; try it for yourself." [9]

As he speaks, he shakes the horrible link of iron from his foot and passes the instrument to the other.

No. 99 takes it, with a muttered oath.

"You're a wonderful man, captain, a wonderful man. There ain't nothing as you can't do—or won't do if we gets clear of this frightful torment. I'll be sworn, the game's all planned out a'ready."

"It is," replies the other, with quiet coolness.

The grating of the file stops for a moment.

"I thought so! S'help me, if I didn't! Might a humble pal, as has always stood by you, captain, ask what the move is? It 'u'd pass the time away and keep the shivers off. There's a curse in the very air o' this place that cramps a man's heart and a'most chokes him. Tell us the plot, captain. I'm yourn, and you know it."

The captain looks into the darkness before him in silence for a moment; then, speaking in the whisper above which their voices had never for a moment been raised, he says:

"I'll tell you, Jem, as we swim together, as you say. We must, taking all things into consideration, and so—Jem, give me your hand."

The man he called Jem feels about in the darkness until his hard-grimed hand is clasped in the softer one of his companion, and waits silently.

"I'm going to take your oath," says the captain, coolly. "Swear that you'll follow me faithfully—as, to give you your due, you always have done—right to the end of what is to come. Swear it, Jem, and I'll open up the game. You'll keep your oath, I know, because I'll swear at the same time that this hand of mine shall wring your neck if you break it. You swear?"

"I swear, captain!" replies Jem, hoarsely. "I've never played you false yet, captain. Would it pay me to do it now after this little bout? Would it pay me, I asks yer?"

"No; now nor ever. Come closer; these cursed cliffs seem to me to have ears. Keep a look out all round. I'm watching for the lights of the fishing yawls."

"All right, captain," replies the other, eagerly. "Go on, if it's only for talking's sake," and he shivers under the strain of long-sustained fear and excitement.

"You're right, Jem, I have a game on the board already. It wouldn't be me if I hadn't. It's a good game, too, and worth playing. Better than the last, which landed us here—not so risky, either. Did I ever tell you where I came from? No? Well, it isn't likely, when I come to think of it. I am not one of the communicative sort. What do you say to India—to Madras? I am a captain, Jem, by something more than courtesy. Captain Murpoint's a good enough name and title, and they're my real ones. They'll do again, too." [10]

For a moment he relapses into silence, his eyes scanning the sea before. Then he takes up the thread again, in a tone rather of soliloquy than communication; but his companion, though

apparently forgotten, listens eagerly.

"Five years ago I was the most popular man in Madras. You cannot understand all that short sentence means, my friend; no matter. I was a rich man—as men went—and could count friends by the score. If there had been fewer friends and less whist I might not have been here; who knows? No one, and no one cares; not even I myself. Madras! I see it now. Bah! A high-flown description of the presidency would be lost on you, Jem, and it is a rule of mine to waste nothing. At Madras, among the host of friends, some of whom plundered me, and some of whom I had the extreme happiness to plunder, was one, the best and bravest of the lot, John Mildmay——"

"John Mildmay," repeats the man, Jem, to show his companion that he is listening carefully.

"John Mildmay, a merchant, a prince among merchants, with a fortune in England, India—and I know not where else also. He was a fine fellow, but simple—simple as a schoolgirl, and too bountifully supplied with those awkward incumbrances called feelings. We were bosom friends. I borrowed his money, and he loved me too well to remind me of the debt—you understand that, Jem—that is something within your comprehension."

Jem chuckles with hoarse enjoyment.

"He made me his confidant—told me everything of his own affairs and a great deal of other people's. He had a daughter. I remember her name—Violet. Beautiful, he said she was; but that goes for nothing. I'll be bound, my friend, that you would have called a bantam of your own, [11]
though it copied every one of your extremely plain features, a swan. The mother was dead, there was only one relation of any consequence—an aunt, and Jack Mildmay loved this little girl better than he did me—and that's saying a good deal. One night—when we were sitting in the veranda of his mansion on the hills, watching the Brahmins at their prayers, he declared his intention of making me the sole guardian of this girl. He prayed me—if anything happened to him—to be a second father to her, or at least a brother, considering that he was so much older than I. I swore—readily enough—that I'd watch over her like a guardian angel, and, after drawing tears from him by my fervid eloquence, delicately borrowed a hundred pounds. Poor Jack! we never saw each other again. A special messenger arrived that night with news from England. His business—an enormous one—required his presence to tide over an emergency, and with a hasty handshake, he left me, reminding me of my promise, and declaring his intention to draw up on parchment the declaration of his wishes as to my guardianship over his daughter.

"'Good-by, old fellow,' he said. 'It's a long journey; but I feel safe. I've written about you in every letter to my little darling; I shall be able to tell her now what a grand guardian she'll have. Good-by, and Heaven bless you!'

"Jem, my friend, don't believe the good people of this world when they talk of a special providence for honest men; Jack Mildmay was drowned on that homeward voyage, and I, Captain Howard Murpoint, was left to live and rot in a convict station.

"Yes, the ship went down, and soon after Captain Howard Murpoint went down likewise. I got tired of the army; that's the mild way of putting it, though if the truth must be spoken, the army got tired of me—or rather my wonderful luck at cards. You know my little trick with the ace? Enough. It suited me to cut the military life. How was I to do it? A fool would have deserted and got shot. I, not being a fool, managed differently. There was a slight skirmish on the frontier one moonlight night. My men were cut to pieces like packthread. I, by a miracle, escaped. Walking [12]
over the corpse-strewn field, one of those happy thoughts which are the inspiration of knaves, struck me. My corporal, a good fellow, had fallen at his post. I knew it was my corporal by his accoutrements, his face and features had been obliterated by a cannon ball. Supposing, was my thought, that Captain Howard Murpoint's regimentals were upon that poor fellow, then every one would say that the said Captain Murpoint had fallen with glory and honor, and that the missing corporal had either been carried away by the Sepoys or deserted.

"Jem, my friend, I lost not a moment, but there and then exchanged clothes with the corpse, threw a cloak over my new corporal's regimentals and started for the coast.

"I reached Paris—unfortunately for the Parisians. When Paris grew too hot I gracefully fluttered to my native land. My native land for eighteen months proved as rich a harvest as a man of talent could wish.

"During those eighteen months I cleared—no matter—it is all gone, swallowed up in that fiasco. Idiot that I was to descend to the level of such poor vermin as you! What could I expect? Were these hands made for burglary, were these brains? Bah! this is wasting time. Some sweet friends of yours persuaded me to change my line, and I came to grief; dragging you in for revenge's sake. Plain truth, you see, Jem. I scorn to tell a falsehood—when there is nothing to be got by it. Transportation for life! It was a hard sentence, and I wished when I heard it, and a hundred times since, that they had not balked Jack Ketch. I wished it every day till a week ago.

"What changed me? A mere bagatelle. A newspaper. A year-old newspaper, which that lout of a warder had dropped from his pocket. I snatched it up and hid it in my bosom. It would lighten many a hateful hour in that horrible cell. I opened it next morning, and the first words my eyes rested on were:

"'Grand Fête at Mildmay Park, Penruddie.—On the occasion of Miss Mildmay's sixteenth birthday a large party of personal friends and the tenants of the Mildmay estate was gathered at the Park, where most extensive preparations have been for some time in progress to insure success for the [13]
various festivities. In the morning the numerous gayly dressed visitors gave themselves with a zest to the enjoyment of archery, boating and the subtleties of croquet. In the evening the grand

hall—which was decorated by Owen Jones—was opened for a ball to which invitations to the number of two hundred had been issued. It is needless to say that the whole affair was brilliantly successful, and that the twelfth of July will be a white stone in the lives of Miss Mildmay's tenants and those fortunate friends who were enabled to partake of her hospitality. Miss Mildmay is at present staying, in company with her aunt, Mrs. W. Mildmay, at her residence, Mildmay Park.'

"That is something like it, Jem—all glitter and sparkle, diamonds and rubies. I swear, much as I reveled in that greasy paper a moment before, I could not read another line of it. Every time I tried my eyes looked back to Mildmay Park and the wealthy Miss Mildmay.

"This Violet was to have been my ward, and Jack's money, his enormous estates, ay, the very diamonds she wore, were to have been under my charge. What an opportunity I had lost! With such a chance, what might I not have accomplished? I might have feathered my nest, ay, have filled it even, with every penny of Jack's gold; for what was a puny little bit of a girl to count for?—if I had been free. Free! that was the word, and it haunted me. One day it rang in my ears, making a chorus to the grand doings at Mildmay Park, and at last I swore that I'd give this place the slip or die in the attempt. Once away from here—once in England, the way to Jack Mildmay's gold is as plain as the road to Rome. I am once more Captain Murpoint. I turn up, looking the gentleman that I am, at the Park in the character of her father's friend. She knows all about me, remembers me almost as well as she does her father. Keeps all his letters, those letters in which he tells her that he is hunting, fighting, playing, or dining with his dear Murpoint, on her bosom, perhaps. Here is dear Murpoint, and she welcomes me to Mildmay Park with open arms and a shower of tears."

There was a moment's pause; Jem crept closer to the daring schemer.

"And me, captain? You won't forget me?" [14]

"No; you go with me as my servant. No thanks. I shouldn't take you if I didn't want you, my friend. I never did a generous action in my life, I leave that for idiots. I want you for a hundred things. I want a man who is completely under my thumb—in my power. You are in both those situations, so I help you to escape and take you with me. If you have any gratitude, keep it bottled up, don't let it evaporate in words. Well?"

The man mutters something, faintly.

"But, captain, is that all the game? Don't we hold no more cards than that? It seems a chance, a regular chance."

"And what else is life?" says the captain, with a short laugh of contempt. "But those are not all the cards. Even to you, my bosom friend, I do not choose to show my whole hand. Enough that I hold sufficient cards to play the game, and that I have sufficient brains to win it. You, my poor Jem, have neither cards nor brains! Stop! what's that?" and his low, subtle voice sinks to a sharp hiss.

"That's the light of the fishing smack," hoarsely returns his companion.

"Not that, idiot!" is the retort, in a sharper voice. "That up above. A thousand fiends! It is the moon!"

A smothered cry breaks from the parched lips of the convict Jem.

He springs to his feet, then falls to the ground with a quiver of excitement.

"Captain, we are lost! In two minutes it will be like day! The soldiers can see every speck on the water for a mile round!"

"Silence!" cries the captain, crouching so motionless that his gray-clad figure looks part and parcel of the rock against which it presses. "The tide is in. That is the smack before us. Swim like the fiend! If we reach it we are safe. I have enough to bribe them. Swim for liberty and life!—now!"

And, with the word, he rises to his feet, leaps over the patch of beach that intervenes between cliff and sea, and plunges into the foremost wave.

His companion follows, and not a moment too soon.

The moon that had been battling with the dark mass of clouds, rises conqueror at last, and swims majestically into the clear heavens, lighting up the sea till it glows like a plain of diamonds. [15]

Not a moment too soon, for the monotonous tramp, tramp of the nearest sentinel upon the ramparts above is suddenly broken, and his sharp voice gives the challenge:

"Who goes there?"

For answer the moon shoots a bright beam of light full upon the dark figures swimming toward the smack.

With a shout of alarm, the sentinel brings his musket to his shoulder.

"Dive!" hisses the white lips of the captain.

Crack! ping! and a bullet cleaves the air.

Another moment, and the rampart is alive.

Lights flash to and fro, showing up for a moment the excited faces of the soldiers.

Shouts of warning and anger break through the silence and affright the seagulls.

Then an officer's voice rises above the din.

"There they are, close by the smack! Ready—present!—fire!"

Crack! crack! crack!

"Ah! that's got them! There they go—eh, what? couldn't see them?" says the commandant, angrily, repeating the hesitating suggestion of a subordinate that the moon was obscured and that he couldn't see the men as he fired. "Nonsense! You winged them right enough. Anyway, we must say we did. There have been too many escapes lately to allow of any more. We shall have the authorities down upon us for negligence. It's a singular thing that I can't run down to the town to get a rubber at whist but that somebody must go to sleep. It isn't often I take a little pleasure, but sure as I leave my post for an hour or two some foolhardy or sleepy-headed warder lets one of those vermin get away. There's warder No. 24 got his back broken, and the Lord Harry knows what. Serves him right! It must be hushed up, mind! There have been too many escapes lately by far. If there's any inquiring, mind you winged them twice, and they are dead as nails at the bottom of the sea."

The sentinels give the salute, and the officer starts off to finish the interrupted rubber. [16]

Next morning the official whose business it was to draw up such statements reported that convicts Nos. 108 and 99 had attempted escape, but were shot down by the sentinel while swimming toward a fishing smack.

CHAPTER II.

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB.

In the drawing-room at Mildmay Park was seated, in her own particular easy-chair, Mrs. Henry Mildmay.

Mrs. Henry Mildmay was a lady of that good old sort of whom our modern demoiselles are rather tired of receiving as models for imitation. Herself ladylike and *distingué* in feature, dress and manner, slight of figure, delicate of hand and more delicate of nerve, she was deeply imbued with a love of good birth, elegant manners and a large income, all of which she possessed in a fair and comfortable degree.

Mrs. Mildmay was John Mildmay's only sister, and at his death she had undertaken the sole charge of his daughter Violet, whom she loved as a daughter, and by whom she was beloved in return as a mother, with just this difference, that, whereas, the dear old lady was rather afraid of her beautiful, high-spirited ward, the girl was as fearless as a lioness, and gave her love unalloyed and unshadowed.

Violet Mildmay had inherited the brave, simple nature of the merchant prince, and was a realization of that most glorious ideal—a pure-minded, tender-hearted English girl.

Mrs. Mildmay was knitting—a favorite amusement, or occupation, as she would have dignified it, for the results of her pastime were distributed among the Penruddie poor—and sinking into a comfortable doze, from which the sharp striking of an ormolu clock aroused her.

"Dear me!" she murmured, placidly smiling; "dear me, Violet, I was nearly asleep."

The remark finding no answer, the old lady turned in her chair, and found the handsomely furnished room was empty. [17]

"Violet, where are you, my dear? What a restless girl it is. She was here five minutes ago, and now she has gone. Just like poor John, never still ten minutes together."

At that moment the conservatory door was thrown open with a suddenness that made the old lady drop her needle, and a sweet, but full, voice immediately behind her said:

"Whom am I like, auntie?"

"No one in particular, my dear," faltered the old lady, with a pleasant smile and a "Thank you" for the needle, which the owner of the voice had sprung forward to recover before the old lady could stoop.

"Where have you been, my dear? I did not know you had left the room."

"No? Only on the lawn. It was so hot in here, and you were falling so comfortably asleep that I thought I would creep away before it was too late, for I know I frighten you if I move when you are fast asleep, auntie mine. Am I not careful now? Am I not improving?"

"You are everything that is good and dear, Violet," said the old lady, stroking the girl's head, as it leaned itself to a level with her white hand. "But don't sit on the floor, my love, you will crease that pretty muslin."

"Shall I?" said the sweet voice, absently, and Violet sprang to her feet.

Her aunt, with another little start—she started on the average twice in every ten minutes when her niece was near—looked up with mild nervousness at the tall, graceful figure, her gaze gradually changing to one of affectionate admiration.

And who could withhold admiration?

There was beauty in the cleanly cut, oval face, with its clear, brunette skin and deep, brown eyes;

there were youth, strength, grace in the undulating charm about the girl, her figure, voice, and gesture, which enthralled young and old of both sexes and demanded admiration rather than won it.

"My poor dress," she said, with a laughing pout. "He was—is a dress a he or a she, auntie?—I'll say 'it,' was so clean and stately only this morning, and now! Look, that is water. The fish leaped [18] out of the fountain and Tray has pawed me with his wet feet. It's no use my trying to be good, you see, dear, circumstances are too strong for me," and, with a musical, rippling laugh, the light-hearted girl ran to the open piano.

The old lady sighed, but with a smile.

"I am almost beginning to think they are, Violet," she said, in her low-pitched voice, so great a contrast to the full, melodious one of the girl.

"No; you will never make me anything better than an untutored savage, auntie. You've tried so hard, so very hard, to teach me how to enter a room, steal from chair to chair, lower my voice, and smile properly. But all in vain, I can't be a model young lady, and I am always making you jump."

"Not jump, my dear."

"Well, start, then? It is all the same, auntie. Fancy you jumping! Now, I can jump. I jumped over the brook. No, not quite," and here the laugh rang out again, "but almost quite. Poor Marie, she has hard times with me. Do you know, I shouldn't like to be lady's-maid to Miss Violet Mildmay; no, not for all the mines of Peru—or is it Patagonia?"

Without waiting for an answer, she struck a chord, and dashed into a waltz.

That came to an end, however, as suddenly as it commenced, and the graceful figure was on its feet.

"It is too hot to play, is it not? How can you knit such weather as this? It makes me boil, yes, actually boil, to watch you!"

"Don't watch me, then, my dear," suggested the old lady, mildly. "Go and sit in the arbor. It will be cool there in the shade."

"Well, I will. But I warn you, auntie, I shan't sit long. I never can sit still long. I'll try the arbor, though," and, catching up her rustic hat, which for the nonce had fallen from her lovely young head to a little rest on the floor, the restless girl swept in a wave of muslin and tulle from the room.

Mrs. Mildmay rose, folded her knitting into a neat little ball, stored it away in a neat little basket, and was about to quit the room, but before she could open the door Violet had run through the [19] conservatory again.

"Well, my dear?" said the old lady, patiently.

"Too hot in the arbor, auntie," said the girl, with a charming and decisive shake of her head. "The lawn is absolutely simmering. I shall go on the cliffs."

"My dear, you will be roasted! Come and sit in the shade here, in my chair."

"Oh! then I should be suffocated. No, I'll try the cliffs. What is the time? Just time for a quiet stroll. Good-by."

"Stop, my dear Violet. Pray don't go without your sunshade! You will be burned up!"

"Right. I'd forgotten that stupid old thing. Where is it? Let me see—where did I throw it?"

And she stood in the middle of the room, swinging her hat to and fro, and fanning herself.

"Is that it under the piano?" said Mrs. Mildmay, pointing to the sunshade where it lay, ignominiously entangled with the legs of the instrument.

"Yes, that is it. What dear, sharp eyes you have, auntie. Come along, sunshade! It's rather hard that you, being so much the weaker, should be burned to save me."

And with another happy nod and smile away she floated again, her long, diaphanous skirt whisking a current of cool air through the room and just escaping the overturning of a table of bric-a-brac by an inch.

The cliffs to which Miss Mildmay bent her steps were within five minutes' walk of the lawn, and were one of the young lady's favorite promenades.

From them, looking seaward, she could feast her eyes upon the ocean, ever restless and sportful, like herself; turning landward there jutted far a fair stretch of well-wooded scenery, with Mildmay House in the foreground, and the sparkling Tivor, where it ran in a semicircle toward the sea as a belt to inclose the whole.

On a part of this there stood another house, larger even and more pretentious than Mildmay's. This was the Cedars, a modern residence of yellow brick and stucco erected at enormous cost by a certain Jabez Dodson, who had amassed a large fortune by the melting and manufacturing of [20] tallow.

The Cedars and its inhabitants were the objects of Mrs. Mildmay's supreme detestation. Loving good birth and high breeding as she did, it was only natural that tallow should be detestable to her, and that the large and altogether hideous house which the retired tradesman had erected

should be a perpetual eyesore to her.

Often, as the sunset lit up the yellow edifice, bringing out all its ugly points with unmerciful distinctness, the good old lady had spoken from her heart, and, with a sigh that shook the bugles in her cap, she had regretted that Providence had not been kind or considerate enough to allure Mr. Dodson's fancy to a more distant spot.

"That house spoils the view and gives me the horrors, my dear," she would often say, but never meeting with any further sympathy from Violet than expressed by a laugh.

"It is ugly, I'll admit," she would remark, "but you need not look at it so often."

"I can't help it, my dear," the old lady would avow, "I am fascinated by it. I am so glad that the dreadful man did not build his monstrosity during your poor father's lifetime. It would have been a cruel blow to him. I can't think why he didn't secure all the land around. Then you would have been safe from such a visitation. Fancy a tallow chandler or melter, or whatever he calls himself, setting up a habitation within a stone's throw of your drawing-room window."

Violet would laugh again, with pleasant enjoyment of her aunt's pet aversion.

"It doesn't very much matter, that I can see, aunt, after all," she had once urged. "Of course, it would be better without the Cedars, but, to give Mr. Dodson his due, the family have never annoyed us. I have never seen them, even. I scarcely know how many there are of them; do you?"

Mrs. Mildmay shook her head in the negative, but a nod in the affirmative showed she was doubtful.

"I think there are only the father, mother, and one son. But I have never seen them, at least, I think not."

"Nor I," said Violet. "So, you see, they are not such dreadful characters, after all. Poor people, I [21] dare say, they are as constantly deploring the nearness of the Park, and declaring that we spoil their view—which we certainly do."

"How absurd!" said Mrs. Mildmay. "Violet, I really believe you do not dislike them half so much as one would expect."

"Wicked as I am, I can't hate people I have never seen," Violet here laughingly replied.

And in like manner she always turned her aunt's disparagement of the Cedars aside, and contrived to say a word for the obnoxious individuals whom she had never seen.

This morning as she stood on the edge of the cliff, looking first out to sea and then at the sweet landscape, a smile rested for a moment upon her face, and her lips murmured:

"Poor auntie, if she could see the Cedars now! It looks as if the tallow which built it had caught fire. It makes me hotter than ever to look at it!"

And, with a little flutter of her dainty handkerchief, she seated herself upon the dried-up grass and turned her eyes seaward again.

As she sat thus she formed a picture beautiful enough to gladden the eyes of a Veronese in her glorious youth and loveliness, standing out in its cloud of airy muslin against the vividness of the summer sky.

Perhaps an individual slowly climbing the steep path behind her was of the same opinion, for he stopped in his laborious ascent, and, baring his well-shaped head to the slight breeze, stood, lost in an admiring reverie.

How long he would have indulged in his admiring observations it would be difficult to say, but his reverie was suddenly disturbed and his fixed regard turned aside in some confusion by the movement of Violet's head.

She had been watching a seagull, and following the bird's progress with her eyes, and had suddenly become aware of the proximity of the stranger and of the fixed and admiring regard of his two dark eyes.

Almost too suddenly, for, with something that nearly approached a start, she half rose.

Regretting the movement before it was complete, she reseated herself, and in so doing loosened [22] her hold of the sunshade, which, with the perversity of such things, instantly took advantage of its freedom to sail over the cliff.

Violet sprang to her feet, and thoughtlessly was about to peer over the precipice in search of it, but before she had reached the extreme edge she felt a strong hand upon her arm, and, turning with some astonishment, found herself face to face with the observant stranger.

For a moment they regarded each other in silence. It is worthy of notice how much and how acutely the eye can comprehend in so short a time.

Violet saw a handsome face, tanned and mustached, a tall, lithe figure, to whose strength the grasp upon her arm bore witness, a pair of earnest, fearless eyes, and a mouth which might have been grave but for the smile which made it remarkably pleasant.

"Pray, forgive me!" said the gentleman, removing his hat with his disengaged hand. "But have you fully considered the danger which attends a downward glance from this height?"

The tone was respectful, almost reverently so, but there was a dignity and a nameless music in it also that carried it even further in one's liking.

Violet blushed like a schoolgirl, as she would have expressed it and, without a word, stepped back from the danger which she certainly had not considered, and which, by the light of the gentleman's question, was now fully revealed.

"I thank you very much," she said, as his strong hand dropped from her arm, and the stranger's face allowed itself to relax into a smile. "It was foolish and thoughtless, I," and she shuddered, "I might have fallen over. People have been known to, have they not?"

"Yes, a great many," he replied. "The strongest brain might be excused a sudden dizziness on the edge of such a precipice as this."

"Of course," assented Violet, laughing, but very quietly. "I am so much obliged; I thought only of my stupid sunshade."

"Ah!" he said, quietly, "I had forgotten that. Perhaps it has lodged on one of the jutting bushes; if [23] it has, I may recover it for you," and he approached the edge.

Violet, who had not quite recovered from the shock which the sudden sense of her peril had produced, uttered a slight cry of warning and rebuke.

"Oh, please do not look over! It is of no consequence, not the slightest in the world."

The gentleman looked back at her alarmed face, then up at the blazing sun, and smiled significantly.

"It is of great consequence," he said, and before Violet could say another word to prevent him, he had gained the edge and was upon his knees, looking over.

"I can see it," he said, "and I think I can get it. The danger was not so great, after all; there are one or two ledges here which will bear a man's weight, I should think, and below them is your sunshade."

While he was speaking, he was cautiously, but fearlessly, lowering himself onto one of the ledges of which he had spoken, and Violet's horrified eyes lost first his legs, then his body, and last of all his good-looking face, as it disappeared below the edge.

Rooted to the spot with terror which she in vain struggled to suppress, Violet grew white as death and almost as cold.

At last her terror found utterance in a deep-drawn moan.

"Oh! come back! Please come back! I am sure you will be killed! It is horrible! Do come back!"

While she was still entreating and commanding the handsome, careless face arose above the surface again, and, with slow, cautious movements, the stranger, with the recovered sunshade in his hand, was beside her.

Violet drew a long breath of relief, and then, with a smile that was better than all the thanks in the world, said:

"I won't thank you, for I think you were more foolish than even I. You said it was dangerous to look over, and you actually went over! And all for this stupid, worthless thing." And she shook the sunshade with annoyance.

"Not altogether for the sunshade," said the gentleman, smiling again. "But I am glad I have got it for you, and I assure you the danger was less than I at first imagined it; indeed, for me there was [24] no danger. I am blessed with a steady nerve, and have had some experience in mountaineering."

Violet looked down, and then up at his calm face.

"It was very good and kind of you," she said, "and I will thank you, after all, I think." Then she made a movement, which he took in intimation that he might say good-day, and, accordingly, he raised his hat—or, rather, would have done so, had not the wind saved him the trouble.

"How provoking!" said Violet, looking after the hat, as it sailed over the cliff, in imitation of the sunshade. "I am afraid there is a fatality about this spot. I do hope you will not go down after it, too!"

"No, indeed!" he said, with a light, pleasant laugh; "my hat is really of no consequence——"

"Oh! but of more than my parasol! You have nothing to protect your head, and the sun is quite as hot as it was five minutes ago." And she smiled naïvely.

"True," he said. "But my head is used to scorching; in fact, rather likes it."

"You must take my sunshade," said Violet, with provoking gravity.

"No, thank you," he said, imitating the gravity and suppressing the smile. "I do not dread the sunstroke, and I have but a few steps to go," nodding to the blazing Cedars.

Violet was guilty of an unmistakable start.

"The Cedars!" she exclaimed, extending her beautiful eyes to their widest, "but you are not——" and she paused as if absolutely too astonished to conclude the sentence.

"My name is Leicester Dodson," said the gentleman, a slight, but not imperceptible reserve showing upon his face, and in the tone of his voice as he spoke.

"Mr. Dodson's son!" said Violet, slowly, as if the intelligence were too astonishing to be taken in instanter.

The gentleman bowed.

"Mr. Dodson's and Mrs. Dodson's son," he said, with a smile.

For a moment Violet stood still; then her face lit up with its delicious smile, and, with a frank gesture, she held out her hand. [25]

"Then we are neighbors," she said, as Mr. Leicester Dodson, with as much surprise as his courtesy would allow his face to express, took the well-shaped, little hand. "I am Miss Mildmay."

Mr. Leicester dropped her hand as if it had grown red-hot and had burned him. Violet colored then, but understood his gesture of repudiation instantly. "He knows how aunt dislikes his people, and is sorry he rescued my sunshade," she thought.

"I am happy to have been of some slight service to you, Miss Mildmay," he said, coldly, with a careless but distant bow; then he turned and walked slowly down the steep path.

Violet, looking down after him until his bare head had dropped slowly out of sight, then said, audibly:

"Well, that is pride now; but it is proper pride, I think," smiled rather sadly, and returned homeward.

"Aunt!" she said, coming into the drawing-room just before dinner was served, and more quietly than was her wont, "I've had an adventure on the cliffs, startling and melodramatic. My sunshade blew over, and a gentleman was polite enough to go after it."

"My dear!" exclaimed the old lady, thinking it one of her darling's jokes.

"It's true, aunt. A stranger risked his neck—precious, no doubt, to himself and family—for a fifteen-and-six-penny sunshade. Imprudent, but heroic, was it not?"

"Very good and kind, but imprudent, as you say, my dear. Young men are so rash!"

"This one was not," said Violet, picking at the costly fringe on her dress; "he was as calm and cool as—as—a cucumber."

"A stranger," said Mrs. Mildmay, smiling. "Whom can it be, I wonder? Somebody staying at the Wenningfords, no doubt."

"Aunt!" said Violet; then suddenly changing the subject, "do not the vicar and his wife dine with us on Saturday?"

"Yes, my dear, and I have asked Mr. and Mrs. Giles. The vicar is a dear, good man, but——"

"Rather a bore," put in Violet, decidedly. [26]

Mrs. Mildmay looked shocked, but Violet, without waiting for a reprimand, went on, with slow and most unusual gravity:

"Do you know, aunt, I should like to ask this heroic gentleman of mine?"

"A perfect stranger, my dear!" said Mrs. Mildmay, with a smile.

"Yes, a perfect stranger, but a gentleman. Perfect strangers who are gentlemen, and heroic enough to risk their lives for one's sunshade, are people worth knowing. Aunt, ask him. He is tall, rather dark, goldeny-brown, you know, nice eyes, a yellow mustache and—I think that's all I remember—I was going to mention the smile but, of course, he may not always wear that."

"I don't remember him, my dear," said Mrs. Mildmay. "But if you really want to know him I'll try and find out who he is from the servants."

"And ask him to dinner?" urged Violet.

Mrs. Mildmay looked bewildered and puzzled.

"Yes, my dear, if you wish it, and he really belongs to the Wenningfords."

"I do wish it, aunt," said Violet. "But he doesn't belong to the Wenningfords. He belongs to the Cedars, and is no other than Mr. Leicester Dodson, the tallow melter's son!"

It is Saturday evening, and Mrs. Mildmay's little dinner is in progress.

There are the vicar and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Giles from the Ferns, and, wonderful to say, the Dodsons from the Cedars.

Miss Violet had, as usual, had her way with her aristocratic aunt, and the Dodsons are here.

For a whole day Mrs. Mildmay, with tears in her eyes, declared that she would not call at the Cedars; and it was not until Violet had, with greater firmness, vowed that she would go to the Cedars by herself rather than not at all, that the good old lady had given in.

And when they had called, and Mrs. Dodson had accepted the invitation for herself and two menfolk, Violet had still further worried her aunt by declaring that the Dodsons, though they were tallow melters, were not snobs, and that for her part she saw nothing to find fault with in Mrs. Dodson save, perhaps, rather a redundancy of color in her morning cap. [27]

"Which, my dear aunt," Violet said, in conclusion, "is an error in taste not confined to tallow chandlers."

So there they are. Mr. Dodson, the father, a quiet, mild-eyed old gentleman, with a partiality for clear soup; Mrs. Dodson, a smiling, homely looking lady, with a devouring admiration for her son; and the son, Mr. Leicester himself, with no particularly prominent virtues or vices save that of silence.

He had scarcely spoken a word during the soup and the fish, and Violet had almost made up her mind that he was too proud and unforgiving, and was prepared to dislike him, when suddenly he, looking across the table, met her questioning glance, and with a smile dispelled his gravity or ill humor as a mist evaporates before the midday sun, broke out into conversation.

Then Violet understands that he is not only heroic but amusing, that he is handsomer even than she had thought him, and that, above all, his manner, speech, and bearing are those of a perfect gentleman.

The *entrées* are passed round and partaken of.

Mr. Leicester is describing the Vicani Pass to Miss Mildmay, and interesting her deeply therein.

Mrs. Dodson is comparing notes with Mrs. Mildmay, and Mr. Dodson is lost in the beauties of a curried fowl, when the butler, a model of solemn propriety, is approached by a footman, with whom he confers in stately, but rather disturbed asides.

"What is it, James?" asks Mrs. Mildmay, who has noticed the conference.

"If you please, ma'am, a gentleman——"

But all explanation is rendered unnecessary by the opening of the door, and the entrance of another servant, who says, with that clear sing-song, proper for the occasion:

"Captain Howard Murpoint!" and, stepping aside, allows a tall, dark gentleman to pass through the doorway.

Conversation immediately ceases.

Dumbly, hostess and guests regard the newcomer; dumbly still, Mrs. Mildmay rises from her [28] chair.

"Captain Murpoint!" she repeats.

"Captain Murpoint!" suddenly echoes Violet, whose quick, thoughtful eyes have been scanning every feature of the dark, pale face from its piercing, black eye to the scar on its left cheek, and its black mustache.

"Captain Murpoint!" she repeats, "my father's dearest friend!"

Captain Murpoint came forward, with a smile evidently struggling against some emotion, and met her halfway, taking her outstretched hands, and, looking with what may well pass for tear-dimmed eyes into her pure, youthful face.

"And you are John Mildmay's daughter!" he exclaims, in a tremulous voice. "Poor Jack, poor Jack!" and evidently overcome by the likeness or some memory of the past, Captain Murpoint, after wringing the girl's slight hand, conveys his own to his eyes and—weeps!

CHAPTER III.

THE RETURNED CAPTIVE.

In the few minutes consumed by Captain Murpoint in mastering the emotion which the sight of his old friend's daughter had produced, Mrs. Mildmay had recovered from her astonishment, and, with her well-bred composure still a little shaken, came forward, with outstretched hand.

"And is it, indeed, poor John's old friend, Captain Murpoint?" she said, with a little smile.

"It is, indeed," said the captain, taking her hand, and bending over it with graceful *empressement*. "Alas, that I should return to find his place empty! Yet scarcely empty, for here is a beautiful reflection of my dear friend's face and form."

And he turned his eyes with affectionate admiration upon Violet again.

Mrs. Mildmay sighed, then quickly called his attention to her guests.

"We have got half through dinner, Captain Murpoint, as you see, but I am sure my friends will not [29] mind a little extension of the meal, while fresh courses are prepared. Let me introduce you. Mrs. Dodson, this is an old friend of Violet's father, consequently a dear friend of ours, Captain Murpoint."

The captain's quick, black eyes rested for a moment upon her and Mrs. Dodson's physiognomies while the introduction was being made; as quickly passed over Mr. and Mrs. Giles' and the vicar's, but rested a little longer when Mr. Leicester's turn came, and grew more searching in their expression as they met the calm regard of the young man.

But the keenness of the scrutiny—for it was nothing more nor less—was tempered by a smile. Captain Murpoint possessed the rare art of smiling well.

"I beg that you will not delay the meal, nor change a single course. I am a case-hardened traveler, and too used to short fare to think anything of the loss of soup and fish. Indeed, my dear madam, if you will pardon me for a few moments I will exchange these dusty and really disgraceful garments for something more orthodox and suitable."

Mrs. Mildmay bowed graciously, and turned to a footman.

"I have brought my man with me—a faithful fellow, who has been my companion in fair weather

and foul all over the globe," said the captain, moving toward the door. "Pray, let me implore you not to spoil your dinner."

So saying, he passed through the doorway, outside which, eying the elegant room with a satisfied and comprehensive gaze, stood the grim-faced, sharp-eyed "faithful fellow," the captain's servant.

Violet had not spoken a single word save those she had addressed to the captain. A sweet, solemn gravity had settled upon her fair, young face, brought there by the memories of her father, which this stranger's arrival had called up.

She sighed when his soft, pleasing voice had died away, and turned almost with a start to her neighbor, Mr. Leicester.

"How strange—is it not?" she said. [30]

"Very," said Mr. Leicester, looking at her, thoughtfully. "Captain Murpoint came unexpectedly?"

"Quite," said Violet.

Leicester Dodson toyed with his fork.

"Do you remember him?" he asked.

"I have never seen him before," replied Violet, quietly. "But he is such an old personal friend. My father never wrote me a letter without mentioning him."

Leicester, with all the interest he felt showing plainly in his face, nodded.

"They met in India, of course. Captain Murpoint must be a younger man than Mr. Mildmay would have been."

"Yes," said Violet, "much younger. Papa told me how much once, but I have forgotten."

Then her aunt spoke to her, and Leicester fell into a muse. Captain Murpoint's advent seemed to have struck all his eloquence dumb.

The rest of the guests were chattering with quite a mild excitement, but he sat turning the fork over and following the pattern of the tablecloth with that grim silence which did not sit ill upon him, though it would have made some men look sullen.

Suddenly the hum died out, and Leicester, looking up, saw that Captain Murpoint's re-entrance was the cause.

If Captain Murpoint had looked gentlemanly in his traveling suit he certainly looked distinguished in the orthodox army dress.

Leicester Dodson's eyes, as they watched him take his place between Violet and her aunt, took in every detail of the well-proportioned figure from its breadth of shoulders to the long stretch of arm with its strength-denoting muscular development.

But when he came to regard the face he was startled.

He had, on the captain's first entrance thought him rather handsome, but now, seeing him sideface, he was surprised to find that there was a sinister look about some feature that had an unpleasant effect.

Suddenly the captain turned full face to address Violet, and the displeasing expression had gone.

Then he turned again, and Leicester understood it.

One side of Mr. Murpoint's face was better looking than the other. [31]

On the right side, in a line with the ear, there was a scar—a small white scar—too small one would have thought to have marred the face, but mar it, it certainly did, for, whether the captain smiled or frowned, looked humorous or sad, that scar remained the same—inflexible, white, repulsive, giving the sinister cast to the right side of the face which had startled Leicester.

Was the captain aware of this blot on his beauty?

Certainly that scarred side of his face was not half so often seen as the other, and Leicester, who was observant as well as quiet, noticed that when he was spoken to, the captain invariably turned his left side with a smile to the speaker, and kept it turned until the speaker's gaze was withdrawn.

But Leicester was not allowed to continue his silent examination of Mr. Murpoint's features long, for that gentleman, having blunted his appetite upon the greater portion of a fowl, with a tact which was remarkable, soon engaged the whole table in conversation.

Then he found that he could not only smile well, but talk well also.

He started a topic, chased and ran it to death in a light, graceful way, then raised another.

The spirits of the party, which had grown somewhat low, rose rapidly.

The captain was humorous, and made Miss Mildmay laugh.

Then, with a graceful ease, he veered round into the pathetic—some little Indian story—and the ladies sighed sympathetically.

As suddenly he managed to engage Mr. Leicester Dodson in a discussion on the catacombs, and proved to that gentleman, who knew the East pretty thoroughly, that Egyptian antiquities were also not quite hidden mysteries to the wonderful captain.

All the time he managed to eat in a noiseless, well-bred way about three times as much as any one else, and contrived to divert to his own plate the nice cuts and choice corners of the poultry and saddle of mutton.

He drank, too, with a quiet enjoyment of the good wine, which met with a hearty sympathy from the butler. [32]

"This wine," he said, lifting his glass and bowing to Miss Mildmay with infinite grace, "this wine, my dear friend brought from India—eh? my dear young lady?" turning to Violet. "Many and many glasses have your father and I drank in the hot sunset. I have a wonderful memory for wine and faces. Do you know," he broke off, suddenly, addressing Leicester, who was regarding him with his quiet, earnest gaze, "I fancy that I have seen you before? Have I?"

"I can't say. 'Tis possible," said Leicester. "Have you any recollection beyond the indistinct surmise?"

"N—o," said the captain, hesitating. "Were you ever in India?"

"No," said Leicester. "I have traveled through the East, and know the Continent and England pretty well."

"There you have the advantage of me," said the captain, setting his wineglass down, and looking round at the attentive faces. "I left my native land when a boy of eighteen, and returned only two days since."

"Ah," said the vicar, in his nervous, jerky style, "then you have much to see, Captain Murpoint. England is small, but precious in beauty. It can compare creditably with any other spot on earth, even in its most unfair and ill features. What is softer and more beautiful than Devonshire? What more grand than the Cornish cliffs? Ay, even in picturesque business it would be difficult to eclipse our little island. We defy you to find in any other part of the globe so weird and grotesque a piece of scenery as the Portland wastes."

The captain, with a smile, had turned his left side to the well-meaning, but rather long-winded cleric, and the butler was filling his glass with the wine which he had so highly praised.

Suddenly, as the vicar's neatly turned sentence came to a close, the captain's face turned and presented the left side, which was as white as the scar itself.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the butler, for the captain, in turning his head, had also moved his hand and spilled some of the wine.

"All right, my good fellow," he said, good-naturedly, and stooped to wipe the wine from his coat. Then, looking up as placid and smiling as before, he added, "Portland! Let me see, that is on the south coast, is it not? A—er—convict station?" [33]

"Yes," said the vicar. "A most interesting place, and well worth a visit. If you think of making an English tour, you should by all means take it *en route*."

"Thanks," said the captain, with an air of gratitude. "It's a good suggestion." Then he rose to open the door for the ladies, his left side well to the front and the good-tempered, well-bred smile shining placidly upon it.

The vicar, being the oldest friend of Mrs. Mildmay, moved to the head of the table, and did the honors of the good old port and claret with formal exactness, but the gentlemen had evidently taken all the wine they cared for, and, with a nervous, "Er, shall we join the ladies?" the vicar pushed back his chair and led the way into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Giles was seated at the piano. Mrs. Tonson, the vicar's wife, was sipping tea with her sweet, little head on one side like a tomtit, listening to Mrs. Mildmay's explanation of the intricacies of some new needlework, and Violet and Mrs. Dodson were engrossed in conversation, which had for its topic Mr. Leicester's various habits and idiosyncrasies, a topic the fond mother could expatiate upon *ad infinitum*.

The captain's quick glance flashed through the handsome room for a moment, then sank into a quiet gleam of pleasure as he walked to Violet's low chair, and, motioning with his eyes to a small, black-edged portrait of himself that hung in a recess, said:

"No wonder you recognized me so quickly, Miss Mildmay. I had forgotten the portrait."

Violet smiled.

"But for me, who see it so constantly, it seems as impossible for me to forget you, or rather fail to recognize you."

Mrs. Mildmay turned, with a smile and a little nervous flush.

"You notice that it has a black frame, Captain Murpoint?"

The captain nodded, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Yes, and I can guess the reason. Oh, my dear madam, I must reserve the story of my resuscitation for a more fitting opportunity. I am afraid you will find it tedious. Poor John! would that he could have lived to learn that instead of being among the killed, I was only one of the unfortunate captives." [34]

Here the vicar, who had been vainly endeavoring to engage mild Mr. Dodson in a theological argument, turned, with very awkward interest.

"Ah, Captain Murpoint, that was a most extraordinary mistake. I am curious to hear how it

occurred. My old friend mourned for you very deeply—er—er—and caused a tablet to be set upon the left side of the church aisle to your memory."

The captain smiled, then sighed.

"It was a mistake, and an extraordinary one. The facts are very simple, though. My corporal, a worthy man, poor fellow, had, the evening before the skirmish, fallen into a water tank and spoiled his uniform, the only one he had brought with him. He came to my tent at sunset, dripping wet, and I, on the impulse of the moment, lent him one of my spare suits. Poor fellow, he promised to return it before the following morning, but Providence so willed it that the loan should become a gift. Before sunrise the Sepoys were upon us. I was wounded and taken prisoner, the poor corporal was killed and mangled to such an extent as to render his identification by features impossible. The clothes by which they imagined they could ascertain his personality, were, of course, mine, and so Captain Howard Murpoint was returned as dead and buried, and Corporal Mundy was cited as captured."

Violet, who had been listening, with her dark eyes fixed upon the captain's face, drew a long breath.

"And what became of you?" she asked, with that absent, abrupt way peculiar to her.

The captain passed his hand down his thick, dark mustache, and looked at her.

"I will tell you some day," he said, "as I threatened. Suffice it for the present that I was held captive for two years far away beyond the hills—ay, outside the pale of civilization. It was a miserable time; to look back upon it even now, in this comfortable room and with your interested face, my dear young lady, before me, gives me an unpleasant sensation. The Hindoos are the connecting link between the man and the monster!" [35]

And, with this figurative conclusion, the captain rose and walked to the bureau to turn over the leaves of the Battle of Prague, with which the vicar's wife was about to favor the company.

Leicester Dodson dropped into the vacant seat, Violet drawing her skirts out of the way of his long legs.

"And have you not played yet?" he asked.

Violet woke from her absent fit and shook her head.

"Not yet," she said. "I am not fond of my own music. You will play or sing, will you not?"

"I can do neither," he said. "I have a voice that would shame a crow."

Violet laughed her full, sweet, mirthful laugh.

"I am so sorry, because now you will have to play whist. Look, the vicar is shuffling the cards and looking round for the victims already."

"Shall I hide behind you?" said Leicester, in a low whisper.

"Indeed, no; you shall do your duty!" And, catching the vicar's blinking eyes, she beckoned to him.

"Here is Mr. Leicester for one corner. He doesn't sing or play!"

Leicester looked fierce and nodded at his father.

"You will have enough without me, I think," he said, and the vicar, more nervous than ever, but quite as anxious for his rubber, shuffled over to Mr. Dodson, who, with his benevolent, expressionless face well elevated, was beating time with his first finger to the "Battle."

So the vicar seized upon him, Mrs. Dodson and Mr. Giles, and was soon in his play.

"I've escaped, you see," said Leicester, with his grim smile.

"Only out of one danger into another," said Violet, maliciously. "The 'Battle of Prague' will be fought out directly, and then you will have to go over the large scrapbook of Swiss views and tell Miss Tomson which of the places you have seen."

"Thank you," said Leicester. "If that is a necessary part of the programme I am prepared to perform it without a change of audience. If you will allow me, Miss Mildmay, I'll go over the scrapbook with you." [36]

With two long strides, he seized the book and opened it.

"I knew you would be very much bored," said Violet. "I told you so before you came."

"And I assure you that you were wrong, which you are. I was never further from being bored in my life. That's a fine view. I climbed that on the coldest day in winter and had to have my fingers thawed in the shed at the top."

"And you learned cliff climbing in Switzerland, of course?" said Violet, naïvely. "Do you know, you frightened me so this morning? I was afraid you would fall over and be killed?"

Leicester's eyes—they were dark and deep and somewhat stern for so young a man—brightened.

"Should you have been so sorry?" he asked.

"Of course. How stupid a question!" laughed Violet, wickedly. "Cannot you surmise the consequences? I might have been accused of throwing you over, tried and condemned."

"But the motive," said Leicester, entering into the jest. "What motive could they have found?"

"Oh," said Violet, "people are always ready to find motives for other people; they would have said I resented your appearance as an interruption to a train of poetic thoughts; in fact, they would have been sure to find a motive."

"That is a pretty plain hint that I am to avoid that favorite walk of yours for the future, and beware how I interrupt your cliff reveries."

Violet flushed.

"Indeed, no. It is not a favorite walk—at least, not particularly so—and I am sure you are welcome to come. What nonsense. It is as much yours as mine, and I seem to be making you a present of it," and she laughed.

Then the "Battle of Prague" came to an end, and the captain led Mrs. Tonson to a seat with profuse compliments upon her style and touch.

"Are you fond of music, Captain Murpoint?" asked Violet.

"I adore it," said the captain, seating himself by her side, and looking, with a smile, at Leicester, [37] who regarded him with his usual grim reserve. "Music is the language of women and angels. Are you not going to sing?"

Violet shook her head at first.

"Will you not?" said Leicester, earnestly, bending the regard of his dark eyes on her.

Then she changed her mind, and, placing her hand upon the captain's arm, allowed him to take her to the piano.

Leicester remained where he was, and, thrusting his hands into his pockets, stretched out his long legs, and watched her beneath his dark, heavy eyebrows.

He had seen beautiful women of all countries—Circassians with pearly skin and rosebud lips, Spanish señoras with almond eyes and passionate, low-strung voices, Italians with fire-lit laughter and lithe grace—but none whose beauty touched and warmed him as the pure, sweet, loveliness of this willful English rose did.

Beautiful! The word was poor, tame, commonplace for such a face. Call it loveable, bewitching, which is far better than beautiful, and you were still far from a satisfactory adjective, Leicester thought; and as he sat and listened, his gaze alternating between the fair, young face and the dark, sinister one of the man by her side, he felt her heart slipping away from him.

The song finished, there arose a commotion at the whist table.

The vicar, in nervous, jerky sentences, was calling Mr. Dodson over the coals for bad play.

Mr. Dodson, with a bewildered air, was vainly endeavoring to explain, and at last managed to persuade the captain, who had stood smilingly listening to the dispute, to take his place.

The captain sat down, asserting, with a good-natured shrug of his shoulders, that he had not taken a hand at whist for a twelvemonth—which was indeed solemn truth—and the game commenced, the vicar and Mrs. Giles being partners against the captain and Mrs. Dodson.

"What are the stakes?" said the captain.

"Er—er—" stammered the vicar, in his shrill falsetto, "what you please."

"Half-crown points?" said the captain, carelessly, and the rest agreeing, the captain and Mrs. [38] Dodson lost the first game.

Now the vicar was fond of cards, and was still more fond of winning a little money at them. The captain made one or two gross blunders, and clearly proved that he was out of practice. The vicar was but human and suggested that they should raise the stakes.

Alas, the next game was scored to the captain's side. So, also, was the next, and Mrs. Dodson, with many blushes and exclamations of comic alarm at the amount, shared ten pounds with her lucky partner.

Then the party broke up.

Leicester Dodson, who had been talking to Violet during the whole of the card playing, bowed over her small white hand with his usual gravity, wrapped his mother in her China crèpe shawl, and took her to the carriage.

The vicarage party and the Giles' followed quickly, and the captain was left alone with his old friend's daughter and her aunt.

"Captain Murpoint, I have given you rooms in the south wing. If they are not to your liking I hope you will let me change them," said Mrs. Mildmay.

"They will seem palatial apartments after Indian mud huts, my dear madam, and only too luxurious," said the captain.

"Good-night," said Violet, giving him her hand. "I hope you will sleep soundly and not dream. There are ghosts near you."

The captain laughed.

"You mean in those old ruins at the side," he said.

"Yes," said Violet. "The park was all ruins when papa bought it, but he pulled down all the old walls, excepting the tower and old chapel that adjoins the south wing, and they are fearfully

haunted."

"I am not afraid," said the captain, and with another good-night he ascended the broad staircase to the apartments allotted to him.

Captain Murpoint was evidently an honored guest. The suite of rooms was of the best in the house, and beautifully furnished, the small dressing-room or boudoir exquisitely so.

As the captain opened the door of the dainty little nest a sturdy figure rose from the satin-covered couch and saluted him with a grin. [39]

The captain set the candle down upon the unlaid table and walked to the window, which he threw open, then he turned to the sturdy figure and smiled.

"You don't look so ridiculous in your swallow tails as I should have thought, Jem—no, Starling I meant; but I'm afraid appearance is the least important attribute of a gentleman's servant. Help me off with this coat."

Mr. Starling, with a grave face, tugged at the coat rather clumsily.

"Gently," said the captain, "I don't want you to take my arms with it. That will do," and he sank into the chair before the glass and stared at the reflection of his face absorbed in thought.

Starling watched him in silence for a minute or two, then fidgeted restlessly, and at last spoke out:

"Well, captain, ain't you got a word for your humble pal? How's things going? Does the plant look well?"

"Hush!" said the captain, arousing, with a start. "The window is open, doors and walls have ears. You must drop that slang and talk like the character you assume, even when we are alone, for practice. Tell me what you have seen. Is the house large?"

"Enormous!" replied Starling, sinking his voice to a disagreeable hoarseness. "It is a reg'lar palace. Bigger than the pris——"

The captain sprang to his feet, his eyes blazing, and his face white.

"Idiot! keep that word between your teeth! We're working over a powder mine, and such a word as that means destruction. Forget the past; forget that you were ever anything else than my servant—Captain Murpoint's valet. If you don't, that idiot's tongue of yours will blab and spoil the whole."

He sat down again with something of his old coolness, but his hand, as it toyed with an ivory-backed brush, trembled, and his eyes still flashed evilly.

"All right, captain," pleaded Starling, humbly. "It was a slip," he laughed, "but it shan't occur again. Cuss me for an idiot. But I never can play a close game like this right away at first. It [40] requires genius, and I ain't that, and you are, capt'n; and that's where the difference is——"

"Answer my question," said the captain, interrupting him with a gesture of weariness.

"The place is a regular gold mine," said Starling. "Heaps o' servants and cartloads o' plate. I never see such swag. Great, big plates and basins and ornaments and spoons and forks enough to set us up for life——"

The captain interrupted him with a contemptuous:

"Pshaw! Do you think I am going to steal the plate, idiot?"

"Well, you might do wus," said Starling, scratching his head with a puzzled air. "O' course I don't know what game you're playing, captain; how should I? You're such a deep 'un. But some games want capital, and where are we going to get that?"

"Capital," repeated the captain, more to himself than in answer to the expressed doubt of his companion. "My capital is here," and he knocked his snow-white forehead with his forefinger.

Then, with a short, dry laugh, he pulled the five sovereigns out of his pocket and flung them on the table.

"Capital? You're right, my friend. Five pounds is not much to start a big thing on, but it's enough when Captain Murpoint has the undertaking in hand!"

CHAPTER IV.

STRANGE TACKLE.

Mildmay Park—or The Park, as it was more generally called—was peculiarly placed on the slope of a hill climbing toward the cliff.

The lower part of the building was that remnant of the old abbey of which Violet had spoken to Captain Murpoint. The upper part was the modern luxurious mansion in which the wealthy merchant prince, John Mildmay, had lived.

Money can command all things in the way of architecture and luxury, and The Park was a fitting residence for a marquis, to say nothing of an East Indian merchant. [41]

Having passed so much of his time in the crowded, bustling streets of both hemispheres, it was

only natural that Violet's father should choose a quiet resting place.

Penruddie was quiet enough to suit an Anglican monk.

Beside the Cedars there was no other house on the cliff, and the village in the valley was so small as to scarcely be deserving of the name. A few fishermen's cottages, a general shop, and an inn, picturesque and inviting, comprised it.

The fishermen were simple people, who looked upon The Park and its inmates as a place and people to be worshiped from afar; the general shop, a little more elevated in its notions, prided itself upon the custom of the "gentry," and the inn—well, the inn deserves something more than a statistical mention.

It was a pretty little place, midway in the single street, overgrown with ivy, from which its windows peered like so many eyes struggling to catch a glimpse of the glittering sign board through their lids of leaves.

This sign board was a wonder. In Martha Pettingall's opinion there had never been, or ever would be a work of art to compare with it. It bore on its crimson background a lion so blue, so fierce, and in attitude so wickedly and preposterously unnatural that, perhaps, Martha's pride was, after all, excusable. Certainly, there was some truth in her assertion that there was "ne'er a lion in the whole world like it."

Martha Pettingall was a thin old lady, with sharp eyes and a mysterious complaint. This disease—it was painless—attacked her whenever the wind was in the East, her customers troublesome, and her niece, pretty Polly Pettingall, aggravating. It proclaimed itself by sharp tones and a yellow bandanna.

The sharp tones were freely employed to all about her, and the fishermen knew when to expect them by the appearance of the yellow flag tied tightly round Martha's head and face.

At such times it was astonishing how quiet the gruff, hard-voiced men became, and how early they left the little taproom and departed to their by no means soft couches. [42]

The day after the captain's arrival Martha appeared in the bar with the yellow bandanna and the vinegarish tones in full battle array.

Polly—light-hearted, slippery-fingered Polly—had dropped and broken one of the best jugs, one of that precious set which the late Joe Pettingall had presented to her aunt as a wedding gift, and there was wrath in the hostess' bosom and fierce ire in the bandanna.

Polly was red and flushed about the neighborhood of the eyes, and her pretty lips were fixed in a sullen, tear-threatening pout.

It was a quarter to eleven, the men had just come in from a mackerel haul and were inclined to be jovial.

"Where's the missus?" inquired Willie Sanderson, as, followed by a dozen of his mates, young and old, he trudged into the barroom. "Well, Polly, my lass, thee's as fresh as a herrin' this mornin'! There's a mack'rel for ye, the biggest I've seen this season."

And Willie, a great, strapping giant with a good-natured face and a pair of dark, wide-awake eyes, threw an enormous fish upon the polished counter.

"Thank you, Willie," said Polly, with a dolorous sniggle.

"Why, what's the matter, lass?" exclaimed the brawny fisherman, taking her by the shoulders and swinging her round. "Here, you Bill, and Jim, and Jake, here's the lass piping her eye! Can't ye say a word o' comfort?"

The young fellows, fresh-cheeked, brown-eyed sons of the hamlet, gathered round sympathetically and admiringly, ready with their inquiries and their condolences, but pretty Polly with a pout stepped from among them and ran into the long bar parlor.

"Come along, lads," said Willie, "women's tears are like gurnets—no sooner here than gone again. Jake, where's the mistress?"

At that moment the door was flung open with no gentle hand, and Martha appeared with the yellow bandanna tightly bound round her head.

The young fellows looked at one another and sank into the seats round the sanded room in grim, expressive silence. [43]

"Well!" said Martha, sharply. "Is the haul in? It's mighty early ye are, Willie Sanderson, and it's no great take, I suppose, as usual."

"Indeed you're wrong, mistress," said big Willie, with a short laugh. "The haul's as good as ye could wish, and we be come up to wet the fish afore they starts on their last journey."

"Ye'd better have sent them off and took to your drinking after," said Martha, sharply.

"That's a matter of opinion, arter all," retorted Willie, who was the only one in Penruddie who dared bandy words with the owner of the "Blue Lion" and the yellow bandanna.

"What's it to be, lads?" he continued, looking round.

"Ye'd get nothing but ale so early as this," declared Martha, decisively, and so, fully aware that any opposite opinion, however firmly delivered, would be of no avail, the "boys" nodded good-naturedly, and the shrewish hostess left the room for the ale.

Four huge tankards were soon foaming at the mouth, and Polly was bearing them into the room on a tray when the low-browed door swung open and the well-built, dapper form of Mr. Starling entered.

"'Eavens, what a sight!" he exclaimed, throwing himself into an elaborate pose of ecstatic admiration and arresting Polly's progress thereby. "It's a study of Michael Hangelo," and he clasped his hands with an artistic enthusiasm.

Pretty Polly threw up her head with a pert smile and a side glance at the stranger.

"Oh, indeed!" she said, "and pray who's Mr. Hangelo? And who's a sight, I should like to know?"

"You're a sight, my dear," retorted Mr. Starling, who, however deferential and meek he might be in his master's presence, was thoroughly at home and at his ease in a public house. "You're a sight beautiful enough to gladden any hartist's eyes."

"Nonsense!" said Polly, tripping into the taproom.

Mr. Starling, with a cast of his sharp eyes in that direction, strolled up to the bar and bowed with [44]
proper respect to the landlady.

"Good-morning, ma'am. I hope I see you well. Beautiful morning for the hay——"

"Do you want anything to drink?" sternly interrupted Martha.

Not at all discomposed, Mr. Starling intimated that he should feel obliged if the lady would favor him with a glass of her very best ale, and draw it mild.

Perfectly unmoved by his grand manner and repeated bows, Martha drew the glass of ale and flung the twopence with a clash into the large pocket at her side.

Mr. Starling winked at the ceiling, chuckled noiselessly, and disposed of the ale with a peculiar drawing in of the breath and turn of the little finger.

"That's good tackle," he said.

"Ye asked for the best," said Martha, who was not to be conciliated.

"And I've got it; and I'll have another," said Mr. Starling.

This glass he dealt with more mercifully, and after taking a draught carried the remainder to the taproom door.

The sunburnt faces and bright eyes of the lads were lifted as he appeared, and Willie's sharp gray orbs seemed to take an inventory of his every inch, as Mr. Starling, with a nod and a smile, said:

"Good-morning. Any fish this morning?"

"Ay, lots," said Willie, curtly.

"Ah, glad to hear it," said Mr. Starling, edging a little farther into the room. "I'm very fond of fishing—allus was. Used to catch little bats with a umbrella handle and a bent pin when I was so high," and he put his hand about five inches from the floor.

"Oh, we don't fish with that tackle in these parts," said Willie, quietly. "Won't ye come in?" and he raised his tankard.

Mr. Starling responded candidly, and was soon seated beside the huge fisherman and discussing a fresh tankard, produced at his expense.

Mr. Starling was of a convivial turn, and the little parlor was soon echoing with short, sharp laughter and snatches of rough wit, all of which, however, did not prevent a sharp scrutiny which [45]
Big Willie was continually trying to bear upon the stranger.

Once or twice he raised his eyes and glanced significantly at an old man who had entered after Starling and was seated near the door, but the old fisherman shook his head in response to the look of inquiry, and Big Willie grew more silent and serious. At last he said, in one of the pauses of conversation:

"You seem to have traveled a main. Where be ye bound for?"

Mr. Starling nodded up toward the ceiling and jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"I'm staying at The Park," he said. "Come along with Captain Murpoint."

"You're his servant," said Willie.

"Yes, I'm his servant," said Mr. Starling, looking into the bottom of his quart pot with one eye closed.

"Oh," said the fisherman, with an air almost of relief. "Oh, that's it, is it?" he said. "I thought perhaps ye were loafing round a bit."

Mr. Starling grinned.

"I can do a bit at that trade," he said, with a wink that elicited a guffaw.

"Noo doubt," said Willie. "An' what sort of a man is the captain?" he asked.

"What sort?" said Mr. Starling. "A good sort, or he wouldn't be my master."

"And where do ye come from?"

"India."

Willie shook his head.

"Ay, that's where Master John coom from."

"Just so," said Mr. Starling. "They were sworn friends—what you may call brothers with two mothers. My guv'nor was Mr. Mildmay's particular pal, thick as thieves, and—come, what do you say to another wet?"

"No more," said Willie, answering for himself and the rest of the company.

"Well, if you won't I'll see about climbing," said Mr. Starling. "It's a rum thing to build a house on a hill; it's awkward for a gentleman after he's took his evening's glass at the pub. Now, if it was me I should 'a' built it down here in the village, just next door to the 'Blue Lion,'" and with a wink [46] he stuck his hat well on the side of his head and walked toward the door.

At that moment, however, Martha entered, and, looking round, said, sharply:

"Are you going to sit here all day, Willie Sanderson, with all them fish to send off to Lunnon? Are ye daft, man?"

Willie Sanderson rose and looked at her, raising his hand and scratching first his right, then his left ear.

Mr. Starling, who happened to turn at the doorway to observe how the customers would take such summary ejections, noticed the action, and was somewhat struck to observe Mrs. Martha's sharp tone dropped considerably, and that with a quick pursing of the lips she raised her hand and scratched her own ears, first her right, then her left.

Now, Mr. Starling, who knew something of signs and countersigns, and had had occasion during his rather adventurous life to avail himself of such devices, instantly decided that there was some secret understanding between the hostess of the "Blue Lion" and the burly fisherman, and was confirmed in his suspicions by the silent and immediate obedience of the lads, who, at a toss of the head from their leader, rose quietly and left the house, giving Mr. Starling a gruff good-day as they strolled past.

Mr. Starling looked after them, then turned on his heel, stuck his hands into the mysterious depths of his light trousers, and commenced his climb.

Halfway up the hill, however, he stopped abruptly and swinging round smacked his leg with an emphatic thwack, muttering:

"Hang me if I can make it out. What the Villikins and his Dinah does the landlady of a village inn want a making signs with a wooden-headed fisherman?"

Mr. Starling's wits would have been still farther sharpened could he have followed Willie Sanderson down the village and watched him unseen.

The lads, once clear of the "Blue Lion," turned swiftly to the left and ran down to the beach, where, in a confused heap, were the recently taken fish and the baskets in which they were to be packed.

Willie Sanderson, however, after a word or two with the old fisherman, turned to the right and [47] walked slowly toward the end of the village.

As he neared the row of cottages he saw, coming toward him on the road that led by many a weary mile to London, a smart tax cart.

Willie's eyes were sharp and though the little white-covered cart apparently differed in nothing from its kindred, he knew it at a glance, and, drawing a little aside, he sat down on a heap of empty baskets to wait patiently.

Presently the cart came up, and the driver, a little, thickset man, dressed in an ordinary guernsey, and thick, white trousers peculiar to the seacoast, and wearing a patch over his left eye, shot a sharp glance from the right one at the recumbent figure of the fisherman, and gruffly gave him "Good-morning."

"Good-morning, Job, lad," replied Willie, and with a smile he repeated the action which had surprised Mr. Starling.

In an instant the old fellow's hand went up to his ears, and, with a reflection of Willie Sanderson's smile, he "tckd" to the horse and passed on.

Beyond the salutation not a word had passed, but Willie Sanderson rose to his feet and set off toward the beach, whistling with the satisfaction of a man who has adroitly accomplished a difficult and dangerous undertaking.

CHAPTER V.

IN DIFFICULTIES.

To the unsophisticated inhabitants of the little seacoast village the Mildmays of the Park, and the Dodsons of the Cedars, were very great folk, indeed, but we have now to do with far greater, with no less a personage and family, indeed, than the well-known Earl of Lackland and his children.

A very great man was the Earl of Lackland. His ancestors had fought at Cressy, and at Hastings.

Lackland Hall was an immense place in the Midlands, a grand old house, with famous associations. You could not turn a page of English history without coming directly, or indirectly, upon the deeds and doings of the Lacklands. [48]

It was a question with some politicians whether if by some dreadful chance the house of Lacklands had been extinguished, the history of England could have been written at all!

There were men who, when they wanted to illustrate the grandeur, the nobility, the importance of England, would point the admiring finger at Lacklands and exclaim:

"There is one type! Look at Lacklands and see epitomized the glory of our land!"

Certainly the Earl of Lackland was a most important individual.

Besides the great Lackland Hall there were also the great mansion in Grosvenor Square, the castle in Scotland, the villa on the banks of the Arno, and the fishing boxes in Ireland and Wales.

The present earl and countess was blessed, in addition to the places of residence above enumerated, with a son and daughter.

The former, Lord Fitz Plantagenet Boisdale, was a young man just passed his majority. Fair—insipid he would have been called had he not been heir to Lackland—somewhat simple-minded, certainly not clever, and extremely fond of dress, billiards, his betting-book, and his cigar.

Lady Ethel Boisdale, his sister, presented a marked contrast to him.

She was tall, dark, by no means insipid, and if not positively clever, certainly possessed of the average quantity of brains.

To say in what direction her taste inclined would be perhaps at present rather premature.

It is difficult to analyze the lady's disposition, and probably the reader at some future time might be dissatisfied and inclined to pooh, pooh our opinion of Lady Ethel if we pronounced it thus early. Suffice it to say she was fond of reading, was deeply attached to her brother, and would have been equally so to her parents had they encouraged or even permitted her to be so.

Perhaps such great personages as the Earl and Countess of Lackland were too exalted to possess those emotions of affection and tenderness which fall to the lot of commoner people. [49]

If they did not possess them they managed to conceal them with infinite art, and no one could accuse them of the common folly of wearing their hearts upon their sleeves.

Assuredly Lady Ethel must have had a warm heart and a generous nature or the coldness of her exalted parents would have chilled her and rendered her cold likewise.

That she was not the reader will soon perceive.

Thousands of persons envied my Lord and Lady Lackland. Never did their carriage roll through the streets, or their names appear in the paper among the fashionable intelligence, but hundreds exclaimed:

"I wish I were a Lackland."

But not one of the envious many knew what they were really envying.

There is a skeleton in every house; there was one ever present in all the great and small houses of Lackland. Sometimes he kept discreetly to his cupboard; at others he stepped boldly out and rattled his bones, and grinned in a manner horrible to see.

Oh, yes, reader, other people besides yourself have a skeleton, and there are some persons unfortunate enough to have two.

If we entered the Grosvenor Square mansion, say on the morning after that memorable little dinner party at Mildmay Park far away in Penruddie, we might perhaps have caught a glimpse of that skeleton starting out of the cupboard.

Lord Lackland was seated at the morocco-lined writing table in his own room, with a few newspapers, a decanter of light wine, and a box of biscuits before him.

The door opened, and a young man, no other than Lord Fitz Plantagenet Boisdale, entered.

There was a flush on his fair face, and a look of doubt and distrustful nervousness in his rather simple blue eyes.

"Good-morning, sir," he said, holding out his hand.

"Good-morning, Fitz," said the earl, extending two fingers and glancing coldly at a chair which stood near the table ready for any visitor on business. "You are ten minutes behind your time." [50]

"I am very sorry, sir," said the boy, for he was little more in years or appearance, "but I'd promised to ride with Ethel this morning, and I forgot it until after I left you, so I went down to the stable to tell Markham to saddle the two bays, and he kept me to talk about that chestnut ——"

The earl interrupted what promised to be a lengthy explanatory excuse with his cold, little bow, and glanced at the ormolu timepiece on the table.

"It is of little consequence to me; I am obliged to leave at the half hour to meet an appointment, therefore I shall only be able to give you the time I promised to give you. You wished to speak to me."

"Yes, sir," said Lord Fitz, looking down at his boots nervously, and then up at the ceiling. "I

wanted to ask you if you could let me have a couple of hundred pounds beyond my allowance to—to—pay a few debts, which—which, of course, I could not help running into while I was in Paris."

Lord Lackland walked to the bureau, and took out a bundle—a very small bundle—of banknotes; from this he counted out a hundred pounds' worth, and, holding them in his hand, said:

"Here are a hundred pounds; I cannot give you any more, for a very good reason, I cannot afford to do so."

Lord Fitz looked up with a simple stare which extended his mouth as well as his eyes.

"I cannot afford to do so," said the metallic voice. "It is quite time that you should be placed in possession of the truth as regards my—I may say our—pecuniary position. I ought, perhaps, to have informed you of the condition of my affairs long earlier, but consideration for your feelings deterred me. Fitz, the estates in London, in Italy, in England, are mortgaged to their fullest extent. The revenue is nearly swallowed up by the interest, and there is so little ready money in the house that if the servants were to demand their wages I should not be in a position to pay them."

Lord Fitz stared, pale and aghast.

The skeleton was out grimly walking before him. For the first time Lord Boisdale learned that he [51]
was heir to a rich crop of embarrassments, and that the great Earl of Lackland, his father, was a poor man.

"Great Heaven!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that, sir!" unlike his father, showing his emotion unmistakably.

"I have said it," replied the earl, "and now you know my—our—real position. Credit, Fitz, has kept our heads above water for a great many years—credit alone. How much longer it may do so I cannot say, but I can estimate if your bills for necessaries amount to the sums which they here represent."

"What—what's to be done?" asked Lord Fitz, staring at his calm parent with bewildered horror. "We must sell some of the places, the horses, the diamonds, by jingo!—the—the—everything!"

"We cannot sell what is sold or out of our hands already. You do not understand business matters, unfortunately, or you would at once comprehend that the houses, the land, being mortgaged, and the diamonds at the—ahem—pawnbroker's, it is simply impossible to make further money of them."

The young man jumped up and took three paces up and down.

"But," said he, suddenly, and with incredulity upon his face, "I saw my mother wear the diamonds at the last drawing-room."

"Not exactly," said the earl, "paste imitations only; the real are in the possession of a pawnbroker. But if you have any taste or inclination for an investigation or examination of our finances, you have my permission to examine the documents which you will find in this case——"

"Great Heaven, no!" said young Fitz. "I don't doubt your word, my lord; I'm only stunned, knocked all of a heap as one may say. It seems so incredible! Why, by jingo, the fellows are always asking me to lend them money—and—and saying how rich we are; and you say that——"

"That I cannot afford to let you have the other hundred pounds," said the earl, replacing the bundle in the bureau. "While we are upon the subject, which is too painful to be renewed, I will remind you that you are heir to the estate, and that it is in your power to clear it of the [52]
encumbrances."

"In mine!" exclaimed Lord Fitz.

"Exactly," said the earl. "By a judicious marriage. You must marry an heiress, Fitz. There are a number of them to be met with; and a great many are extremely anxious to purchase position with their money. I speak plainly because the matter is too serious for mere insinuation. You must marry well, and—ahem—so, of course, must your sister."

He glanced at the timepiece significantly.

The young lad rose at the hint and took up his hat.

"I won't detain you any longer, sir," he said. "I am very much obliged for—for the money, and, of course, I'm very sorry to hear such a bad account of the estate."

"Exactly," said the earl, with a cold smile, looking out of the window. "You are riding that bay, I see, and I trust you will take care of it. I had to pay a heavy bill for the mare whose knees you cut last month. Let me beg of you to be careful with the bay."

"Certainly, sir," said Lord Boisdale, and with a very uncomfortable air he left the room.

As he passed into the corridor a sweet, clear voice rose from the hall.

"Fitz, are you coming?"

Fitz smothered a sigh, and as cheerfully as he could, replied:

"All right; here I am," and ran down the stairs.

In the hall stood Lady Ethel Boisdale.

"How long you have been!" she said, with a smile. "Are you not ashamed to keep a lady waiting? Well, I think brothers imagine they are privileged to take advantage of a sister."

As she spoke her eyes noted the disappointment and embarrassment on his countenance, and when they were mounted and turning out of the square she said:

"What is the matter, Fitz? Will not papa give you the money?"

"No," said Fitz, with an uncomfortable laugh, "no; and supplies an excellent reason for not complying with my modest request. Oh, dear me, I'm very miserable. There! don't ask me what about, because I shan't tell you. It would only worry you, and you're too good a fellow—I mean [53] girl—to be worried. Let's put these lazy animals into something sharper; I hate this square and those streets."

Lady Ethel touched her horse gently, and in silence they cantered into the Park.

"Look," said Ethel, presently, "who is that lifting his hat?"

"Eh? where?" said Lord Fitz. "Oh, it's Bertie Fairfax and Leicester Dodson—capital fellow, Bertie. Let's pull up a minute, Ethel."

And with a smile of welcome he steered his horse near the rails, upon which the two gentlemen who had raised their hats were leaning.

One of them, Leicester Dodson, we know, the other was a tall, splendidly built fellow, with a frank, genial face, and a noble yet peculiarly free and graceful bearing.

"Hello, Bertie! Good-morning, Mr. Dodson. Delighted to see you. Ethel, you will let me introduce my friends, Mr. Dodson, Mr. Bertie Fairfax. Bertie, Mr. Dodson, this is my sister, Lady Ethel Boisdale."

Both the gentlemen raised their hats; Lady Ethel bent her beautiful head with her rare smile.

She always liked to know any friends of her brother whom he chose to introduce, for with all his simplicity he was too wise to fall into the mistake of showing her any but the most unexceptionable of them.

Bertie Fairfax looked up at the lady and then at the horse. He was a connoisseur of both.

"It is a beautiful day," he said, opening the conversation with the usual weatherwise remark. "Your horse looks as if he enjoyed it."

"Which he does," said Ethel. "I am sure I do. It is delightful—walking or riding."

"I should prefer the latter," said Bertie Fairfax, "but my horse is lamed temporarily and I am compelled to pedestrianize."

"What a pity," said Ethel, adding, with her sweet smile, "Perhaps the change will be good for you."

Bertie Fairfax looked up at her with his frank eyes to see if she was quizzing him, then laughed musically.

"Perhaps he thought so and tumbled down on purpose. It doesn't much matter—I like walking, [54] but not here; I like more room. My friend, Mr. Dodson, however, insisted upon this promenade. He is an observer of human nature—a cynic, I regret to say—and finds material for bitter and scornful reflection in the gay and thoughtless crowd. Are you going to Lady Darefield's ball to-night?"

"Yes," said Ethel. "I presume you, also, by your question, are going?"

"Yes," said Bertie Fairfax, "I am glad to say."

Five minutes before he had sworn to Mr. Leicester Dodson that he wouldn't go to my Lady Darefield's ball for five hundred pounds, and five hundreds pounds were of some consequence to Mr. Bertie Fairfax.

"It is very hot for balls, but one must do his duty. I hope I may be able to persuade you to give me a dance?"

"I don't know," said Ethel, with a smile.

At that moment her horse walked on a little. Mr. Fairfax moved farther up the rail, and then conversation, no more confidential than that we have already given, continued until Lord Fitz was heard to exclaim "Good-by," and then joined his sister.

Both the gentlemen on foot raised their hats, Bertie Fairfax with his cordial, pleasant smile, Leicester Dodson with his grave and also pleasant grace, and after a return of the salutations the four young people parted.

"Well," said Lord Fitz, from whose mind the recent meeting had expunged the unpleasant remembrances of his morning interview, "what do you think of them?"

Ethel was silent for a moment.

"I don't know which was the handsomer," she said, thoughtfully.

"That's just like you women, Eth; you always think of the graces first."

"Well," said Ethel, "there was no time to know anything more about them. I think Mr. Fairfax is very pleasant—he has a nice voice and such frank eyes. There are some men with whom you feel friendly in the first ten minutes; he is one of them."

"You're right," said Lord Fitz. "Bertie's the jolliest and dearest old fellow going. Poor old Bert!"

"Why poor?" said Ethel.

"Because he is poor, deuced poor," said Lord Fitz, muttering under his breath, with a sigh, "Like some more of us." [55]

"How do you mean?" said Ethel.

"Well," said Lord Fitz, "he has to work for his living. He's a barrister or something of that sort. But he writes and draws things for books, you know. I don't quite understand. He can sing like a nightingale and tell a story better than any man I know."

"He looks very happy," said Ethel, "although he is poor."

"Happy!" said Lord Fitz. "He's always happy. He's the best company going."

"And who is his friend? Mr. Dodson, is not his name?" asked Ethel.

"Yes, Leicester Dodson," said Lord Fitz. "He's one of your clever men. You can't understand whether he's serious or joking sometimes, and I've often thought he was making fun of me, only ——"

"Only what?" asked his sister.

"Only I didn't think he'd have the impudence," said Lord Fitz, proudly. "It isn't nice to be sneered at by a tallow chandler."

"A what?" said Ethel.

"Well, the son of a tallow chandler. That's what his father was. A nice, quiet old boy. Haven't you heard of 'em? They live at Penruddie, which is about nine miles from that shooting box in Herefordshire—Coombe Lodge."

"So near," said Ethel. "No, I had not heard of him. He looks to be a gentleman, but I did not notice him very much. I like his friend's face best, yes, I am sure I do, though both the faces were nice."

"You don't take into account Leicester Dodson's coin," said Lord Fitz. "His people are immensely rich; tallow turns into gold, you know, if you only melt it long enough."

"That's a joke or a pun, Fitz," laughed Lady Ethel. "And really rather clever for you. And where does Mr. Fairfax live?"

"Oh, in chambers in the Temple—quite the clever bachelor, you know. Very snug they are, too, much more comfortable than any of the places. He gives good dinners sometimes—when he's in luck, as he calls it. Eth, you ought to have been a man, then you could have known some jolly good fellows." [56]

"Thank you, if I were not on horseback I'd curtsey," said Ethel. "Can't I know good fellows as I am?"

"No," said simple Lord Fitz, "you can't! They won't let you; it's dangerous. You must only know men with long handles to their names like ours, and with their pockets full of money—unlike ours. You mustn't know Bertie Fairfax, for instance. The mother wouldn't allow it."

At that moment Ethel's horse started—his rider had, in reality, touched him with a spur—and got in front of Lord Fitz, so that the blush which suddenly crimsoned Ethel's beautiful face was hidden from her brother's light blue eyes.

Now, why should Lady Ethel Boisdale blush at the simple little speech of Lord Fitz? It could be of little consequence to her, surely, if her eyes were fated never to rest on Mr. Bertie Fairfax again. Why did she blush, and why, during the remainder of that park gallop, did she look forward to Lady Darefield's little ball?

"Well," said Leicester, as the two equestrians rode away, and left the pedestrians looking after them, "what do you think of the Lady Ethel Boisdale? You have been wrapped in a silence unusual and remarkable for the last three minutes; unusual because on such occasions as the present you generally indulge in a rhapsody of admiration, or a deluge of candid abuse, extraordinary because silence at any time is extraordinary in you."

"Hold your tongue, you cynical fellow," exclaimed Bertie, still looking after the brother and sister. "So that is the sister of whom simple Fitz is always talking—Lady Ethel! A pretty name, and it suits her. An Ethel should be dark, or at least brown shadowed; an Ethel should have deep, thoughtful eyes, a pleasant, rather dreamy smile, and a touch of hauteur over face, figure, and voice. She has all these——"

"And fifty more virtues, attributes, and peculiarities which your confounded imagination can endow her with! Nonsense! She's a nice-looking girl, with a sensible face, and the pride proper for her station. You can't make anything more of her."

"Can't I?" said his friend; "you can't, you mean. I call her beautiful. She is going to Lady Darefield's ball to-night; I—I shall go, after all, I think, Leicester." [57]

"I thought so," said Leicester Dodson, with a smile of ineffable wisdom and sagacity. "I thought somebody said they wouldn't go to the confounded ball for five hundred pounds, and that the same somebody was pitying me for having promised to grace it with my presence."

"I thought you'd die if I didn't keep you company, and so, as I like to borrow your money, and don't want you to die, I'll go. I say, Leicester, haven't the Lacklands a small place in Herefordshire near you? What do they call it—Coombe Lodge?"

"Perhaps they have," said Mr. Leicester. "I believe that there are few counties which are not honored by the Lacklands in that way. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, merely for idle curiosity."

"H'm! you promised to come and spend a week or two with me," said Mr. Leicester. "Will you come?"

"Oh, chaff away," said Bertie Fairfax, good-temperedly. "But I'll take you seriously; I will come."

"Done," said Leicester, still chaffing as his light-hearted friend called it. "I'm going down next week. Come with me?"

"Thanks," said Bertie, "I'll think it over. I'll come and cut you out with the Mildmay heiress! Hah! hah!"

He laughed as Leicester turned to him with a look of mild surprise.

"You didn't know that I was posted up in that intelligence! I've a dozen little birds who bring me news night and morning, and I've heard——"

"Pshaw!" interrupted Leicester. "I've dined with mamma and papa at Mildmay Park, and that—that's positively all. My dear Bertie. I am not a marrying man; now you are, but, mark me, Lady Ethel Boisdale is not meant for you."

"Thank you," said Bertie, "I'm very much obliged, but who said that she was?"

And with a light laugh the subject was dropped.

That night when Lady Ethel Boisdale entered the magnificent saloons of Lady Darefield's mansion in Park Place she looked round the room with calm, yet expectant eyes, and dropped them very suddenly as they met the also searching and expectant gaze of Mr. Bertie Fairfax. [58]

It is one thing to exchange glances and smiles with a belle in a ballroom, but quite another matter to get a dance with her.

The saloons were crowded by the best of the land, eligible parties were in abundance, and Mr. Bertie Fairfax, handsome, sweet-natured and lovable though he was, found himself somewhat out in the cold.

It was not an unusual position for him, and on other occasions he had laughed good-naturedly in the smoking-room of his club, saying that there had been too many iron pitchers going down the stream for such a fragile, unsatisfactory delf affair as himself to hope for success.

But to-night it was different.

He wanted to dance with Lady Ethel Boisdale; why he could scarcely have told.

She was very beautiful; but he had seen faces far more lovely even than hers; she was very graceful, tall and full of a sweet, proud dignity, but Bertie Fairfax had seen some of the ladies of the Papal court, and remembered their faces.

She was, as it happened, just the realization of the young fellow's ideal, and—yet it must be written—he was already half in love with her.

Round her, forming a sort of bodyguard or watchdog, continually hovered in majestic grace the Countess of Lackland, her mamma.

Bertie was aware that her ladyship knew all about him, and that it was utterly vain to hope that he might be allowed to fill a vacant line in the Lady Ethel's little dancing programme.

He watched her dancing for some time, watched her as she spun round in two waltzes with Leicester Dodson for her partner, then the disappointed Bertie made his way out on to the corridor and leaned against the balustrade, gnawing his tawny mustache and trying to make up his mind to go to his club.

Just then, as he had almost decided, Leicester Dodson came out, hot and flushed, but with his usual grave reserve about his mouth and eyes.

"Ah! Bert!" he said. "Taking a cooler; you're wise in your generation. They ought to keep a weighing machine outside in the lobbies, so that a man could see how much he'd fined down after each dance. I've lost pounds since the Lancers. It's hotter than a siesta hour in Madrid. You look cool." [59]

"I don't feel particularly hot. I haven't been dancing. I feel like the skeleton at the feast; I think I shall carry my bones to the club. Will you come?"

"I'm engaged for another turn with Lady Ethel Boisdale," said Leicester Dodson, leaning over the balustrade and skillfully concealing a yawn.

"Lucky dog," said Bertie, enviously.

"Eh?" said Leicester. "By the way, you said she'd half promised you a dance; you don't mean to say you haven't called for payment, Bert; she's the best-looking woman in the room, and the most sensible——"

"Too sensible to dance with Mr. Fairfax, or her mamma has had all her training trouble for nothing," said Bertie.

"Nonsense! She's looking this way; go and ask her, man. I'll wait until the waltz is over, then we'll go on to the club, for, between you and me and that hideous statue, which is all out of drawing,

by the way, I have had pretty well enough; and you seem, to judge by your face, to have had a great deal too much."

Bertie, without a word left his friend, fought his way through the crowd, and, after some maneuvering, gained Lady Ethel's side.

"Have you saved me that dance which you half promised me this morning?" he said.

Lady Ethel turned—she did not know that he was so near—and a smile, bright, but transient, passed across her face.

"There is one dance—it is only a quadrille," she said; "all the waltzes are gone."

"I am grateful for the quadrille only, and do not deserve that," he said.

"I thought you had gone," said Ethel. "My brother was looking for you just now, and I told him that I had seen you go out."

"I was in the corridor cooling," said Bertie Fairfax.

"Is it cool there?" she asked; "I thought it could not be cool anywhere to-night." [60]

Then Lord Fitz came up, his simple face all flushed with the heat and the last dance.

"Hello, Bert, I've been looking for you. I say——"

"You must tell me when the dance is over," said Bertie, "there is no time."

And he led his partner to her place in a set.

A quadrille has the advantage over its more popular sister, the waltz; it allows of conversation.

Bertie could talk well; he had always something light and pleasant to say, and he had a musical voice in which to say it.

He was generally too indolent to talk much, but neither his natural laziness nor the heat seemed to weigh upon him to-night, and he talked about this matter and on that until Ethel, who was not only beautiful but cultivated, was delighted.

Too delighted, perhaps, for my Lady Lackland, from her place of espionage in a corner, put up her eyeglass and scanned her daughter's rapt and sometimes smiling face with something that was not altogether a pleased expression.

"Who is that good-looking young fellow with whom Ethel's dancing?" she asked of the dowager Lady Barnwell, a noted scandalmonger, and an authority on every one's position and eligibilities.

"That is young Fairfax. Handsome, is he not? Pity he's so poor."

"Poor, is he?" said the countess, grimly.

"Oh, yes, dreadfully. Works for his living—a writer, artist, or something of that sort. Really, I don't know exactly. He is in the Temple. Very amusing companion, evidently. Lady Ethel looks charmed with her partner."

"Yes," said Lady Lackland, coldly, in her heart of hearts she determined that her daughter should receive a lecture upon the imprudence of wasting a dance upon such doubtful and dangerous men as Bertie Fairfax.

Meanwhile, Ethel was enjoying herself, and when Bertie, whose handsome face was beaming with quiet satisfaction and pleasure, softly suggested that they should try the corridor, Lady Ethel, after a moment's hesitation, on the score of prudence, replied with an affirmative, and they [61] sought the lobby.

Here there were a seat for the lady and a leaning-post for Mr. Fairfax, and the conversation which had been interrupted was taken up again.

Bertie was in the midst of an eloquent defense of a favorite artist, of whom Lady Ethel did not quite approve, when Lord Fitz again appeared.

"What an eel you are, Bert! I've been everywhere for you. I say, we're going down to Coombe Lodge; it's so beastly hot up here in town, and we're going to make a little summer picnic party; you know, just a nice number. Cecil Carlton, Leonard Waltham and his sister, and two or three more. My sister is going, ain't you, Ethel? Will you come?"

"Thanks," said Bertie, with something like a flush, and certainly a sparkle in his light eyes. "But I am booked to Leicester Dodson."

"Oh, yes, the Cedars; what a bore for us. Never mind, the Lodge isn't far off, and, if you go down, we shall all be together."

"Yes," said Bertie, glancing at the fair face beneath him, which was turned, with a quiet look of interest, to her brother; "yes. When do you go?"

"Next week, if Ethel can get herself away from this sort of thing."

"I shall be very glad to go," said Ethel; "I am longing for the green trees and a little country air."

"It's done, then; all the odds taken," said simple Lord Fitz.

At that moment came up Ethel's next partner.

Bertie relinquished her, with a smothered sigh. He knew that he should not see her again that night, for her programme was full.

"We may meet in a country lane next week," he said, softly.

"We may," she said, with a smile that parted her lips bewitchingly, and then she was called away.

Bertie looked after her, then slowly descended the broad stairs, got his crush hat and strolled into the open street.

"That's the most sensible thing you've done for the last two hours," said Leicester Dodson's voice, behind him. "I'll follow your example," and he took out his cigar case. "Here, my man," he added, as his neat brougham drove up. [62]

"Let us walk," said Bertie.

And they started slowly for the club.

It was very hot there, however, and the pair were soon in Leicester's chambers, which were in the same inn and only one floor below Bertie's.

Leicester Dodson was a wealthy man, and quite able to afford luxurious apartments in the Albany, or at Meurice's, but he preferred a quiet set of chambers near those of his fast friend, Bertie.

He did not work in them, but he read a great deal, and he enjoyed half an hour now and then spent in watching his hard-working friend.

He would sit in Bertie's armchair, with his legs extended before him, watching Bertie engaged on some article or poem or drawing, and, as he watched, would almost wish that he also had to work for his living.

So Mr. Leicester was somewhat of a philosopher and a cynic, as Bertie had said, and at times found life rather wearisome.

To-night he drew himself a chair—Bertie was extended upon an ancient, but comfortable, sofa, and, lighting a fresh cigar, rang for claret and ice.

"Dreadfully hot, Bert. What on earth makes us hang about this horrible town, in this terrible weather? Fancy staying in London when all the green fields are holding out their hands and shouting, 'Come, and roll on us'! Fashion is a wonderful thing—so are you. Why on earth don't you speak? I never knew you so silent for so many minutes together, in my life. Are you asleep?"

"No," said Bertie. "Push the claret across the table with the poker, will you? When did you say you were going down to the Cedars, Les?"

"When you like," said Leicester Dodson, coloring slightly and turning his face away from his companion. "To-morrow, if you like; I was going to say I wish I'd never left it, but I came up this week because——"

"Because what?" asked Bertie, as he stopped.

"Because," said Leicester Dodson, looking hard at the fire, in his grave, sedate way, "discretion is the better part of valor." [63]

"What on earth do you mean?" exclaimed Bertie Fairfax. "You never mean to tell me you were afraid of a man?"

"No," said Leicester, with his cynical smile; "of a woman. There, don't ask me any more. I am not going to make a fool of myself, Bert, but while we're on the subject, I'll say that it would never do for either of us to do that."

"No," said Bertie Fairfax, with an unusual bitterness. "We can never marry, Les. You, because you are too——"

"Selfish," interrupted Mr. Dodson, placidly.

"And I, because I am too poor——"

"You will be rich enough some day, you clever dog," said Mr. Dodson, sententiously.

"Yes, when I'm an old man, gray-headed and bent double. Never mind."

"I won't. Don't you, either," said Leicester; "and now for the Cedars. Suppose we say the end of the week?"

"Yes, that will do," said Bertie. "The Lacklands—at least, some of them—are going down to Coombe Lodge next week."

"Oh," said Leicester, significantly, glancing at the frank, pleasant face of his friend.

"Yes," retorted Bertie, "and the Mildmays are still at the Park, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Leicester, shrugging his shoulders with an air of indifference he was far from feeling. "So that we shall be all together—like moths round a candle," he added, cynically, as Bertie rose, with a yawn, to mount to his own chambers.

Yes, all together, and near the meshes of that web which a skillful, cunning spider was weaving for them.

Captain Murpoint had laid his delicate web ready for his flies.

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[64]

CHAPTER VI.

"LOVE ME, LOVE MY DOG."

Captain Howard Murpoint had not exaggerated his powers of pleasing when making that important communication and revelation to his accomplice, Jem, under the Portland cliffs.

He had not been in possession of the marvelously comfortable suite of rooms at Mildmay Park many days before young and old, mistress and servants, were ready to pronounce the captain a most agreeable man, and his servant, Jem, a most amusing and obliging fellow.

The morning after his arrival the captain came down to breakfast elegantly attired in a loose velvet shooting-coat, which set off his strong, well-made figure to advantage.

His smooth face was set with a pleasant smile, and his voice was toned to a half-affectionate interest as he shook hands with Mrs. Mildmay.

"I hope you slept well, Captain Murpoint?" she murmured.

The captain declared that he had never slept better, and that his quarters were all that could be wished.

"Violet is not down yet," said Mrs. Mildmay. "She is late, but we were rather later than usual last night, and, I dare say, the excitement of your arrival made her feel tired. Ah, there she is."

And Violet entered at the moment, and came up to give her aunt the morning kiss.

Then she turned to the captain, and once again his bold, watchful eyes shrank for a moment before the clear, calm gaze of her pure ones.

His salutation was a finished piece of acting, so reverential, so paternally affectionate, and so respectful.

Violet shook hands with him, and tripped to her seat.

"And did the ghosts annoy you?" she asked, as the captain spoke of his night's rest.

"No; they were considerate to their guest. Perhaps when we are more familiar they may be more troublesome. You have had a good night's sleep, 'tis evident," he continued, glancing admiringly [65] at her fair, fresh, blooming face.

"I always sleep well," said Violet, simply. "Neither ghosts nor indigestion disturb me."

"I thought perhaps that our little party had tired you, my dear," said Mrs. Mildmay.

"No, aunt," replied Violet. "It was a very pleasant one," she added, musingly.

"Very, the pleasantest I have participated in for some time," said the captain, with some truth. "I must congratulate you upon having some really agreeable neighbors. The vicar was a most delightful man, and Mr. and Mrs. Giles are most amiable."

"And what did you think of the Dodsons?" asked Mrs. Mildmay, with a half sigh.

"Most agreeable people," replied the captain. "So original and unaffected. The young fellow pleased me exceedingly," and he glanced at Violet, under his dark brows.

"They are quite new friends—acquaintances," said Mrs. Mildmay. "Last night was the first time we have had the pleasure of their company.

"Indeed!" said the captain, with interest. "Newcomers, I suppose?"

"No; they have been here some time," answered Mrs. Mildmay. "They live in the large, red house, the Cedars; perhaps you did not notice it? You can see it from the dining-room windows. They are friends of Violet's making and—and though very agreeable people, still——"

"Still, they are—tallow chandlers," put in Violet, wickedly, "and aunt cannot forgive them."

Captain Murpoint smiled a peculiar smile of conciliation for both the ladies.

"Tallow chandlers," he said, "can be very agreeable people; but I understand your aunt's prejudice, my dear Miss Mildmay——"

"And I cannot," said Violet, with quiet gravity. "My father," and her voice lowered softly, "must have bought tallow when he traded with Russia, as I have heard, and I cannot see much difference between buying it in the first instance and melting it in the second."

"There is a difference," said the captain, softly. "But, putting the question aside, I thought the [66] Dodsons extremely nice people, and Mr. Leicester Dodson a well-informed person."

Violet looked at her plate. She did not echo the captain's praise or qualify it, so one could not tell whether she thought Mr. Leicester clever or not.

"Violet made their acquaintance in quite a romantic fashion," said Mrs. Mildmay, harping upon the subject, and she proceeded to recount the adventure of the parasol upon the cliffs.

While they were talking, Violet, who was facing the window which overlooked the lawn, saw the tall, graceful figure of Leicester Dodson sauntering up the path toward the house, in the indolent way which distinguished him.

"There is Mr. Dodson," she said. "I'll tap at the window; he may as well come in this way as walk up to the front."

And so she tapped.

Mr. Leicester looked over the whole of the house, as usual, before settling upon the right

window, then, when he did, he lifted his hat, with a grave smile that was also a very pleased one, and came across the lawn.

"Will you consent to make such an undignified entry?" said Violet.

"Yes," said Mr. Leicester, and, stooping, stepped into the room. "I'm afraid I'm too early," he said, shaking hands with Mrs. Mildmay and the captain. "But I thought if I left it till the middle of the day it would be too hot, and if I left it till the evening it would be too near dinner, and that after dinner——"

"We should be all asleep," said Violet, quietly.

"Exactly," assented Mr. Leicester, gravely.

"We are very glad to see you at any time," said Mrs. Mildmay. "And I think it is very kind of you to take the trouble on such a warm day, to come and see Violet's dog; poor fellow! we cannot think what ails his leg."

"We shall perhaps be able to find out," said Mr. Leicester.

"Will you take a cup of coffee?" asked Violet.

"Yes, I will, please," he said. "Coffee is a good antidote to the heat, is it not, Captain Murpoint?"

"Yes," said the captain, who had taken the opportunity to scrutinize the young man's face during the exchange of remarks; "yes, with a little curry powder added. We used to take it with chillies every morning at Madras." [67]

Mr. Leicester sipped his coffee and chatted in his grave way; then, when the coffee had disappeared, Violet rose to conduct him to the stables.

When they reached the stables, where Violet was welcomed by many a groom and stable-help with smiles and hat-touchings, the great mastiff Leo came limping out of his kennel, baying and throwing up its head, with mingled pain and pleasure.

"Poor old fellow," said Violet. "See, isn't it a pity? He is very fierce," she added, as the dog eyed the stranger with suspicious, threatening aspect.

"I'm not afraid of a dog," said Mr. Leicester, quietly, and without hesitation he knelt down and stroked the thick, smooth neck. The dog growled and put its paws on his shoulder.

"Oh, please be careful!" said Violet, apprehensively. "Quiet, Leo! Quiet, sir."

Mr. Dodson, however, did not seem at all nervous and, with a grave, "Poor old man!" took hold of the bad foot and examined it.

"There's a thorn in this foot, or there was, and it is festering. I prescribe a poultice," he said.

"Oh, dear me! who is to put it on?" said Violet.

"I will," said Mr. Leicester, "if you will be kind enough to order some warm water and linseed."

Violet, without any further fuss, sent one of the grooms for the required articles, and Mr. Leicester seated himself on the top of the kennel and talked to the dog until they came.

Then he mixed the poultice, applied it, and washed his hands, all with the same self-composed gravity which half amused Violet and half awed her.

This Mr. Leicester, whom she had once almost despised for being the son of a tallow melter was gradually winning her respect and setting her thinking.

"How kind of you," she said. "I am really very grateful. But I am ashamed that you should have had so much trouble."

"Not at all. I am very fond of dogs," said Mr. Leicester, and the speech, though it seemed ungracious, was pleasantly spoken. [68]

"If you are fond of horses, come and see my ponies," said Violet, in her frank way, and they turned to the stables.

"They are a pretty pair; they'd go well in tandem," said Mr. Leicester, thoughtfully.

"Would they?" said Violet, eagerly. "How I should like to drive them. Is it difficult?"

"No," said Mr. Leicester, "not at all, when you have acquired the knack. If you will allow me, I will show you how to drive the ponies tandem."

"Thank you so much," said Violet, gratefully; "but are you sure that it will not bore you? I know gentlemen dislike being bored."

"No, it will give me great pleasure," he said, simply. "When will you take the first lesson?"

"Oh, you shall say the time."

"This afternoon, at five?"

"Yes," said Violet; "I shall be delighted! Oh, I forgot!" she added, quickly, and with an unmistakable air of disappointment. "I am to drive Captain Murpoint over to the village, and perhaps he would not care to risk his neck."

Captain Murpoint came from the house at that moment to answer the question.

"Will you be present at a little equestrian experiment, Captain Murpoint?" asked Mr. Leicester.

The captain smiled.

"Are you going to ride three of Miss Mildmay's horses a-row?" he said, with his smooth smile.

"No; Mr. Dodson has been kind enough to offer to teach me how to drive tandem," said Violet.

"I shall be only too delighted to make a spectator."

"Will you come into the house again?" she asked, as Mr. Leicester raised his hat and paused at the walk leading to the gate.

"No thank you," he said. "I am going down to the village for my mother. Good-morning. Good-morning, Captain Murpoint." And he sauntered off.

They repaired to the drawing-room, that being the coolest part of the house, and there the [69] captain was most attentive. The conversation got on to the topic of music, and Violet turned over her new songs, and at last, in answer to a question whether he sang or not, the captain offered to sing.

He seated himself at the piano, struck a few chords, and commenced a barcarole in so sweet and yet powerful a voice that Violet was charmed.

The music drew Mrs. Mildmay into the room from another part of the house, and the morning, which Violet had feared would be extremely dull, promised to pass away most pleasantly.

While he was singing, Violet heard her door open.

She was standing at the piano, and she did not turn her head, but raised her eyes to a mirror which hung over the instrument, and which reflected the whole of the room.

As she did so, she saw that the door was opened by the captain's servant, and her gaze was riveted by the picture which the mirror showed her.

The man, thinking himself unobserved was standing, with the door handle in his hand, with such an expression of infinite mockery and sardonic amusement on his evil face that Violet felt herself fascinated and strangely impressed by it.

Suddenly the captain raised his eyes, and she knew by the look of mingled anger, alarm, and suspicion which displaced the smile upon his face that he was conscious of her fixed attention upon the mirror.

He finished the song abruptly, turned his head, and saw Jem Starling, whose face instantly resumed its usual snug demureness.

"Well, James?"

"A letter, captain," said James, "marked 'immediate.'"

The captain took it.

Jem left the room.

"Pray, do not mind us," said Mrs. Mildmay, and, with a bow, the captain took out his letter, which he had thrust into his pocket.

He was almost on the point of returning into the hiding place, for at a glance he saw that it was only a sham one—an old envelope sealed up.

However, with his usual quickness, he decided to open it, and, accordingly, made a slight fuss [70] with the seal, and, taking out a piece of paper, read:

"The pleece inspector's cum down to-day."

Captain Murpoint smiled.

"Business, my dear madam; business men always mark their letters 'immediate,'" and he thrust the letter into his pocket, and commenced talking as if the matter were of no moment.

Violet played a little, and practiced some new song, and Mrs. Mildmay ventured to pass through the French window into the garden, the captain accompanying her.

It was after they had left the room that Violet, happening to glance at the carpet, saw a scrap of paper by her side.

It was the captain's note.

"'The pleece inspector's cum down to-day,'" she said; "why, where can this have come from?"

For the moment she thought that it must be the letter which the captain had received, but the scrap of paper had so little of the appearance of a missive that had come through the post, and the information seemed to have still less connection with the captain, that she dismissed the idea.

"Strange," she said, and, with a laugh, she put the piece of paper in her pocket.

The captain had pulled it from his with his pocket handkerchief.

CHAPTER VII.

IMPRESSIONS.

Five o'clock came, and with it Leicester Dodson.

It had been very warm out all day; it was warm still, but Mr. Dodson did not look at all distressed,

and his velvet lounging jacket hung loosely and comfortably upon his strong, muscular frame.

"Have you courage enough to face the weather?" he said, putting his head through the window frame, "or do you give in?"

"No," said Violet, laughing; "on the contrary, I feel quite brave. I will not keep you long. Will you take a seat while I get my hat?" [71]

He entered, sauntered to a chair, and dropped into it, prepared to wait the three-quarters of an hour which ladies usually require for donning hat and cape.

But Violet was quick and impulsive in all her actions, and before ten minutes had passed he heard her voice on the stairs again, speaking to a servant.

Before she entered the room, however, the door opened, and Captain Murpoint came in.

"Oh, here you are, Mr. Dodson," he said. "Can you tell me at what time the post goes out?"

"Six o'clock," said Leicester.

"So soon?" returned the captain. "I am afraid I shall be compelled to deprive myself of the pleasure of accompanying you. I have some rather important letters to write, and shall barely have time to get through them."

"I am sorry for that," said Leicester Dodson, quietly telling a polite falsehood, for he was in reality rather glad than otherwise, and looked forward with no little satisfaction to a *tête-à-tête* with Violet.

"So am I," said the captain, and, as he spoke, he looked round about the room, as if searching for something.

"Lost anything?" asked the other, in his slow, indolent way.

"Y—es," said Captain Murpoint, "a letter. I have dropped it from my pocket, and I fancied I should see it in this room."

At that moment the door opened and Violet entered.

The captain ceased his hunt immediately, and, murmuring softly, "It's of no consequence," turned to Violet and told her that he should be compelled to remain at home.

"I am sorry," said Violet, echoing Leicester's words, and with as little truth.

And she passed out onto the lawn.

"I don't know whether James has harnessed the ponies properly," she said, doubtfully, as the groom appeared, leading up the pretty pair tandem fashion.

"No, he hasn't," said Leicester, after examining them.

And he quietly explained to the man how the operation should be performed.

Then he handed Violet into the little toy phaeton, and took the reins. [72]

At first the ponies, unused to their novel positions and quite fresh after two days' rest, showed signs of rebellion, and started first to one side, then the other, and at last the leader ventured to attempt the feat of walking on his hind legs.

But Mr. Leicester's iron hand drew him to earth again, and, with a touch of the long whip, hinted to him that a very different driver than Miss Violet sat behind him.

After a few minutes they settled down more quietly, and, as the feathery phaeton was rattled down the well-kept road to the village, Violet's face flushed and her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"How delightful!" she exclaimed; "and how easy it looks!"

"Come and try," said Mr. Leicester, and he pulled the ponies up until he had changed seats with her.

Then Violet found that tandem-driving was one of those feats which look easier to perform than they really are. Her hold on the reins was not tight enough; the artful little creatures knew her gentle touch, and the leader commenced his old trick, and, in spite of all Violet's skill, insisted upon turning round, as if he meant to enter the carriage and take a ride himself.

Mr. Leicester smiled, and Violet pouted.

"Hold the reins tighter," he said, "and give Master Dot—or Spot? which is it?—a clean, little cut on the left side."

She did so, and Master Dot immediately spun round to the right.

Then Mr. Leicester showed her how to keep him straight by whipping him on the right, and Violet managed to drive him straight for some little distance until they came to a sharp corner.

"Now, take care," said Mr. Leicester; but his warning came too late.

Dot cut the corner rather close, Spot, of course, cut it closer, and the phaeton would have been over, and its contents spilled like eggs, had not Mr. Dodson's hand closed on the small ones of Violet, and tugged the leader round.

For the second time Violet learned how hard and firm that hand was, and involuntarily she uttered a little, sharp cry of pain. [73]

"I am so sorry!" said Leicester, and his voice, naturally so cold and grave, grew wonderfully

gentle and anxious. "I did not mean to hurt you."

"No, no; it's nothing," Violet said, coloring with shame at her weakness. "I am really very grateful. You did not hurt me. May I keep the reins a little longer? I don't deserve to after such a silly mistake."

"Yes," he said, "there is a bit of straight road now."

He seemed so genuinely kind that Violet could not refrain from thanking him again.

"You are very good-natured, Mr. Dodson," she said. "I might have thought you proud if I had judged by first impressions."

"Why?" he asked.

"Why?" she repeated. "Are you sure that I shall not offend you?"

"Quite," he said, with a short laugh. "Pray, go on."

"Well, then, if you remember how abruptly you turned away from me that morning when you so foolishly and recklessly, but so heroically, risked your life for my paltry sunshade? You actually refused to shake hands," and she laughed, "and turned away with the cut direct."

He laughed, and looked up at her with a half-amused smile.

"I did, did I?" he said. "Come, I will be candid. I had judged you, not by first impressions, but by hearsay. The unkind things said of one always get repeated—one's friends always see to that. And I have heard some of the mighty civil things your aunt, and perhaps you had said of tallow chandlers in general, and ourselves and the Cedars in particular."

Violet crimsoned, and whipped Dot almost angrily for very shame.

"And," he exclaimed, laughing again, "I thought when you told me your name, 'Well, she shan't be compelled to know me because I picked up her sunshade,' and so I took myself off with all humility."

"Some one's darling sin is the pride that apes humility," answered Violet, with an arch smile.

"Exactly," said Mr. Leicester, "I did not choose that the acquaintanceship should be one of my commencing. If you chose to look down with contempt upon tallow melters——" [74]

Violet stopped him, with a look almost of pain.

"You are unjust," she said, in a low voice. "And you forget that I never thought less of you for what you were. You are not a tallow melter—and—and—oh, I do not know what to say, save that I am not guilty of the meanness you lay to my charge."

"Forgive me," he said, gently and earnestly. "I was only half serious. I did not think so really. But," he added, laughing, "it is a fact that we made our money from tallow, and there's no getting over it. Ah! here is Captain Murpoint," he broke off, as the captain's tall and powerful figure stepped out on to the path beside the drive.

So sudden was his appearance, seeming to grow out of her thoughts, as it were, that Violet, who was by no means a nervous or sentimental young lady, half started, and certainly paled.

In starting, she tugged the reins.

Dot and Spot took the jerk as an excuse for a little freshness, and started off, with their heads down viciously.

Leicester, who had noticed her start, and the sudden pallor, caught hold of her hand, and soon pulled the sprightly ponies into a trot again.

But Violet's hands and his had met once more, and the contact had produced a strange thrill, which was as wonderful as that feeling which they had been speaking of, but it was certainly not one of antipathy.

Leicester stepped out, handed Violet to the steps; then, after patting the ponies, held out his hand.

"Will you not come in?" said Violet.

"No, thank you. It is nearly dinner time. I hope you are not tired."

"No," said Violet, giving him her hand, which he kept while she finished speaking. "No, and I am very much obliged. Good-by."

"Good-by," he said, and perhaps unconsciously he pressed her little hand as he released it.

Then he turned, and Violet, watching him, saw him stand for a moment to exchange a good-day with Captain Murpoint, then stride on. [75]

It was nearly dinner time, as he had said, and he sauntered up to his room, and put himself into the hands of his valet with his usual indolence.

Then he came down to dinner, and ate it with rather more than his usual gravity, talking little, save to his mother, to whom he was always the perfection of knightly courtesy.

Once only he seemed cold, and that was when she said, "Leicester, we have been talking of returning the Mildmays' dinner party. What day would you like me to ask them?" for she always consulted her darling son on every matter, important or trifling.

"I do not care," he said; "I am going to town to-morrow, and I may not return for a week or two.

You might ask them next week."

"Going to town," said Mrs. Dodson, ruefully. "Why my dear Leicester, you said you would stay a month with us!"

"I must go to-morrow, mother," he said, and she knew that it was useless to contend against the fiat when pronounced in that calm, cold tone.

After dinner he strolled out on to the cliffs and lit a cigar.

"Yes," he muttered, looking at the sea, lying like a great opal in the low sunset. "I will go to town; I am better there out of mischief. She is very pretty—beautiful, I think, if any woman's face did deserve the word; and there is something about her—is it her voice, or her look, or that swift turn of the head?—which moves me as never voice or look or gesture of woman moved me yet. She is a beautiful, bewitching snare, and, as I have no desire to be snared, as I am too selfish, too cynical, too philosophical to make any woman happy, I will fly. Yes, I will go to town before the danger grows greater." And, as to resolve and perform were nearly one with Mr. Leicester Dodson, to town he went, and Violet saw his dogcart rattling down to Burfield from her bedroom window.

He went to town, but, as we have seen, he could not be happy, contented, or even satisfied, and before the fortnight had passed, he was on his way back to Penruddie, with Bertie Fairfax accompanying him. [76]

Fate stands at the crossroads of life and beckons with inexorable finger, and man, though he strive against the stern command and struggles to avoid that particular path up which the great fate beckons him, must yield at last and walk on to his happiness or his doom.

Fate beckons you, Leicester Dodson, and, though you proudly set your face against its decree, you cannot avoid the inevitable.

CHAPTER VIII.

SYMPATHY OR ANTIPATHY?

The captain, as he opened his bedroom window, saw Mr. Leicester Dodson's departure, and was rather surprised.

Captain Murpoint was too shrewd an observer of human nature not to have noticed Mr. Leicester's evident partiality for Miss Violet's society, and, although it would seem to be antagonistic to the captain's plans that the young man should be hanging about the house, yet, in reality, he was quite willing that Violet's attention should be absorbed by handsome Mr. Leicester, or any one else, so that it was drawn for the present from Captain Murpoint.

He could not understand Mr. Leicester's sudden flight, and Mr. Starling, when interrogated, could not very much enlighten him.

Jem or "Starling," as the captain now called him, entered his master's bedroom with the water for the bath, and found the captain still in bed, but with his head resting on one strong hand, and his face turned dreamily to the window.

Starling grunted his morning salutation, and the captain nodded.

"Go to the window," he said, "and tell me if that young Dodson's dogcart has come back; if I have calculated correctly, it has just had about time enough to get to the station and back."

"Here it comes, captain."

"Without Mr. Leicester?" [77]

"Without Mr. Leicester," replied Starling.

"Then he has gone to town," said the captain, springing out of bed and stretching himself thoughtfully. "Gone to town! What the deuce has he gone to town for?"

"That's what everybody wants to know," said Jem, from the next room, where he was spreading out the towels and pouring the water into the bath.

"Did you make friends with the people in the servants' hall at the Cedars?" asked the captain.

"I did, captain, obedient to your commands," said Jem with a wink. "And a very nice, genteel lot o' people they are, though I prefer the hall here, if there's any choice. Oh, yes, I walked up last night, permiscous like, and when they knew as I was your man they made me welcome, drawed me some of the best October and would 'a' opened a bottle of Madery, but I wouldn't hear on it—I allus was so modest. I had a cut of duck and a helpin' o' some sort o' cream with a long, furrin name——"

"Tush! I don't want to know what you had to eat and drink," interrupted the captain. "What did you hear?"

"Not much," he said, laying out the captain's ready-brushed morning suit. "I heard that Mr. Leicester was going up to London this morning, quite sudden like—and he ain't one of your impulse gents, neither. His man didn't know what was up, and depended to stop here for another month at the least. There wasn't anything awkward between the old people and the young 'un, neither, for the butler—which is a more high and mighty swell, in a bigger shirt front, than our

chap—he heard Mr. Dodson beg o' Mr. Leicester to stop. But, no, he said he'd go, and gone he has, sure enough."

"And now you can go," said the captain. "Stay! did you find that piece of paper which I told you to look for in the drawing room?"

"No, captain, and I looked everywhere."

"Idiot!" said the captain, between his teeth, "let that be a warning to you never to put your clumsy paw to paper again. How do I know who may have picked that up, with its cursed, telltale sentence?"

"I beg pardon," said Jem, humbly, "but I thought I was doing right. This 'ere inspector was a man from London, and he might have spotted either of us——" [78]

"Enough," said the captain, with a displeased frown.

"You were right to be cautious, and to give me warning, but you should have taken a better way in which to do it. Your grinning face and that stupid business of the letter were enough to arouse the suspicions of a child. Has the inspector gone?"

"Yes, captain," said Jem, "went last night. Found everythink satisfactory; the force in fine condition, and the reserve able and active. He! he!"

"What are you laughing at?" said the captain.

"There's only one policeman—bar the coastguard, which don't count—in the place," grinned Jem.

"Only one policeman—and the coastguard!" mused the captain.

Then he muttered, "All the better," and, dismissing his faithful servant, he prepared for his bath.

For a week Violet felt very dull, and the captain, who watched her closely behind his well-assumed simplicity and carelessness, found that all his amusing stories, songs and little pieces of acting failed to amuse her, and he was not surprised to hear Mrs. Mildmay say at breakfast one morning:

"My dear Violet, you want change of scene. You look tired, my child. If we can persuade Captain Murpoint to accompany us, we will go up to town for a week or two."

The captain bowed.

"I must be taking my flight soon, my dear madam. I have made a long stay."

Violet looked up with one of her frank, open glances.

"You will not go yet!" she said. "You will make this your home, Captain Murpoint, as you would have done if my father were master here."

The captain's eyes moistened, and his voice trembled with emotion as he bowed over to her in his courtly way.

"My dear Miss Mildmay," he said, in a low voice, "I express my gratitude for your generous, warm-hearted welcome, and, though I cannot consent to make the Park my home, I will stay a little longer, for I must confess that I am loath to go."

"Stay as long as you can—forever!" said Violet, in her impulsive way. "You are my father's best friend, and mine, therefore." [79]

"Do not let me be a drag on any of your plans," said the captain, earnestly. "I am an old campaigner, and can make myself comfortable anywhere. This is a charming place, but if Mrs. Mildmay would like a change, pray, pray do not let me be a hindrance."

"There is plenty of room over and over again for you in Park Place," said Violet, smiling. "So you will be no hindrance, Captain Murpoint. But I do not know that auntie really means to go to town—do you, auntie?"

"Well, my dear——" said Mrs. Mildmay, with hesitating indecision.

"At least," laughed Violet, "you will wait a week to think over it. You and Captain Murpoint can sit in council while I take a drive. I am going to try Dot and Spot in tandem," and she ran from the room.

"Be careful, my dear!" Mrs. Mildmay called after her, and the girl's light laugh rang back in loving mockery.

But something occurred within the next half hour which put the projected journey to London on the shelf for a while.

As Dot and Spot were trotting down the steep road, in very high spirits and showing signs of rebellion, Violet saw two gentlemen walking slowly up the hill.

Her attention was so much absorbed by the ponies that she did not bestow more than a glance upon them at first, and it was not until she had got considerably nearer to them that she recognized in one Mr. Leicester Dodson.

Impulsive, as usual, she on the instant determined to change places with that gentleman in the matter of pride, and show him that she also could be inconsistent, therefore, when she came on a level with the gentlemen, she merely responded to the uplifting of Mr. Leicester's deerstalker by a cool, little nod, and whipped up Dot into a sharper trot.

Leicester, who had pulled up expecting a little parley, colored slightly, and to Bertie Fairfax's

enthusiastic exclamation, "I say, Les, what a beautiful creature," replied, rather coldly:

"Do you think so? That is Miss Violet Mildmay."

Bertie glanced up at Leicester's face, and whistled, comically. [80]

"By Jove! she gave you the cut direct, Les."

"I am sure, I don't know," said Mr. Leicester, with the most provoking gravity. "She did, most likely, if you say so, Bertie—you, who are so well versed in woman's wiles and smiles."

"Hem!" laughed Bertie, "you haven't made much impression in that quarter, Les, and—Hello!" he broke off, "those blessed ponies have started round, and here they come, neck or nothing! By Heaven! they'll be over that wall, trap and all, if she don't pull them in directly!"

Leicester turned round sharply, and, without a word, set off running across the road.

"Keep tight hold of the reins!" he cried, in his deep, musical voice, as the two ponies came dashing along, with their wicked, little heads thrown back and the tiny, toy phaeton swinging and rocking behind them. "Keep a tight hand on the reins, and don't be frightened," he added, as he glanced at Violet's face, which was pale, but set fast and firm with determination and courage.

She nodded slightly to show him that she heard and would obey, and he saw the tiny, little hands close fast upon the reins.

The next instant he made a spring at the pony with such force that the little animal was nearly knocked over, and dragged him to a standstill.

Snap went one of the traces, and up went Master Spot, but a round smack on the head from Leicester's hand quieted him, and then Leicester turned, with a smile, to Violet.

"You haven't acquired the art yet," he said, nodding laughingly. "I am afraid you do not use the whip enough."

Violet bit her lip with vexation for a moment in silence, then burst into a merry laugh, which had not a particle of fear in it.

"Tiresome little beast!" she said, "he would turn round! I did whip him, indeed, I did! But he was so obstinate, and so—and so—I thought I would let him go!"

Mr. Leicester smiled incredulously, and Violet, understanding the smile, laughed again.

"Well, I really do believe I could have pulled him in if I had tried a little harder!" [81]

"Then you will not forgive me for interfering," he said.

Violet's smile changed immediately, and her beautiful eyes grew grave.

"I am only jesting," she said, in a low voice. "I know how kind you have been, and what you saved me from," and she glanced at the low wall, significantly.

"You must not try tandem alone just yet," he said.

At that moment, which was rather an awkward one, Bertie Fairfax came up, and Leicester hastened to introduce him.

Violet bowed to the fair-haired Bertie and, after a glance of examination, felt that she liked him.

"Is it sympathy or antipathy?" murmured Leicester, who was near her.

Violet flushed slightly. "Neither," she retorted, in as low a voice.

"The trace is broken," said Bertie. "You cannot drive the little beggar any farther, Miss Mildmay."

"No," said Leicester, who seemed to have forgotten the ponies. "I will cut the connection, and divide the little rascals. You can then drive Master Spot home, and I can put Dot in my pocket."

Violet laughed.

"Really, it is a shame to give you so much trouble," she said. "Can you not tie him to a post? I can send Tom down for him!"

"It is no trouble," said Leicester politely. "And, what is more, we were coming up to the Park. My mother and father have driven over to pay you a visit; my friend and I were to accompany them, but we preferred walking, and arranged to meet them."

"I hope I shall get home before they have gone," said Violet. "At least, you will let me take one of you up?"

But they both declined, and Violet started, leaving Leicester and Bertie to follow with the rebellious Dot.

"Well," said Leicester, with his half cynical smile, as Bertie Fairfax looked after the disappearing phaeton. "I know you are dying to pronounce your opinion."

"I like her," said Bertie. "I think she's the most beautiful girl I've seen—bar one," he added, *sotto voce*, "and I like the candid, fearless look of her face. Those violet, velvet eyes, too." [82]

"Nonsense, they're brown," said Leicester, but, although his voice was mocking, Bertie knew that his praises had pleased his friend.

"You evidently think as much of her yourself, *mon ami*," he said, significantly, "or you wouldn't drag that little beggar a mile and a half in a midsummer sun! Leicester's reformed! The bear is tamed!"

"Pshaw!" said Leicester. "Can't a man do a civil thing once in a way but all you young puppies must yelp at him?"

"Young!" retorted Bertie. "I like that, old Methuselah! Why, hang it, I'm older than you, if I haven't such a grim mug."

Leicester laughed.

"Then you've more years than sense, Bertie; so hold your tongue, and come on. I'd give a shilling for a bottle of Bass. If this little beggar were a hand smaller we'd tie his legs, sling him across your walking-stick, and carry him home in triumph like a dead rabbit."

CHAPTER IX.

THE PATH OF THE GHOST.

In due course they appeared at the Park, very dusty and rather hot. Mrs. Mildmay was greatly alarmed and distressed at the idea of their walking such a distance in such weather, but it was the captain who so cleverly suggested that a little refreshment might be acceptable.

Mr. Leicester eyed him for the first time with something like amiability.

"I am thirsty, I'll admit," he said, with his curt smile.

Mrs. Mildmay rang the bell.

"Some claret, and hock, and some seltzer water."

Violet, whose eyes were quick, saw a quiet twinkle in Mr. Fairfax's eyes, and said, with a laugh:

"Perhaps you would prefer something else, Mr. Fairfax?"

"No, not I," said wicked Bertie; "but Leicester here has acquired a most degraded taste for bitter beer." [83]

And as Mr. Leicester did not take the trouble to deny the imputation, Violet added, "and some bottles of ale."

The servant brought them, and while the gentlemen—including the captain, who said that he really could not resist the temptation—discussed them, Mrs. Dodson delivered herself of the purport of her visit.

Would Mrs. and Miss Mildmay and the captain come over to the Cedars and eat a friendly dinner with them on the morrow?

Mrs. Mildmay glanced interrogatively at Violet. Violet looked up, smilingly, and accepted.

"I shall be delighted, for my part," she said, "if it is really to be a very friendly, unceremonious evening."

The captain and Mrs. Mildmay echoed, and Mrs. Dodson looked pleased.

"It will be very quiet," she said. "We did expect Lord and Lady Boisdale from Coombe Lodge; but it is not certain whether they have come yet; if they have they have promised to join us."

"I am so glad!" said Mrs. Mildmay, who was secretly quite surprised that the Dodsons should be on dining terms with the Lackland family. "I like Lady Lackland so much. I met them very often in town. Violet does not know them; they have not been to Coombe Lodge since she left school."

"Then you will come, and I hope we shall see them," said Mrs. Dodson, rising. "Seven o'clock. Have you gentlemen finished your ale, and do you mean to ride back?"

"I'll walk, please," said Leicester, rising.

"Then you must rest a little longer, I think," said Mrs. Mildmay.

So it happened that Mr. and Mrs. Dodson were escorted to their carriage and started off, and that Leicester and Bertie spent the afternoon resting in Violet's drawing-room and conservatory, and that, while Bertie was absorbed in conversation with the captain, Leicester was left to exchange notes and opinions with Violet.

Perhaps it did not seem so dull to Miss Mildmay that afternoon, and perhaps Mr. Leicester was not altogether unhappy, stretching his long legs among her ferns and flowers. [84]

At seven o'clock on the following evening the Park carriage dashed up to the door of the Cedars, and the guests alighted.

"Fancy calling upon 'those people, the tallow chandlers,' auntie," whispered Violet, wickedly, as they were ushered through the immense hall to the magnificent drawing-room.

"Hush, my dear! they will hear you," murmured Mrs. Mildmay, warningly, as Mrs. Dodson came forward to greet them.

But Violet was shaking hands with Mr. Leicester and Mr. Fairfax, the latter looking particularly handsome and yellow-haired in his evening dress.

"The Boisdales have not come yet," said Mr. Dodson; "but they are coming."

"And here they are," said Leicester, as another carriage, not quite so well appointed as the wealthy Mildmays', dashed up.

Violet looked toward the door, with some curiosity, which was transformed to pleased interest as Lady Ethel entered.

Violet, whose likes and dislikes were most sudden, and oftentimes unaccountable, liked Ethel at first sight.

The two girls bowed first, and then shook hands. There was no doubting Violet's open, kindly eyes on Ethel's part, and Ethel's gentle, quiet smile on Violet's.

"This is my brother, Fitz," she said, as Violet made room for her on the sofa, and Violet looked up and saw good-natured, simple Lord Boisdale standing looking down at her with his boyish grin.

Violet felt herself superior to him immediately, and bowed quite condescendingly, as she would to a schoolboy. Lord Fitz felt—well, he never could tell how he felt at their first meeting, though he tried to often afterward.

"What a pretty place this is!" said Ethel. "I am so sorry we have not known more of it. It is the prettiest drive possible up the cliff."

"And that house with the green, old buildings on the hill," said Lord Boisdale, "is quite a treat. I wonder who owns it?" [85]

"Miss Violet Mildmay," said Mr. Fairfax, who was standing near, quite silent, for a wonder, and looking out of the corner of his frank, blue eyes at Ethel.

"Eh? Eh? I beg your pardon," said Lord Fitz, coloring.

"You have done nothing to need it," said Violet. "I am quite grateful to you for admiring what I love."

"Well, it is pretty," said Lord Fitz. "By Jove! prettier than this," he added, in a loud whisper, which was fortunately drowned by the announcement of dinner.

Mr. Dodson took in Lady Ethel, Lord Fitz followed up with Mrs. Mildmay, and Violet found herself upon Bertie Fairfax's arm, but Leicester Dodson sat near her at dinner, and, being at home, found it his duty to talk.

It was a pleasant dinner, exquisitely cooked and served by discreet, attentive and noiseless servants.

When the ladies returned to the drawing-room the gentlemen seemed to miss them, and after a very little wine was consumed they followed them.

Somebody proposed whist to Mr. Dodson presently. The captain said it was a good idea, and simple-minded Fitz, Mr. Dodson and Bertie and the captain sat down, just for a rubber, while the ladies gave them a little music.

Leicester could play a good hand at any game of cards, and was fond of whist, but he found himself at Violet's side, by the piano.

The captain was induced to sing, and the audience dropped into silence, for when Captain Murpoint pleased he could still conversation most effectively, and never did he sing more effectively than he did then.

When the carriage came up the party was quite loath to break up.

Coombe Lodge was within such an easy drive, and the Park so near, that, as Mr. Dodson said, they were like a family party.

It was a lovely moonlight night, and Leicester proposed that, if they insisted upon going, they should send the carriages on at a slow pace and walk themselves part of the way.

They started and sauntered on, the moonlight pouring down upon them its soft, placid, fitful light, and bathing sea and land, cliff and hollow, in a silver stream. [86]

The party soon broke up into groups. Fitz and Leicester with Violet, Bertie and Ethel with Mrs. Mildmay, and the captain and Mr. and Mrs. Dodson.

It was certainly a tempting night, and the young people seemed to quietly revel in it. Twice the Lackland carriage was sent on; but at last Ethel decided that they had better get in, and, much to Bertie's inward grief, Fitz consented.

"The day after to-morrow, then," he said, as he closed the carriage door. "You will not forget that as you forgot me."

"No," said Ethel laughing, but with a slight flush, "I will not forget, and I hope we shall all have a nice ride. Good-night."

Bertie bent over her hand and held it until he was in danger of the wheels. Then Leicester declared that he would go on as far as the Park and return with a cigar.

"You may light it now," said Violet, "if you like. I do not mind."

Leicester was very grateful and lit it.

By some means the captain attracted Bertie's attention as they neared the Park, and so, calling him away, left Leicester and Violet alone.

They did not seem to notice it, however, and stopped to look at the ruins of the old abbey clinging to the new house.

"Beautiful!" said Leicester. "Bertie has been in ecstasies over this; he is an author and an artist,

you know."

"I like him," said Violet, in her decisive way.

"So do I," said Leicester. "He is my best friend. My rooms and his in the Temple adjoin."

"Do they?" said Violet. "How strange it sounds: 'In the Temple.' What do you do in chambers?"

"He works hard. I—smoke, drink, read, think, and watch him working."

Violet laughed.

"It must be very nice," she said, softly. "Look!" she said, suddenly; "that is the ghost's window."

"That long oriel window?" said Leicester. "You promised to tell me about your pet ghost." [87]

"Don't joke about it," she said, with a short laugh. "Ask the fishermen about it. No man, woman or child would pass that tower after dark."

"What sort of ghost is it?" asked Leicester, with extreme levity. He did not believe in the supernatural.

"Have you never heard the legend?" said Violet. "It is a strange one."

"Tell it me here; it is a fine opportunity, and proper surroundings. Is it a man or a woman?"

"A nun," said Violet, "in white robes, with a skull's face and two gleaming eyes. My old nurse had seen it three times. And after each appearance something dreadful or unfortunate happened either at the Park or at the village. Once the old farm took fire and was burned down, the second time one of the Godolphins, who were then living at the Abbey, was drowned in the bay, and the third time a child fell off the cliff."

"The people of Penruddie should insure their lives after the ghost appears," said Leicester laughing.

"You laugh; but is it not strange?" said Violet gravely. "And, what is more strange to my mind, all the descriptions of the apparition by the different persons who have seen it tally exactly. All say it is a woman in white robes, with a skull's face and gleaming eyes, and that it carries a strange, shaded light, which throws a fearful, dim glare for some distance. Is it not awful?"

Leicester smiled.

"Not very," he said. "I have seen better at Drury Lane. And does your ghost confine herself to that lower and oriel window or does she perambulate?"

"Yes, she has been seen at that small window on the right, you see, which the ivy half covers."

"I see," he said, "and what room is that?"

"A room in the old abbey, which was left standing by my father's directions," said Violet, in a low voice. "He used it as a sort of study or reading-room, and when he died it was closed up."

"It is empty, then?" said Leicester.

"No; we would have nothing removed. There is all the old furniture as it used to be when he lived. It used to be left undisturbed while he was absent on his voyages, and it is undisturbed now." [88]

"It is a room for a ghost," said Leicester.

Violet nodded.

"Yes," she said. "Look, the moon is obscured. How dark it is. Ah! what is that?" she broke off, with a scared, dry voice, clutching Leicester's arm.

"What—where?" he asked, quickly, and laying his hand upon hers.

"There—in the room! at the window!" she breathed. "It has gone!"

"What?" he asked, still keeping the hand, which she seemed too frightened to remove.

"I—I—scarcely know," she said, brokenly, and with a shudder, which Leicester felt. "A something white, with a light, at that little window."

"Oh, are you sure?" he asked, doubtfully, anxious to convince her that it was mere fancy. "Remember, we have just been talking about the ghost."

"No, no; it was not fancy," she said. "I saw it plainly enough. I was not thinking of it as I spoke, and I saw it when the moon got behind the cloud. It was in my father's room."

At that moment she started again. A voice so close behind her that it seemed to spring from the ground said: "Miss Mildmay, where are you? Oh, here you are!"

And Captain Murpoint came up.

"How interested you look! What are you talking about?"

"Ghosts," said Leicester, fixing his dark, scrutinizing eyes upon him. "Did you not hear Miss Mildmay call out?"

"No," said the captain, innocently, "I only just came up."

But he had been close beside them for some minutes, and had not only heard Violet's low cry of terror, but the whole of the conversation.

CHAPTER X.

A DISQUIETING RUMOR.

Some quiet evenings are more productive of matter for reflection and afterthought than many more exciting and apparently eventful ones. How little there is to talk over a ball! One quadrille is like another and one partner very much like another. Most ballrooms are hot, most partners are unsuitable. But how often a quiet evening with a few friends in a country house is the beginning of some great matter—the mustard seed whence springs the shadowing tree, the bend of the stream which changes its whole course!

So it was with several of the members of Mrs. Dodson's quiet, little dinner.

Five of them at least returned to rest that night very thoughtful.

The captain, when he had reached the little boudoir, or dressing-room, of his luxurious suite, cast off as if it were a mask the careless smile of simple amiability and showed in his countenance some of the subtle working of his brain.

As he walked to the window and looked out upon the scene bathed in the moonlight, his face grave and frowning with deep thought, he looked a very different person to the easy-going gentleman of fortune which he had appeared in the drawing-room a few minutes before.

"Soh!" he muttered, "the room has been closed since John Mildmay's death, and never been opened; the dust must lie thick there. Haunted, too! Did she see anything, or was it only a sentimental girl's fancy? Violet is not sentimental, and is scarcely the girl to be led away by a weak fancy, either. The cry and the start were too natural in their suddenness and reluctance to be affected. Strange! I don't believe in ghosts, but if I did I would believe that Violet Mildmay saw one then.

"The haunted room lies near this—in what direction? Let me see," and he closed his eyes and worked out a mental calculation. "It must lie at the end of my bedroom, for that is in the part of [90] the building nearest the ruins. If I were a nervous man, I might feel qualmish about the near proximity of the haunted chamber. As it is, as I am a man who has to make his fortune, that chamber, with its uncanny character, is a godsend; it is a slice of luck I little looked for, another card in a hand which was not a bad one at any time.

"But I must not overlook my opponents. I play as one against many. First, Leicester Dodson; he is not to be lightly held. His handsome face and long legs carry a brain with them that may be a fitting match for mine. He has coolness and confidence, has Mr. Leicester Dodson, and he is smitten with Mistress Violet. They were close together to-night, in amiable confidence, her hand fell upon his arm. I have known a man's heart fall before one look of such a woman as Violet before now. And the boy, my young Lord Boisdale, is half inclined to lose his wits over the girl's fair face and grace—but he doesn't count. Some men are born fools, and this is one. He is of use, though. I must play one against the other. His sister, too, Lady Ethel, is no fool, and Mr. Bertie Fairfax thinks her an angel. There should be some cards to play there!

"Let me think, let me think. There are the materials of a nice little game of cross-purposes, if I can but manage it. Come in!"

He broke off abruptly as a knock at the door disturbed his cogitations.

Mr. Jem entered with his master's dressing-gown.

The captain threw off his coat, and donned the capacious garment in silence which Jem did not think proper to break.

At last the captain roused from his reverie and turned his attention to his follower.

"Where have you been?"

"Down in the village, captain," said Jem Starling, with a wink. "There's a wery nice little and pretty little creetur in cherry ribbons wot draws a good glass of ale."

The captain nodded, absently.

"Don't be seen there too often, and keep your mouth shut."

"Trust me," said Jem, clicking his tongue against his cheek, with a knowing air. "This old soldier [91] is a very remarkable old soldier, and he's like the parrot—he don't talk much, but he thinks the more."

"You may think as much as you like," said the captain, "but be as moderate in your thinking as your talking, my friend. You had a bad habit, when I knew you in former days, of lifting that elbow of yours too often," and the captain went through the pantomime of a man raising a glass to his lips. "One slip in that direction means ruin, remember, ruin for you as well as me. But, there, I have no wish to worry you. Amuse yourself as you like, so that you keep your mouth shut."

"I amuse myself," said Jem. "There's quite a little game going on down below, which I'm mighty interested in. It's like one o' them Chinese puzzles, little pieces of wood you put together, you know. Lor', you might 'a' lived down Whitechapel in Larry's thieves' kitchen and not see more signs and mysterious nods and winks as you do down here—down here in this little village, which I thought was inhabited by perfect infants. Why, a man has to keep his eyes open every minute to catch all the signs which one simple-looking chap of a fisherman gives to another."

"What do you mean?" asked the captain, absently, and with evident inattention. "What signs should these men have? what mystery? There, I'm tired, go to bed. By the way, there's a sovereign for you."

And he threw one of the coins which he had won that evening on the table.

Jem, who was beginning to understand his master's moods, picked up the donation with a touch of the forehead, and, with a gruff, "Good-night, captain," departed, muttering to himself:

"He's working, he is; he's begun the game, or my name's not Jem. Ah! he's a deep 'un, is the captain!"

In another room of the Park Violet was inclined to be thoughtful, and for some time her maid brushed the long tresses of her mistress' bright hair with inward surprise at her silence, and at last ventured to intrude upon it by the commencement of the little gossip to which Violet was rather partial, so long as it was confined to innocent chat and did not diverge to scandal and tittle-tattle.

So Marie ventured to remark that there were a great many servants at Coombe Lodge, and that [92] the people were very glad that the Lacklands had come down; but they seemed quite as pleased that Mr. Leicester had come, too.

Mr. Leicester's name seemed to rouse her mistress from her reverie, and she looked up, with her bright, clear gaze.

"What did you say about Mr. Leicester Dodson?"

"I said, miss, that the people in the village and the servants up at the Cedars were very glad that Mr. Leicester had come down again, for, though he's so very stern and grave-looking, he seems to be very kind, and everybody gives him a good name. And he's so liberal, miss! He gives a sovereign where others look hard at shillings. Only the last time he was down, miss, he went into Will Sanderson's cottage and sat and talked with little Jemmie, Willie Sanderson's brother, you know, miss, little lame Willie; and he sat and asked questions about his not being able to walk, and then he got up with a start, and in his thoughtful way, which almost makes you think you've done something wrong; but there comes down one o' them little inwalid chairs from London, and Willie says his brother is as well again now that he can be wheeled about. Of course, it came from Mr. Leicester, though when Willie went up to thank him, he sent word down that he was to have a glass of wine, and not to wait. And they say—the servants, you know—miss, that Mr. Leicester is so kind to Mrs. Dodson, and speaks to her quite soft, and when she was ill with the rheumatics he carried her up and downstairs; and so no wonder they likes him; though I did hear the cook say that Mr. Leicester was very particular about the made dishes, and that when he is angry it's something fearful, he's so stern, and what you might call overpowering, miss."

"Oh," said Violet, with her sweet little laugh, "throws the dishes at the butler's head, I suppose you think, Marie?"

"Oh, no, miss, but has the cook up, and talks to him so cold and sternlike, like he talked to Bill Summers, who threw down the horse he was so fond of. But, notwithstanding that way of his, he's very kind to all the servants, and any of 'em would do anything for him. They like Mr. [93] Fairfax, too, miss, and he, I heard 'em say, was an artist or an author, or something clever, miss, in London, and he lives with Mr. Leicester, in the same house, and him and Lord Fitz Boisdale are all great friends. And they do say, miss, though, of course, I can't tell whether it's true, that Mr. Leicester is courting Lady Ethel. Did I hurt you, miss?" she broke off, suspending her operations with the hair brush, for Violet had turned round her head rather suddenly.

"No," said Violet, quietly. "What do you say, that Mr. Leicester is in love with Lady Ethel Boisdale?"

"Well, miss, they say so, and it certainly do look like it, if all accounts be true, for Mr. Leicester's man says that his master is at all the balls and *soirées* and dinners at the Earl of Lackland's, and that he only came down here so suddenlike because Lady Lackland and Lord Fitz and Lady Ethel were coming down to Coombe Lodge."

"That will do," said Violet, "I will go to bed now."

And Marie braided the heavy mass of hair into thick, silken plaits, rattling on meanwhile with a laughable account of Mr. Starling's sayings and doings in the servants' hall, to which he seemed, by Marie's account, quite an acquisition. Violet smiled with her usual enjoyment of the humorous, of which she had a quick perception, and Marie left her still smiling.

But when the talkative little maid had closed the door behind her, light-hearted Violet felt rather lonely.

Her aunt slept in the next suite of rooms, and by touching a small bell, she could summon her, or by opening a door and passing through a little anteroom she could reach her, but Violet was not nervous or timid, and after a little wrestling with the feeling she conquered it.

But she could not altogether dismiss the small incidents of the evening from her mind.

Had she really seen the White Nun, or had fancy deceived her?

That was a question she could not answer satisfactorily.

Then another one presented itself for consideration. Was Mr. Leicester Dodson a suitor for Lady Ethel's hand?

That also was a question which she could not answer. [94]

It was true he had gone up to town suddenly, and it was true that he had been present at a ball at which Lady Ethel was also present. It was also a singular coincidence that he should return so suddenly to Penruddie at the time of the Lacklands' visit to Coombe Lodge.

"Well, if it was so," thought Violet, humming the air of a song which Captain Murpoint had sung, "it was nothing whatever to do with her."

Then she thought of his manner by the stile that evening—of its quiet sense of power and protection; of the grasp of his firm, strong hand on her trembling arm, of—well, of every word he had spoken, of every gesture he had used, of that act of kindness toward Jemmie Sanderson.

"I wish I were a little sleepier," she said, at last.

But though she went to bed sleep would not come to her sweet, deep eyes, which Mr. Leicester so much admired, and they were wide open watching the moonlight as it fell upon the wall for some time.

Had they possessed the power of looking through the wall they might have seen Mr. Leicester's tall, stalwart figure where he leaned against the garden gate, smoking his before-bed cigar, and ruminating, as wakeful as herself.

As for Lady Ethel, she, too, was thoughtful; but that was nothing unusual for her. But when Lord Fitz himself, who was generally extremely talkative, leaned back in profound silence for at least the time occupied in traversing two of the six miles to Coombe Lodge, Ethel felt rather surprised.

"How quiet you are, Fitz!" she said.

"Eh! am I?" he replied, rousing. "I was thinking. I say, Ethel, what do you think of the Mildmays?"

"I haven't thought very much about them," said Lady Ethel, and indeed she had not. "I think Violet Mildmay is very pretty."

"Isn't she!" exclaimed Lord Fitz, eagerly. "I think her the nicest girl I've seen. She's what you call a 'bluestocking,' isn't she? One of the 'merry and wise sort,' eh, Ethel?"

"Yes, I liked what I have seen of her very much. I am glad we have met." [95]

"Yes, so am I," said Lord Fitz. "I say, I heard Bertie and Leicester arranging a riding party; do you know if Miss Mildmay is coming?"

"I believe so," said Ethel; "yes, I am sure she is."

"Then," said his lordship, "I think I shall go."

"Of course you will, to take care of me," said Ethel, smiling.

There was a short pause, then Lord Fitz roused again with the sudden question:

"Ethel, do you think the Mildmays are well tiled in?"

"Tiled in, you inscrutable boy, what can you mean?" asked Ethel, with laughing bewilderment.

"Tiled in, well off, rich, you know, and all that."

"I should think so," said Lady Ethel, thoughtfully. "They have a very beautiful place and I have heard that her father was a merchant. Oh, yes, I should think she was rich."

Lord Fitz gave a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad of that," he said.

Ethel laughed.

"Why should you be glad?" she said, looking at him curiously.

"Oh, never mind," said Lord Fitz, rather embarrassed. "So her father was a merchant. All those merchant fellows get rich. Look at Leicester's father, he's as rich as Crœsus. I wish my governor was a merchant."

"He would be very much obliged to you for the compliment," said Lady Ethel, with a smile. "For my part I am satisfied with an earldom."

"Oh!" said Lord Fitz, and as he drew a long sigh he murmured inaudibly: "So should I if it had a lot of money with it."

"That's a rum fellow, that captain," said Lord Fitz, after a pause.

"In what way?" asked Ethel. "He seemed very ordinary, very amusing, too."

"Oh, yes, he's amusing enough," assented Lord Fitz. "But I'm half inclined to think he's deuced sharp. He can play whist like a book, and picked up the coin like old Hawksey at the club. But I say, Eth, you're pretty sharp, sharper than I am, and did you notice the rum look of the captain's [96] eyes? They seemed to be watching everybody and everything, and when he caught you looking at him they shifted down the table, and he was sure to make one of those funny speeches of his, as if he didn't want you to think he'd noticed you looking at him. And every time he lifted his wineglass he looked over the top all down the table."

"No, I didn't notice all that," replied Ethel. "You are getting quite a student of human nature and manners, Fitz."

"Oh," said Fitz, nodding his curly head decisively. "You were too much taken up with Mr. Bert. I saw you, Miss Sly Boots, laughing and whispering."

"For shame, Fitz!" retorted Ethel, blushing in the darkness. "Whispering to a stranger?"

"Well, and what then?" said Lord Fitz. "And I don't wonder at any one being taken up with Bert. He knows more stories than any man in all the clubs in London, and he can tell 'em better, too. Pity he's so poor, Ethel. Poor old Bert!"

Lady Ethel looked straight before her.

"He ought to have been a merchant or a tea grocer, or something of that sort," said Lord Fitz. "That's the way to make money."

By this time, or very shortly afterward, the carriage rolled up to the door of Coombe Lodge.

Ethel, who had not spoken since Lord Fitz's assertion that Bertie should have been a tea grocer, went straight up to Lady Lackland's room, where her mother was waiting for her.

Lord Fitz sauntered off to the billiard room, where he lighted a huge cigar and, with half-closed eyes, tried to decide upon the color of Violet's.

"I'm glad she's rich," he muttered, "very glad!"

Lady Lackland had been prevented from accompanying Fitz and Ethel by one of a series of headaches produced by the last balls of the past season, and she was now quite anxious to hear a full account of the party.

Ethel gave her a list of the guests.

Lady Lackland, who was lying on a couch, raised her head with a grave look of displeasure as [97]
Ethel mentioned Bertie Fairfax's name.

"Mr. Fairfax there?" she said. "You did not tell me he was to be there, Ethel."

"Did I not, mamma?" said Ethel, calmly. "I had forgotten it, perhaps, or did not think his expected presence of sufficient consequence. Yes, he was there."

"And this Miss Mildmay? I remember Mrs. Mildmay—quite a *distingué* looking woman. Is her niece like her?"

"She is very pretty and well bred," said Ethel.

Her ladyship mused coldly, eying her daughter at intervals while she sat looking through the window at the moon.

"And how did the Dodsons seem? Do you like them?"

"Yes," said Ethel, "very much. It was a very pleasant party, mamma; and we have arranged another, a riding party this time. I may go, I suppose?"

"Y—es," said Lady Lackland, "if Fitz goes with you—oh, yes, certainly. Mr. Leicester Dodson goes, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Ethel, "we are all going, all the young ones. Shall I stay any longer? I make your head ache more by talking."

"No, don't stay any longer," said Lady Lackland, coldly. "Before you go you will please draw that writing table near to me?"

Ethel did so, kissed her mother, who returned the warm pressure of her soft, sweet lips by a cold touch with her own, and left the room.

Lady Lackland drew the table to a convenient position, and without rising wrote a note to the earl, who was still in London.

"Tell me by return," she wrote, "who and what these Dodsons are, whether they are really as rich as they are supposed to be and if I am right in letting Ethel see so much of the son. She and Fitz dined at their place, the Cedars, this evening, and met a Miss Mildmay, Violet Mildmay, the merchant John Mildmay's daughter. I believe he left an immense fortune behind him, but I am not certain, and perhaps you can ascertain. I have not seen Fitz, but Ethel says the girl is very pretty and well bred. I am sorry to say that odious Mr. Fairfax was there also; he is staying at the [98]
Cedars."

Poor Bertie!

CHAPTER XI.

THE LITTLE OLD MAN.

It happened that Mr. Starling was rather late in arriving at the "Blue Lion" on the evening following that of the dinner party at the Cedars.

He had been sent over to the nearest market town on some errand of his master's and had not returned until after the servants' dinner, which meal he had partaken of "warmed up," a state and condition which he declared to the cook was enough to drive a parson swearing.

Altogether Jem was not in the brightest of moods when he entered the hospitable doors of the "Blue Lion", and it did not help to disperse the gloom to find that the parlor door was locked. The room was not empty, for he could hear the hum of voices inside talking in a hushed sort of undertone.

There was no one in the bar, and Mr. Starling, rendered by his early training and the influence of circumstances suspicious by anything out of the common, crept back on tiptoe into the street, and peeped through the crack of the window which was formed by the uplifting of the curtain.

There he saw that the usual number of the gentlemen was reinforced by a little old man, whom he seemed to recollect as having seen somewhere before.

He commenced whistling "Villikins and His Dinah," and re-entered the bar.

His quick ears detected the unslipping of the bolt, and he pushed open the door without any difficulty.

All the men had suddenly assumed an air of the usual indifference and sleepiness, and responded to his cheerful salutation after their various kinds.

"Bring me a pint of the very best, Miss Polly," said Mr. Starling, sinking into his seat, and eying from under his frowning eyelids the strange little man.

"A nice night for salamanders, mates."

"Yes," said Willie Sanderson, "it's mighty hot."

"No fish?" asked Jem. [99]

"No," was the response.

"But we expect a shoal over to-night," said the little man, with an almost imperceptible glance around the room.

"Ay," said the others, in a chorus. "We may do something to-night."

"And a very pleasant little trip, too," said Mr. Starling, nodding all round over his pewter pot. "I quite envy you, and I don't mind volunteering if so be as I shouldn't be in the way."

A slight but unmistakable expression of dismay shot for one instant on his manly face, then Willie Sanderson laughed slowly.

"Better be in bed, mate. We might have it rough, for all the wind's so dead now, and if you ain't a first-rate sailor the smell of the fish—if we get's any—might disagree with ye."

"Ay," said the little man. "Better stay in bed."

"Well, perhaps you're right," said Jem, thinking to himself that they were all mighty considerate on his behalf. "Yes, perhaps you're right. I like 'em when they are cooked, though, and I'll just look down in the morning and see if you've had a take."

"Do," said Willie, shortly, and then started another topic. But though many others followed, and Mr. Starling was quite as amusing as usual, the company did not seem to be in the mood for conversation or laughter, and Jem noticed that every man seemed to be watching or listening.

Once the door opened rather suddenly, and the little man rose with an ill attempt at indifference, but only Polly entered with some tobacco, and the little man sat down again.

Presently the door opened again, and Martha Pettingall entered.

She wore her yellow bandana, and as she looked round the room Jem, who while lighting his pipe was watching her closely, saw her raise her hand and scratch her ear.

He looked round the room covertly to see for whom the sign was intended, and was not surprised to see the little man lift his hand with a natural air and scratch his ear.

"Well, boys, what do you say, shall we be starting?" And as he spoke he went to the window and [100] pushed the curtain aside to look out at the night.

As he did so Jem, who was watching under his eyelids with the most lynx-like intention, saw a streak of light cleave the sky seawards.

The old man dropped the curtain again immediately, but Mr. Starling's eyes were sharp ones, and he had seen the light distinctly enough to know that it was not a natural phenomenon.

"Well, come along, boys," said Willie Sanderson, and, hastily tossing down the remains of their potations, the boys rose and trudged out, giving Martha Pettingall and Polly a cheery "good-night" as they passed.

Jem sat for a little while in deep thought. Then he sauntered out.

Outside he paused and looked up at the sky, then scratched his head, and instead of turning homeward he bent his steps toward the beach.

The tide was coming in; it was a fine night, and Jem could see every ripple upon the smiling, playful ocean.

There, far out now, were the fishing boats, looking like magnified walnut shells as they rose and fell on the light swell.

He waited until the boats were lost to sight, then climbed up the beach again.

As he passed through the street he peeped into the "Blue Lion".

There was no one in the bar, and he was about to peep in when he saw a light pierce the chink in the cellar flap.

He stooped and knelt down, and was rewarded, not with a sight of Polly or Martha, but of the

little old man, peering on his knees into what seemed to Jem like the mouth of a well.

"Hello," he thought, "here's the old chap playing larks with old Grunty-grump's beer," and he was about to run into the bar with the information.

But before he could get up from his knees another figure, no other than Martha Pettingall, entered the cellar, and, far from expressing alarm or indignation at the old man's presence, commenced talking with him in a low, confidential tone.

Jem would have given one of his large eyes to have heard that conversation, or for a peep into [101] that hole over which it was held.

But the pair spoke in a faint whisper, and Jem could not catch a word.

Presently the man dropped the lid of the well, spread some sawdust over it, and, taking up the candle from a cask, lighted Martha up the steps, following himself immediately after.

Jem got up, gave vent to a noiseless whistle, and, having had his curiosity sharpened to a most ravening edge, determined to play spy a little longer.

Accordingly he drew back into the shadow of the house, chose a tree as ambush, and kept a sharp watch both upon cellar and door.

The light did not appear in the former, and for some time the latter was not moved, but at last Jem heard voices in the bar, and presently Martha opened the door.

She stood for a few moments looking up and down the empty street, then re-entered.

"What they call reckonorriting," muttered Jem. "Now I bet the old chap'll come out."

And so it proved.

The little old man did come out, and set off at a sharp trot up the hill.

"Well, I'm blest; that must be funny fishin' up a mountain," said Jem to himself. "He's in a mighty hurry, too. But what's my move? Do I dog him or wait here a bit longer and see what the old woman will be up to? If I sets off arter him he's safe to see me; you could see a brass farden at two miles in this light. No, I'll stop here."

And he did, but was rather disgusted at his fortune when about half an hour afterward Martha came out, banged the shutters to, and shut up the house for the night.

"The performance is hover," said Jem, coming out of his ambush, "and a werry pretty play it's been, only, as the chap said at the Hitalian hopera, it 'ud be all the better if I knowed what it means, which jigger me if I do."

And with a shake of the head Jem hurried his steps homeward. [102]

He looked about him as he went, but nothing more suspicious occurred than the flitting of a rabbit across the road, at which Mr. Starling flung a stone, and as he paused within sight of the Park he wiped the perspiration from his bottle-shaped head, and sighed.

"Where's that chap gone to?" he asked himself. "Got a sweetheart up in the house, I dare say. I'll ask the cook; he knows everybody, and will put me right about these 'ere goings on at the "Blue Lion"."

Somewhat cheered by that resolution he trudged on again, looking at the house, which even to his unpoetical eyes looked beautiful in the moonlight.

Then he glanced at the sky, in which a few black clouds were gathering.

"All in the dark d'rectly," he muttered.

And as he spoke the moon was obscured.

He turned his eyes up toward it, then was about to lower them, when they saw something which caused him to start, to stop and to stare.

By this time he was near that part of the Park called the "ruins."

Right before him was the façade with the oriel window.

All the way up the hill, when not thinking of the "Blue Lion" and its mysterious frequenters, he had been thinking over the various ghost stories in connection with the Park, and now, just at the moment when the moon was obscured, and he was thinking of one of the latest he had heard, he saw something white pass across the window.

He stared and waited breathlessly.

"I'll take my oath I saw it," he muttered. "It's gone, and I mayn't see it again. But I saw it, I swear! Ah!"

The sharp, smothered exclamation was caused by absolute fear.

It had come again.

There, so plain and distinct that he could see every fold in the white robe, was the White Nun!

Jem's face turned pale and his teeth shook.

He had a sensation as of cold water being quietly poured down his back, and his mouth felt dry and hot.

The ghost stood motionless with its back to the window, and a horror seized upon Jem that it [103]

might perhaps turn, see him, and—and—he did not know what else to dread!

The horror was not ill-founded.

The ghost turned.

Jem saw the hideous white, bleached skull-face, and as the gleaming eyes seemed to pierce him through he fell on the ground, stricken by that nameless horror before which the strongest man must succumb.

How long he lay there he did not know.

When he feigned consciousness he found himself covered with dust, fearfully cold, but with no tangible injury.

He rose, shuddered, and striking the dust from his clothes with a shaking, uncertain hand walked slowly on, averting his eyes from the dreadful window.

"Shall I tell the captain what I've seen?" he thought. "No, he'll swear at me, and say I was drunk, and I should think I was, only I know it 'ud take more than three pints o' beer to knock me silly. Ugh! I shan't get the sight o' that thing's face and eyes out o' my head till I'm as dead as she was. This is a rum, unearthly sort o' place, this is, and if summat uncommon queer and nasty don't happen afore long I'm a Dutchman."

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER THE EVIL EYE.

The morning which had been fixed upon for the riding party was as fine as the many which had preceded it, and there was, as a slice of luck, a fresh breeze blowing from the sea that glittered beyond the cliffs.

Leicester had given his friend Bertie the choice of his stables, and Bertie had selected a rakish-looking chestnut mare, because, as he said, it winked at him as he entered.

"Humor should be encouraged in a horse," he said, with a laugh. "I'll ride this comic old lady."

"And I," said Leicester, "will give the Black Knight a spin."

The Black Knight was a tall, black hunter, a special favorite of Leicester's, and a good but somewhat willful horse.

"I'm afraid the ladies will be burned up," said Mrs. Dodson. "Won't you have a white scarf over your neck, Mr. Fairfax? I can't persuade Leicester, but perhaps you will be more prudent." [104]

"No, thank you, Mrs. Dodson," said Bertie. "I am rather anxious to get tanned, to tell you the truth, but I'm sorry Leicester won't wear one, because if he gets any darker he'll be as black as his horse."

And with that parting sally the light-hearted young fellow rode off after his friend.

When he reached the Park, Violet was standing in her habit on the lawn, with Leo making frantic dashes at her and altogether in insane delight.

"Isn't it hot?" said Violet, as they bent over her hand. "I'm afraid Lady Ethel will not have the courage to venture; the least fastidious might fear for their complexions this morning."

"Then you are not fastidious at all?" said Leicester.

"No, not at all," said Violet. "Besides, my blue veil will protect me. Ah, here's Captain Murpoint. He is going to ride my dear old Ned. Look at him; isn't he a noble fellow?"

"Who? the captain, or Ned?" said Leicester.

"Oh both," said Violet, with an arch smile.

And certainly the term would not have been altogether ill chosen; the captain did look well on horseback, and he sat on the old horse as if he had grown to his back.

"And here is another favorite," said Bertie, as the groom brought round a pretty white Arabian.

Leicester approached and held his hand, and when Violet placed her small foot in it, lifted her on to the saddle with that ease which is only acquired by practice.

For some time they rode all together, and the conversation was partly general, mutual inquiries after healths and remarks upon the weather filling up the first two miles.

Then the captain and Mr. Fairfax got into a conversation upon the merits of Bengal cheroots as weighed against Manilas, and Leicester and Violet were left to their own devices.

In due course they reached Coombe Lodge.

"Now for the proof of Lady Ethel's courage," said Captain Murpoint. "Here is Lord Fitz," he added, as his lordship came round from the stables dressed in a light summer tweed, which set off his slight, boyish figure to advantage. [105]

"Well, does Lady Ethel shrink from the ordeal?" said Leicester, as they shook hands.

"No," he said, "she is getting ready. My mother is in the drawing-room."

But while he spoke Lady Lackland came on to the steps, and, with her parasol raised, walked carefully toward them.

She shook hands most graciously with the captain, and insisted upon kissing Violet, which caress Violet met with her usual gentle smile and blush. Indeed, her ladyship was gracious to the whole party, even including Mr. Fairfax, who modestly kept in the background until the other salutations were made—his frank, handsome face rather overshadowed by the knowledge that he was not a welcome sight to the countess.

Ethel appeared the next moment, and welcomed the party with grace and gentleness, and after the usual gossip, the captain helped her to mount.

"Are—a—all ready?" said Lord Fitz.

"No, wait a moment," said the countess. "My dear, will you come and dine with us to-morrow, and forgive so informal an invitation? I will drive over to the Park and call upon Mrs. Mildmay this afternoon, and upon Mrs. Dodson. You, gentlemen, will honor us?" and with an amiable good-by she bade them start.

Although the great lady had been very gracious and smiled her sweetest, all the young people felt an indescribable sense of relief when they had got clear of the great iron gates, and the formal avenue. Ethel, who always seemed quieter and more reserved in her parent's presence, broke into a merry laugh which almost matched that of Violet's, who was telling her some anecdote concerning Leo, who trotted by her side with his great tongue out and his faithful eyes turned up to her with a look of admiring devotion.

"And now for the cliffs," said the captain, raising his white hand toward the sea. "I long for a breath of salt air. Mr. Fairfax, shall we put the horses to a little spurt? Mr. Leicester and my lord, you will look after the ladies?" [106]

And so, much to Mr. Bertie's annoyance, he divided the party.

"How beautiful the sea looks," Violet said.

"Yes, the cloth of the field of gold with the jewel side uppermost," said Leicester. "But you can get a better view of it from that promontory yonder. Will you come?"

"Yes," said Violet. "Will you, Lady Boisdale?"

"No," murmured Ethel, in a low voice. "Not if you call me Lady Boisdale, but I will go anywhere with you if you will call me Ethel."

"I will call you Ethel if you call me Violet."

"That I will," said Ethel, and the bargain was struck.

On the way homeward Captain Murpoint did a little expert maneuvering.

The captain, with infinite art, engaged Mr. Leicester in conversation, and, by dint of stopping every now and then to ask questions concerning, or to dilate upon, the beauty of the scenery, kept Leicester back while Lord Fitz and Violet went on in front.

Then he proposed that they should wait for the remainder of the party, and, when it came up, with the same tact he drew Bertie away from Lady Ethel, and compelled Leicester to escort her.

So he made two of our heroes intensely savage, but gained his point.

When they all came together for the parting Lord Fitz looked particularly happy and flustered; his boyish face was all smiles, and his yellow, flaxen hair was blown across his forehead like a donkey's twist.

"Jolly ride we've had," he said, looking round, "especially the ride home. It doesn't seem so hot."

"No," said Violet, who also looked particularly happy; "I have enjoyed it."

So had they all, they declared, and they parted at the crossroads amid laughter and with wishes for another expedition.

But when Bertie and Leicester turned up the road which led to the Cedars, a dissatisfied, disappointed expression seemed to settle upon both their faces, even on jovial, light-hearted Bertie's. [107]

The countess was as good as her word, and called at the Park and the Cedars with her invitation.

Mrs. Mildmay received her with her usual good-breeding, which covered a considerable amount of satisfaction, and accepted her invitation for herself and Violet.

At the Cedars, where she was received with a little more ceremony, she was quite as gracious, and entertained Mrs. Dodson with an account of the various admirable qualities of Ethel. There was no end to be gained by praising Lord Fitz, so the wily mother said nothing about him.

That evening the Lackland skeleton kept very discreetly in its cupboard, and no one, looking at the magnificent rooms and appointments, would ever have guessed that there was a skeleton at all there.

There were the evidences of wealth everywhere, spacious saloons and snug anterooms, splendid furniture in the best taste, magnificent plate, noiseless and well-liveried servants; and over and above all that nameless tone of rank and high breeding.

The Mildmays were late.

Leicester, who had enough confidence and cool determination to perform many acts which would seem impossible to smaller minds, had, in the drawing-room before dinner, determined upon escorting Violet in to dinner, and his intention was so palpable that Lady Lackland bowed to it, but she so maneuvered that Ethel should be seated on his other side, and that Bertie Fairfax should be separated from them by three others.

The dinner was not nearly so successful a one as that which Mr. Dodson had given.

Lady Lackland was particularly gracious, and talked to all in turns. The captain also exerted himself, but Leicester was either silent or devoted himself to the ladies on either side, and the rest of the company followed in the wake of any conversation like timid sheep.

It was not until the ladies had left the room that Bertie roused himself to be amusing.

The gentlemen got all together, and passed the Lackland port about with alacrity, for now they [108] felt that they were free to please themselves, and would not be disposed of by Lady Lackland like a set of children at a form round a table.

Bertie and the captain made Leicester and Lord Fitz laugh, and Mr. Dodson drank the port for half an hour, then went into the drawing-room.

Two pairs of eyes were raised with something like a welcome: Ethel's and Violet's.

The two girls were seated very close together, talking in a low voice. Violet was telling Ethel the ghost story, and Ethel was trying to convince her that she was the victim of a delusion.

As the gentlemen entered Violet said, quickly and with a slight flush:

"Hush! do not let us talk about it any more."

"Why?" said Ethel.

"Because," said Violet, with her usual candor and openness. "I promised Mr. Leicester Dodson I would try and forget it."

Leicester dropped into the vacant seat beside Violet without any hesitation.

Bertie, taking courage from Leicester, sauntered up to Lady Ethel, and the two pairs were now very comfortable and happy. But their delight was of short duration.

The captain, as he entered, had passed the quartet on the sofa and had stroked his mustache to hide the evil, malicious smile which crossed his face.

Then he went up to Lady Lackland, and in his soft tones laid himself out to please her.

He praised in a delicate, well-bred way the beauty and grace of Ethel, the cleverness and horsemanship of Lord Fitz, and when her ladyship, who had been rather suspicious of him at first, was beginning to think him rather nice and distinguished, he glided from Fitz and Ethel to Violet and Leicester.

"Miss Mildmay," he said, after a sigh, "is, as you are, my lady, no doubt aware, the daughter of my dearest friend! Poor John! he consigned his darling to my care, and I am sorely tempted to take upon myself the post of guardian in the literal sense of the word. I would pray for no other [109] task than that of watching over and protecting her. She is all soul, my dear countess, all soul, as simple, as innocent, as single minded as a child. Just the nature to be misled by seeming heroism, to fancy all sorts of wild, improbable things, to be deceived in matters of the heart. Look at her now. Have you ever seen a more absorbed and trustful face than that turned up to Mr. Leicester Dodson?"

Lady Lackland did not require to be directed. All the while the captain had been running on in his smooth way she had been watching the pair and Ethel and Bertie beside them, and she felt as if she could have dragged Mr. Fairfax away and thrust Leicester in his place while she pushed Fitz beside the ingenuous Violet.

"Mr. Leicester, too, if he will permit me to say so," continued the captain, "is one of those disinterested men who follow the bent of their passing fancy without thought or reflection. Immensely rich, my dear madam, immensely! He should marry rank. Rank is what he wants—so does Violet. It would never do for Violet to marry one of her own class—never! Poor John would rise from his grave to forbid it. Hundreds of times he has said to me 'Howard, my girl must be a countess!' Poor John!"

Lady Lackland sighed sympathetically, and her voice was less cold than it had been hitherto toward the captain when she said:

"She is beautiful and well bred enough for any rank."

The captain bowed.

"Did I hear that Lord Fitz sang?" he said, softly. "If so, I wish we could induce him to sing a duet with Violet."

"I'll try," said Lady Lackland, instantly acting on the hint, and she went over to Violet.

"Miss Mildmay, will you sing a duet with my son? Please do; we are dying for a little music."

Violet, ever ready to give pleasure, rose and laid down her fan.

Lord Fitz, who had vainly been trying to interest Mr. Dodson in the next likelihoods for the coming race meetings, came forward with a blush of pleasure, and Lady Lackland had the [110] satisfaction of seeing Lord Fitz and Violet at the piano.

Then the captain went up to Bertie and in his pleasantest manner said:

"Mr. Fairfax, there is a sketch here you ought to see. I have never seen such color and tint in so simple an effect."

Bertie looked up at him as if he could have pitched him out of the window, but he rose and with as good a grace as he could assume went with the artistic captain to inspect the sketch.

Leicester and Ethel were left alone, and they fell to talking of violets.

The song ended, and there were the usual thanks and requests for more.

Violet turned to Ethel and Leicester with a smile.

"Enjoyed it, did you?" she said, echoing his words. "How can you say so? I heard you talking the whole while!"

"Yes," said Fitz, who was radiant and eager to sing another in the same company, "it was too bad, and there's no escaping Mr. Leicester's voice."

"Thank you," said Leicester. "No one would wish to escape yours. Sing another, pray."

"Do you not sing, Mr. Leicester?" said Lady Lackland. "No? Mrs. Dodson, perhaps. Ethel, if Miss Mildmay is too hot, will you sing?"

Ethel rose obediently, and Leicester, in duty bound, led her to the piano.

So by clever maneuvering the countess had secured another ten minutes of happiness for Lord Fitz.

The song ended, Leicester stayed a little while at the piano, and then, after talking a few moments with Lady Lackland, strode back to Violet.

But Lord Fitz seemed to have taken possession of her, and Leicester sank back on the lounge in profound silence.

At last Mrs. Dodson dropped her fan. Fitz sprang across the room to pick it up, and Leicester regained his seat.

"It is very warm," said Violet.

"Come on to the terrace," said Leicester, with great coolness; "Lady Ethel is going, I think. Yes, there is Captain Murpoint opening the door." [111]

Violet put her hand upon his arm, and Leicester took her out.

"How beautiful!" she said. "I wish all the nights were moonlight."

"We cannot see the moonlight here; it is ruined and marred by the light from the room. Let us move a few feet lower down."

Violet allowed him to take her out of the glare of the room.

"We cannot see the sea," she said. "We have the advantage over the Lacklands, the only one I expect, for they are mighty people, are they not?"

"Very," said Leicester, coolly. "With one disadvantage."

"Pray what is that?" said Violet.

"That the great age of the blood has turned the heads of the family to stone."

"Oh, how can you say so?" said Violet. "Lady Lackland seems quite kind."

"The moon appears quite near," said Leicester, significantly. "But don't let us quarrel over Lady Lackland's temperature; I was going to ask you if you would persuade Mrs. Mildmay to try a little yachting."

Violet was about to reply when a smooth voice, the low, hateful one of Captain Murpoint, said behind them:

"Miss Mildmay, I am the reluctant censor. This night is dangerous after a warm room, and your aunt has commissioned me to break into a pleasant *tête-à-tête* and carry you from the probability of cold."

Violet smiled, and was about to put her hand upon his arm, but Leicester, whose face had set with that hard, cold look which some of his friends had seen when he was about to punish insolence or was suppressing his feelings by a great effort, took her hand and laid it on his own arm.

"Allow me to take you to Mrs. Mildmay and offer my excuses, Miss Mildmay," he said.

And as he passed the captain he looked him full in the face with the cold, icy stare.

The captain met the look of contemptuous suspicion and defiance with the sweetest smile, which lingered upon his face until the pair had quite passed, then it deepened to a grin, and the wreathed lips muttered: [112]

"Soh! Now comes the tug of war. My lord, the grand duke, King Leicester means fighting. So be it. Howard, my boy, you have had a nice little rest, now set to work!"

CHAPTER XIII.

Up to this time the captain had been making holiday. He had been resting after his exertions for his country in the stone quarries at Portland, enjoying a little quiet repose amid the luxuries and beauties of the Park. But while he had been reposing he had not allowed himself to be lulled into a false sense of security.

He was fully aware that the position which he occupied at Penruddie was intangible and untenable.

He was, though John Mildmay's oldest and best-loved friend, only a visitor at the Park, and a guest of Mrs. Mildmay.

But the captain had determined from the first to change the position from that of a guest on sufferance to one of power and possession.

Captain Murpoint, as he leaned back in the carriage returning to the Park, watched from between his half-closed lids the thoughtful, pensive face of the girl who was usually so light-hearted, careless, and talkative.

"Is she in love with him?" he asked himself. "What a pity it is one cannot pick the secret chamber of a woman's heart as he picks a doorlock! I hope she may be; love is blind for all but the adored one, and Miss Violet's eyes will have no regard for me in my little game while they are fixed on the brave and stoical Leicester."

Poor Violet, it was not until some time afterward that she knew how cunning a spider was the considerate and well-bred Howard Murpoint.

Both the ladies were tired when they reached home, and ascended to their rooms, to which Captain Murpoint insisted upon carrying their silver candlesticks. Then, when he had heard the [113] key turned in their respective chambers, he glided off to his own.

On the sofa sat Jem fast asleep, his head on his arm, and his thick, muscular hands—which still above the wrists bore the marks of the gang-chain—clinched at his side.

The captain looked down upon him, and then laid his white hand—which also, under the broad wristband, bore the telltale mark—upon Jem's shoulder.

Jem started up with an exclamation and an expression of fear so palpable that Captain Murpoint looked at him with some attention.

"Asleep, man," he said, rallying him in a soft, mocking voice. "You have been asleep for some weeks, my friend. It is time you, and I also, woke up. There is work to do."

"I'm glad of it," said Jem, with an oath and with a transient gleam of interest.

"Jem, you used to be able to climb. I have seen you cling to the cliffs like a bat, with your eyebrows. Have you lost that art?"

Jem shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm pretty strong in this arm and I ain't lost my cheek, captain. They used to call me the monkey, and p'r'aps I deserved it."

"Then I think we'll test your power to-night," said the captain. "Can you get down to the stable?"

"Yes," said Jem, with a frown, "if it wasn't for the dog. He's a beast, and we hates each other like poison!"

"That's natural," smiled the captain. "Nevertheless you must get down, Jem. Reach me two or three pairs of those thick shooting stockings from that drawer."

Jem wonderingly obeyed.

"Now then, put two pair on over your shoes."

"Now creep down," said the captain, "and bring me a coil of rope from the large stable. I saw it there yesterday, hung above the corn bin. Here's a key. It fits it, for I tried it. There's a lantern, too, I shall want—a dark one. You'll find one in one of the stables, for I saw the groom trimming it."

Jem, whose spirits seemed to rise at the prospect of congenial employment, was about to start, [114] but paused, and with a little hesitation said:

"But suppose I'm nabbed, captain? Rather awkward to be cotched in muffled boots shuffling round the stables."

The captain thought for a moment, then drew off a ring and handed it to him.

"If any one turns up go down on your hands and knees and say you are looking for my ring which I lost to-day. While they are looking on or helping, pick it up. That will avert all suspicion."

"'Pon my soul, it's wonderful; that's what it is!" said Jem, with ecstatic admiration of the captain's cleverness, and he departed.

After the lapse of half an hour the captain's quick ears caught the dull, muffled sound of the stockinged feet, and he sprang up as Jem entered with the coil of rope and the lantern.

"You alarmed no one?" said the captain.

"Not a soul," said Jem, with great triumph.

"Then you may keep the ring," said the captain, and he stopped Jem's thanks by adding:

"Now for the gymnastics. Next to this room," and he touched the wall with his white forefinger, "there is an empty room which has been closed, screwed up, for years. I want to find a way of getting into that room on the quiet. I want to creep in there one night and out of it like a ghost ——Why, what in the name of Jupiter is the matter with you?" he broke off to exclaim, for Jem's face had got as white as the supernatural phenomenon he, the captain, wished to imitate, and his eyes were fixed with horror and disquietude. "What's the matter with you, you idiot?"

"Captain, I'd climb the cliff, or walk a hundred miles, or—or—anything you'd ask me, but I can't go near that room! I've seen—there, never mind what I have seen! I won't go near it, and that's flat!"

The captain rose and walked to his bureau, from the drawer of which he took a neat little revolver.

Then, as if Jem had offered no objection he continued, in a smooth voice:

"I want you, Jem, to drop from this window onto the ivy beneath and to climb up to the window of the empty room. I will hold the one end of the rope, the other you shall tie round your waist. [115] When you get to the window—which has no shutters—you will throw the light from the lantern all round the room and ascertain in what direction the door lies, what furniture the room contains, and its condition. In fact you shall give me a complete description of it. Do you go?"

"No," said Jem, with an oath. "I know what I've seen, and don't go interfering where a human being shouldn't. I don't go, captain."

The captain took out his watch and chain and dropped them on the floor.

"Very good," he said, raising the revolver with calm but suppressed passion, "this is the only thing I have asked you to do in return for all I have done for you. You cur, I saved you from the chain-gang. I have fed you, clothed you, made a man of you, and like an overfed dog you turn, do you? Move a step"—for Jem, stung by the truth in the taunt, had with a scowl advanced a step —"move an inch and I'll shoot you without further parley! I'll shoot you as it is," he continued, taking accurate aim.

"If you dare to disobey me, I'll shoot you and summon the house to hear me tell you attacked me for my watch. The watch lies there, where it fell during our struggle; my ring, which you stole from my finger while I slept, is in your pocket; you are muffled like a burglar, and you have burglarious instruments in your hands. You see, Jem, you die, shot through the head, and everybody believes I shot you in self-defense."

Jem gradually grew white with mingled awe and fear.

He flung his hand down upon the table with an oath.

"I'll do it," he swore. "You're worse than a ghost, captain; you're worse than the very fiend himself. Sometimes I do believe you are him. I'll do it; I can't stand agin you, it's no use; ghost or no ghost I must cave in. Ring, watch, these 'ere stockings on—s'welp me, you planned it all!"

The captain smiled, but instead of retort uncoiled the rope, and by a gesture bade his tool fasten it round his waist. Then he oiled the window sashes so that the window might go up easily, lit the lantern, and after a long, breathless pause of listening motioned to Jem to let himself down. [116]

With intense interest, which was perfectly hidden under a calm, almost indifferent bearing, the captain watched his accomplice, as Jem, with monkeyish agility, dropped onto the thick boles of the ivy and clung to the stems as they in turn clung to the old walls.

Then he saw him rise hand over hand toward the window.

He gained the broad window ledge and, summoning all his doglike courage, dashed the cold perspiration from his brow and turned the light of the lantern full into the empty haunted room.

There was, however, nothing supernatural or ghostly to be seen.

It was an ordinary sized room, smaller than most of the modern rooms in the Park, and furnished in the style of a study or library.

There was a large old-fashioned bureau, an iron safe, half a dozen heavy, leather-backed, oak chairs and some shelves loaded with books.

A waste-paper basket stood under the table, and on the blotting paper upon the desk were some papers, as if they had been left by some one who intended returning within half an hour.

Upon all, table, desk, chairs, bureau, safe, lay the dust scattered by the hand of time, half an inch thick.

Jem took in all the details and then turned to descend.

In another moment the captain held out his hand and helped him into the room.

Jem, at first sullenly, but presently with some interest, described the room.

The captain asked question after question, all the while drawing on a piece of paper. At last when he had got all the information which Jem could possibly give he held out the piece of paper.

"Is that like it?" he said, with a smile.

Jem stared.

"It's the very room!" he exclaimed, wonder struck. "The furniture ain't quite like, but every bit on

it shows in the proper place, and, s'welp me, captain, you must be Old Nick!"

"Perhaps," said the captain, with a smile. "And now you may go to bed." [117]

Jem, without further parley, slipped off the rope and the stockings, and, still in a maze of fear, cunning, and admiration, departed.

The captain lit another cigar, and sat smiling at his paper until the dawn crept up from the east.

"When rogues lie awake," says an old proverb, "let honest men beware!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A SUMMER STORM.

"Yes," said Leicester, staring at himself in his shaving-glass the morning after the dinner at Coombe Lodge. "That is the question. Do I love her? If not, why when I am awake do I think over every little trivial word she has spoken, recall every expression of her face that accompanied it; and also when I am asleep do I dream of her, see her face, with its deep, pure eyes, all through the night? If I asked Bertie he would say that I do love her, and yet to myself I distrust myself. I cannot bring myself to acknowledge that I, the selfish, egotistical Leicester, truly and madly love a girl, sweet faced, violet-eyed angel though she be. Madly I said; and madly it must be. It is not in me to do or feel anything by halves. I must be hot and eager in action, thought and emotion, notwithstanding my seeming frigidity. Now," and his handsome face frowned, candidly, "I hate Captain Howard Murpoint. It's wicked, I know it is, but I hate him in despite of my principles."

Just then came a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Leicester, thinking it was his valet; "you are a nice, active body servant, William. I'm half dressed, and——Hello! it's you, is it?" he broke off as Bertie entered the room.

"Yes; you've cut your face, old fellow."

"Thank you for nothing; my glass told me that," said Leicester. "I never could shave myself, and William hasn't condescended to get up. I couldn't lie in bed such a morning as this, and you couldn't either, evidently." [118]

"No," said Bertie, eagerly. "I say, Les, what a day this would be for the yachting trip."

Leicester smiled.

"Wind's in the right quarter for a good blow," he said.

"I wonder now," said Bertie, hesitatingly, "if Mrs. Mildmay would like a——"

"You mean Lady Ethel," interrupted Leicester, with a smile.

Bertie's frank face flushed.

"Well, both of them," he said. "Suppose you ride over to the lodge and bring Fitz and her over here while I go down to the Park and ask Mrs. Mildmay and the captain, and of course Miss Violet."

"Suppose you ride over yourself," retorted Leicester.

Bertie shook his head with sad significance.

"That wouldn't do," he said. "Do you think Lady Lackland would trust Ethel—I mean Lady Boisdale to me, even though Fitz was with her? No! You go over and she won't say no; but if I go the sun will be too hot, or the trip too much, or something."

"Yes, have your own way, obstinate," said Leicester, and so after breakfast he mounted his hunter and rode over to Coombe Lodge.

When Bertie got over to the Park he found that the captain had gone out on urgent business.

Mrs. Mildmay, when asked if she would take the trip, looked over to Violet, who gave a quiet affirmative, and Bertie, trusting Leicester had been similarly lucky in his embassage, bore the ladies off to the beach.

Bertie hailed the captain's boat, and before it had rowed from the yacht to the shore Lord Fitz's dogcart came rattling down the rural parade.

"Oh, I am so glad!" said Violet, as Ethel sprang lightly down. "I was so afraid you would not come."

When the gentlemen had skillfully assisted the ladies on deck a chorus of delighted admiration rewarded them.

"How beautiful," said Violet. "Why, I thought a ship was always dirty and in disorder. But this is as clean and neat as a lady's workbox."

"Neater, I hope, or I shall have to discharge my sailing master," said Leicester, smiling. [119]

Violet and Ethel went from one end of the little vessel to the other, delighted with the novelty.

"Heave hoy! Heave hoy!" and up came the anchor.

Then at a word from Leicester her white, graceful sails fluttered out to the winds, and the birdlike *Petrel*, with a graceful toss, as if in laughing delight at her freedom, went off before the

summer breeze.

Fitz understood yachting as he did hunting, shooting, and all manly sports, and while Leicester gave the orders and sailed the vessel Fitz explained the different technical terms, taking a great deal of trouble to make the matter clear to Violet.

She was grateful to him, and interested, and as she was not in love with Mr. Leicester Dodson yet, her face was as bright to Fitz as to him, and when the owner of the yacht came with the rugs he found her quite occupied laughing with Fitz.

Bertie had secured Ethel, and at some little distance apart was talking as only he knew how to talk.

Leicester therefore had Mrs. Mildmay left to him, and, like a gallant gentleman, amused her.

He was not of a jealous disposition, and he was satisfied if Violet was happy; but after a little while he came up to Fitz's side.

"Miss Mildmay would like to see how the yacht is steered. Show her the wheel, Fitz."

"You do the honors," said Fitz, good naturedly. "You understand them best."

Mr. Leicester took her to the wheel and explained it.

"How I should like to steer!" she said. "I am ambitious; and ought to be encouraged."

"Yes," said Leicester, "it is a laudable ambition. Take hold of the wheel and I will show you."

The instruction being done more by the hand than the voice it followed that Leicester's strong, firm fingers came in contact with Violet's white, soft ones very frequently.

There arose suddenly upon the flash of the sea, the flap of the sails, and the murmur of the conversation, the musical notes of the ship's bell.

"Luncheon," said Leicester.

So they all "tumbled down," said Bertie, into the saloon, on entering which the ladies were again transfixed with astonishment. [120]

The table glittered with cut glass, plate, flowers, and a luncheon fit for the Caliph of Bagdad himself.

Never had that little bower of luxury ever been filled with sweeter voices or lighter laughter.

It was all delightful, from the lobsters that would roll about as if they were alive to the champagne which popped about the cabin like mimic guns of distress, Violet declared; and Leicester, seated next her, was heard to laugh aloud at one of Bertie's jokes—a thing unknown hitherto.

"Now suppose," said Leicester to Lady Ethel, "we turned out to be pirates, and all this while were carrying you off to the Mediterranean."

As he spoke the sails flapped against the mast, and the vessel rolled suddenly.

He looked up at the sky through the window with a sharp glance.

"The wind is changing," he said, quietly. "We shall have a calm."

"A calm," said Lady Ethel to Bertie. "Then we shall not be able to get on."

"Yes," he said, with a secret thrill of exultation. "I am afraid not. Where are you going, Leicester?"

"On deck," said Leicester, and he sprang up the companionway.

Presently he returned.

"What news?" said Fitz.

"Doubtful," said Leicester, pouring out a glass of wine for Mrs. Mildmay. "A calm, I say—my sailing master says a—storm."

"A storm!" said Mrs. Mildmay, with dismay.

"Only a summer storm," said Leicester, lightly.

He quietly ran up on deck, and they heard his deep voice giving the command to tack round.

Then there followed a hurried trampling on deck and suddenly a voice called out:

"Tumble up! All hands on deck!"

Fitz ran up the gangway, and Bertie would have followed, but Mrs. Mildmay seemed rather alarmed, and he stayed talking and laughing to reassure her. [121]

Presently Leicester came down and with a smile said:

"The rain is coming and some more wind. Mrs. Mildmay, you are in the pirates' clutches, so make yourself comfortable on the sofa."

She obeyed, for she was really frightened.

Violet sat beside her, and Bertie and Lady Ethel did their best to convince her that there was no danger.

Then Violet stole to the door of the cabin and looked longingly toward the dark sky.

As she looked Leicester, passing, saw her.

"Let me come up with you, please," she said.

"I couldn't think of it," he said.

But he called down to ask Mrs. Mildmay if she would permit it, and then handed Violet up.

All the sails were furled, yet the yacht drove along at tremendous pace before the gale.

Leicester's voice was scarcely deep enough to drown the wind, and the little vessel tossed like a nutshell as it forced its way along the breakers.

So anxious had Leicester grown that he seemed to have forgotten the ladies.

But he had not, for presently, after a colloquy with the skipper, he shrugged his shoulders and came up to Violet, who was standing, not in the least wet or frightened, by the forecastle.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing much," he said, with a smile. "I have resigned command, that's all. My skipper knows this coast better than I do, and I have left him to steer us right."

"Is there any danger of going wrong, then?" she asked.

"Well——" he hesitated.

At that moment the skipper shouted out something that sounded dreadfully sharp and stern in the wind, Leicester caught Violet's arm and drew her to him, glancing as he did so to Bertie and Fitz, who were both guarding Lady Ethel.

The yacht sprang forward under the press of sail which the skipper had ordered to be put on.

"Right now," said Leicester, cheerily. "We shall fly home to Penruddie; I can almost see the white cliffs. Ah!" he broke off, sharply, "port your helm! Breakers ahead! Great Heaven! we are on the north reef!" [122]

He sprang to the helm, Violet paled with a sudden fear, cowered, and dropped to her knees.

The next instant she felt an arm round her, and a voice in her ear whispered, passionately:

"You are not frightened! We are safe!"

Then she felt herself lifted up and carried down the gangway.

She had not fainted—or had she, and were the words, "Oh, my darling, my Violet!" only creations of fancy?

CHAPTER XV.

THE SERPENT'S STING.

It is not to be supposed that Captain Howard Murpoint had deserted his post of observation at this critical time on a matter of no moment. The captain had commenced to play his game in earnest, and that he might be able to throw down one of his trump cards he had declared his intention of riding on the chestnut to the market town of Tenby.

Had he even been aware that Mr. Leicester would carry out his yachting intentions on that day it is probable that he would still have kept to his plan, for the captain was a firm believer in the proverb, "Delays are dangerous," and once assured that a step was necessary never hesitated about taking it.

Consequently after breakfast, he mounted the chestnut and rode off, waving his white, well-gloved hand to the ladies, and smiling with the serenity of a mind at ease and a heart innocent of guile.

When he had got beyond the village, the smile disappeared, and the chestnut felt the whip, in which the captain tied three good hard knots, across its sleek sides.

He was in a hurry, and he soon impressed it upon the horse, who tore into Tenby all on fire with surprise and anger at its novel treatment.

The captain stabled his steed, drank a glass of ale at the "Royal George", and then strolled through the town.

It was an old-fashioned place, but there were some good shops, among them an apparently well-stocked stationer's. [123]

To this the captain directed his steps, and, sauntering in, purchased some paper and envelopes, also some ink and pens and pencils, and seemed inclined to purchase anything to which the shopman—an obliging fellow—called his attention.

"Have you any parchment? I am going to make a list of goods—curiosities, and such like—to send over seas, and I am afraid that paper might be destroyed," he explained.

"Oh, parchment is the thing, sair," said the man, and he took a roll of the same from a drawer.

"There is some, sir," said he, "but it is rather faded. The fact is we are not often asked for it, and this has been in the house for some time. If it is of any use to you I will charge you less than the usual price for it."

The captain turned it over indifferently, and separated the sheets with his finger.

"No," he said, "I think paper will do." Then he raised his eyes to a shelf behind the shopkeeper's head and said, suddenly: "Is that sealing wax up there? I think I'll have some."

The man reached a ladder and climbed up for it.

While his back was turned Captain Murpoint skillfully abstracted a sheet of parchment from the heap and slid it into his pocket, coughing the while to cover the sound of the crisp rustle, and flinging his umbrella down upon the remainder so as to account for the sound if his cough had not covered it.

The shopman descended quite unsuspiciously, however, and the captain, having added the sealing wax and some red tape to his purchases, took his leave, refusing all the obliging stationer's offers to send the parcel home, and carrying it in his hand.

From the High Street he then made a slight divergence to one of the smaller thoroughfares, and paused before a small general shop which displayed in its little window a sample of some of its varied stock.

He purchased several small articles and then inquired in the most natural manner for a flour dredger.

"I do not know what it is," he added, with a smile, as the good woman looked rather surprised; [124]
"but I have been commissioned to purchase one for a lady."

"Certainly, sir," said the woman; and she produced a flour dredger.

The captain examined it with a smile.

"I suppose it is all right," he said, and he had it packed up with his other purchases.

With a sigh of absolute relief, for, though the incident was seemingly trivial, he had effected a good deal in obtaining a sheet of parchment and a flour dredger without attracting attention, he returned to the "Royal George", and sat down to a nice light luncheon.

Then ordering his horse, he mounted again.

On his way home, a very little distance from his route, lay Coombe Lodge. The captain was a gallant gentleman, and he thought it would only be a delicate piece of attention if he called to inquire after Lady Lackland's health.

After earnest inquiries after her ladyship's headache the captain gave an amusing and highly colored account of his trip to Tenby, introducing and inventing half a dozen little serio-comic incidents, which, though they did not occur, highly amused the countess.

"I am sorry Ethel and Fitz are out," she said as the captain rose to go. "I suppose, however, you did not expect to find them at home?"

She smiled interrogatively.

"No," he said, "I was not aware——"

"Indeed!" said the countess. "Did you not know that they were going yachting with Mr. Leicester Dodson and Mrs. Mildmay?"

The captain certainly did not know it, and shrugged his shoulders with a smile.

"No, indeed," he said. "Ah, my dear Lady Lackland, these very young people are so impulsive! They arranged their little pleasure trip after I had started this morning, seeing that the weather was fine—though," he added, glancing at the window, "I think we may have a storm."

Lady Lackland looked at him thoughtfully.

She thought him a man worth conciliation, and perhaps of confidence. [125]

"Mrs. Mildmay has gone," she said. "Mr. Dodson rode over this morning and fetched Fitz and Ethel."

"Oh!" said the captain, significantly. "Very impulsive young man, my dear lady; very excellent, clever young man, but impulsive. He has been badly brought up, in a selfish circle, and I am afraid has acquired a considerable amount of willfulness, and—shall I add, fickleness?"

"What do you mean?" asked Lady Lackland, with soft abruptness. "Do you think Mr. Leicester is obstinate and a flirt?"

"The very word, my dear lady," said the captain, softly, as he sank into the seat beside her. "I am very interested in Mr. Leicester," he continued, swinging his hat gently and looking up into the countess' face under his deeply penciled eyebrows. "Very. I could tell you why—perhaps you can guess. To be candid, my dear Lady Lackland, as I told you the other evening, I am poor John Mildmay's oldest friend. I was to have been his daughter's legal guardian; and though his sudden death prevented him bequeathing her welfare to my care I still feel for her the affection and anxiety of a father. Ah, how can I do otherwise when by her every look and gesture, by her every smile and tone she reminds me of my dear lost friend?"

Lady Lackland, whose eyes had been averted, sought his face with a mild but astute look of inquiry.

"One cannot suppose for one minute," continued the captain, "that a man of the world like Leicester Dodson can entertain any serious intention of making a proposal to Violet. No, my dear lady; men of his class strike at higher game." He paused, and did not fail to notice the sudden

drooping of the wily countess' eyelids. "They, or their fathers, have made money by trade, and with that money they desire—nay, they look to purchase rank. It is their ambition. They have it instilled into them with the food of their infancy; they look forward to it as the final goal of their endeavors. Yes, Leicester Dodson intends to marry rank, and," he continued, in a lower voice and with a subtle significance, "and will do so if some foolish flirtation does not act as a stumbling-block."

The countess raised her face languidly. [126]

She understood the captain, and she began to see that he was on her side.

He meant by his delicate confidence to warn her that if the flirtation between Leicester Dodson, the millionaire's son, and Violet Mildmay, the merchant's daughter, were not stopped, the countess would lose the aforesaid Leicester and his money bags for her daughter, Lady Ethel.

The captain continued:

"I may describe the position of Violet as very similar, yet with a difference. She, my dear lady, though I, so biased and partial, should not give it utterance perhaps, is a most charming and lovable girl; but she is simple—simple in the extreme, unsophisticated. She would be the first to be led away and deceived into thinking a foolish flirtation, a midsummer day's flirtation, a serious love affair and a binding engagement. Now I am sure that must not be. No, she is reserved and intended for a different and may I say a happier and more suitable fate? By the way, did you say that Mr. Leicester Dodson came over himself this morning?"

"Yes," said the countess.

The captain smoothed his hat.

"I hope you will not think the less of him for what I have said, my dear lady."

"Oh, no!" said Lady Lackland, "not in any way. Besides, you have not said much," she added, "only that he is somewhat of a flirt."

"And that you have noticed yourself?" said the captain, with ill-concealed eagerness—"you who have so many better opportunities of observing him in the society which you so much adorn."

"Yes," said Lady Lackland, "I think perhaps that he is a flirt. He would be a very eligible young man if he were a little more steadfast; but one cannot put old heads on young shoulders, Captain Murpoint."

"No, no," said the captain. And with a delicate emphasis he shook hands and took his leave, repeating to himself Lady Lackland's reply as he went. It was not a very important one; but we shall see how by deftly twisting and turning it Captain Murpoint effected a great deal with it. [127]

As the captain rode home the storm gathered and broke upon him.

The wind nearly blew him from his horse and the rain saturated him.

At the Park he found the servants in a state of confusion and alarm, and learned that the ladies had not yet come home.

Without dismounting he galloped down the steep hill to the beach, which presented a picturesque scene enough, but a sufficiently significant one.

Just within reach of the spray stood a small crowd composed of the fishermen and their wives and children and the principal part of the village.

Lower down, and seemingly in the foremost waves themselves, were Willie Sanderson and two or three of his mates, vainly endeavoring to launch one of the boats.

By their side, in close and agitated conversation with Mr. Starling, was Jemmie, Sanderson's lame brother.

The captain spurred his horse across the stones and shouted, loud enough to be heard above the roar of the waves:

"Has the yacht come in?"

Willie Sanderson shook his head, and significantly pointed seaward.

Jem Starling came up and touched his hat and, bellowing hoarsely in the captain's ear, said:

"No, she ain't come in, sir, and these chaps be all in a regular state about her. They say——"

But the captain was too anxious as to the situation to receive anything second-hand, and beckoned imperiously to Willie Sanderson, who came up to him.

"Do you think there is any danger?" asked the captain, in a voice slightly tremulous.

Willie Sanderson shook his head gravely.

"Can't say exactly, sir. All depends upon where she be. I knows as the skipper said they were to sail south and tack round. If so be they have, why then they're close agin' the North Reef by now, and——"

"Well, well?" asked the captain, with feverish eagerness.

"Well, then, may Heaven help 'em!" said Willie, solemnly. [128]

The captain's white, strong hand clutched the reins tightly, and his thin lips compressed with restrained emotion.

If the yacht were on the North Reef she would be wrecked, and in all probability Violet, her aunt, and Leicester Dodson, Fitz and Lady Ethel would be drowned.

All the eventualities, the results, and the personal consequences of such a fatality rushed through the captain's brain, and Jem, who was standing by the horse's head, watching his master, saw a gleam of fiendish joy flash across the pale, masterful face. Perhaps the captain knew that he had seen it, for the next instant his face had assumed a look of alarm and anxiety, and, with a burst of excitement not altogether feigned, he flung himself from the saddle, shouting:

"Launch the boat! We must go to her. Who volunteers?"

The men looked out to sea, then shook their heads.

"No boat could live in this, sir," shouted Willie Sanderson, "and if she could, by the time we'd got to the North Reef, the storm would be over. Lookee now, it's clearing off a bit to northward."

The storm abated and passed off as rapidly as it had gathered and broken, and the wet crowd, about an hour afterward, had the extreme pleasure of descrying a white speck on the horizon, which soon grew to be the familiar form of the *Petrel*.

She sailed in, with all her canvas crowded, looking as unconcerned as a swan on a lake after an April shower, and the crowd burst into a cheer of mingled excitement and admiration.

But the captain had determined that there should be a little display of emotion, and therefore when the *Petrel* ran into the little rude harbor he hurried forward and sprang on to her deck, his two hands outstretched to grasp Violet and Mrs. Mildmay with his face pale and grateful.

With soft but emphatic gratitude and anxiety he went from one to the other of the ladies, while Leicester, in command of the vessel, was seeing that all was made secure. [129]

When he was free he turned to where Fitz and Bertie were assisting the ladies to alight and eyed the captain with a calm, keen scrutiny.

"Alarmed, were you, Captain Murpoint?" he said, in his grand, clear voice. "What would you have been if you had been fated to be with us?" and a slight sneer curled his lip.

"Not so much alarmed or so anxious," said the captain, with a smile that was a finished piece of calm reproach. "For I should at least have had the satisfaction of sharing in the danger of my friends."

Leicester smiled grimly and stooped to lend Violet his hand over the gangway.

"A poor satisfaction, captain. There was not much danger, or if there was it did not last long. The Petrel will see out many a worse summer gale than this. But I am sorry," he added, addressing Mrs. Mildmay with a much more eager tone in his voice, "I am so sorry you should have been so alarmed and made so uncomfortable! And—ah, here is the carriage," he said. And he ran up the beach as the carriage Jem had ordered drove up to the parade.

He held the door as Mrs. Mildmay and Violet entered, but though his dark eyes sought hers Violet's made him no return, and her "good-by" was as dreamy and indistinct as her gaze.

Leicester returned to the *Petrel* to assist Lady Ethel, in a state of mind not enviable.

"I'll drive you home, Lady Ethel, if you are too tired," he said, "but if you are not my mother will be delighted beyond measure to make you comfortable. What do you say, Fitz? Will you take refuge with us for to-night? I'll ride over to Coombe Lodge and set Lady Lackland's fears at rest."

Now Fitz was very willing to stay so near Violet Mildmay, and Ethel was not unwilling, though she demurred.

But Leicester's strong will decided for them, and it followed that they were on their way to the Cedars while he was galloping toward Coombe Lodge to apprise Lady Lackland of her children's safety and their whereabouts, also to order a box of clothes, which Ethel declared was positively necessary. [130]

The captain's attention continued during the journey home and even to the door of the ladies' rooms, for he insisted that they should take precautions against colds, and in his quiet, unassuming way saw that their comforts were attended to.

So it followed that Violet's maid was waiting with hot water, a fire fit to roast an ox, and an amount of commiseration altogether too much for Violet's patience.

The first thing she did was to throw up the window and lean out upon her white, well-rounded arms, the next, after inhaling a long breath of the storm-freshened air, was to request Marie to suppress the fire as quickly as possible and throw out the hot water.

Marie picked off the coals daintily and walked away. Directly she had gone Violet slipped the bolt on the door and dropped down upon the bed with a long-drawn sigh.

"'My darling! my darling!' Did he say that to me or was I dreaming? Oh, no, he never could have said it. I must have been dreaming, I did nearly faint, and so I must have fancied that he said so. He could not; it is not possible. He has never been anything else but grave and courteous, he would not forget himself in a moment; his is not the kind of nature—no, no, it is absurd!" And she sighed and smiled.

"I cannot think what is coming to me lately. I am all fancies and dreams and nonsensical imaginings. First I fancy I see a villain in my father's oldest friend, then I fancy I see a ghost in the old tower, and now, the maddest thing of all, I fancy I hear a grave, well-bred gentleman like

Leicester Dodson address me as 'his darling!' Oh, it is absurd!"

A dinner—partly fresh and partly a *rechauffé* of the ruined one—was served up, and the captain did his best to raise the spirits of the ladies.

Mrs. Mildmay, whose very ignorance of nautical matters had preserved her from alarm, was very cheerful and praised the yacht and all pertaining to it with liberal amiability, and, as for the storm, why, if Violet did not take cold, which after her warm bath she would not be likely to, it only added a zest to the trip.

Violet smiled with grave amusement, and did not think fit to enlighten her aunt as to the fate of [131] the hot water, and the captain chimed in as usual from his leaning post outside the veranda, where he smoked a cigar of an evening within speaking distance of the ladies inside.

"I called at Coombe Lodge this morning," he said, with a pause which he filled up with his cigar.

Violet, who lay on a couch, had closed her eyes, but the captain saw that she was not asleep.

"And how is Lady Lackland?" asked Mrs. Mildmay.

"Better I found her, I am glad to say, much better. The earl had not come down yet; parliamentary duties kept him in town I suppose. Pity, a great pity. The peasant in his cot, beneath the blue sky and on the heather-covered hill, is to be envied by an earl in London this weather. By the way," he continued, glancing at Violet and speaking in a low tone as if he were anxious not to awake her, "I heard of rather a damaging trait in Leicester's character."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Mildmay, very much interested, and looking up from her knitting.

"Yes; Lady Lackland knows more of him than we do, of course; she sees him at balls and concerts, at friends' houses and parties. Mr. Leicester Dodson, so I hear, is a terrible flirt."

"Oh, dear me, I am sorry to hear that," said Mrs. Mildmay, shaking her head over her knitting and entirely unconscious of the sudden pallor which had fallen upon the motionless face opposite her and which the captain had quickly noted.

"Yes, not very dreadful, is it? It is not fair to accuse the young fellow—as nice a young fellow as ever lived!—behind his back, but I do hear two or three stories of broken hearts and scattered vows—but nothing very tangible. But be sure Lady Lackland would not have mentioned it if she had not some grounds for regretting it."

"Regretting it?" said Mrs. Mildmay, who could never see through hints and inuendoes and always required things to be as plain as plate-glass.

"Don't you see, my dear madam," said the captain, lowering his voice to a musical pitch, which was as distinct as a trumpet call to the ears of the motionless girl, "don't you see that the young [132] fellow is really in love with Lady Ethel and that he would win her but for Lady Lackland's doubt of his steadiness. A flirt, my dear madam, is to be evaded by every prudent mother and every sensible girl——"

Violet rose, white and statuesque.

"I was nearly asleep," she said, looking round the room with a sad, stupefied look in her eyes of dumb pain, like some one roused to a sense of a lifelong misery. "I—I am very tired, aunt, and I think I shall go to bed."

The captain was by her side, ringing for her candle, in a moment, and she smiled—yes, smiled at him as he pressed her hand and murmured a good-night.

Brave Violet! what did that smile cost her?

She had heard every word, and every word rang in her ears and stabbed at her breast when she laid her head on her pillow.

While Violet was lying awake and burning with mortification and a wounded heart Jemmie Sanderson was down on his knees beside his straw pallet in the policeman's cot thanking Heaven for the safe return of his benefactor and greatly worshiped Leicester. He loved Leicester with a love that passed all calculation. He had stood unnoticed in the crowd, close to the ladies and gentlemen, when they had landed and, unseen by Leicester, he had stood close behind him, weeping his childish heart out with happy tears of joy and gratitude.

So the two, woman and boy, were at the same time enduring widely different feelings for the same man.

Life is full of strange contradictions.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PART OF A FLIRT.

Quite unconscious of the stab in the back, so to speak, which the cunning Captain Murpoint had delivered him, Leicester spent the evening in entertaining his guests, Lord Fitz and Lady Ethel.

In the morning Leicester and his guests walked over to the Park. [133]

He would have liked to have been alone, but that was impossible under the circumstances, so he contented himself with hoping that he might get an opportunity of speaking to Violet alone.

But Violet had spent the wakeful night in planning for herself a desperate course of action.

She was, as she told herself at breakfast time, prepared to meet "the flirt" on his own ground.

Nothing would do for Mrs. Mildmay but that she insisted that the Cedars' party should remain all day to dinner, and to see the evening out, and a footman was dispatched with the invitation for Mr. and Mrs. Dodson.

"I am so delighted you have come," said the good-natured lady; "for I do think Violet is quite triste and needs a little excitement."

They were standing on the lawn chatting, and Leicester glanced up at the upper windows expecting to see a blind down.

"Miss Mildmay not well?" he asked.

"Yes," said Mrs. Mildmay. "But a little low spirited, I think. She will brighten up when she hears that you are here. James," and she called to a footman who was passing, "please ask Miss Violet to come down."

But Violet did not need any information.

She saw the group approach from her window, and as Leicester's long limbs strode across the lawn her heart beat violently.

"He has come for another flirtation, has he?" said the mortified, suffering girl. "Well, he shall not be disappointed. He shall see that two can play at his contemptible game."

So saying she thrust a camellia in her glossy hair, called a smile, perhaps the first artificial one she had ever forced, to her beautiful face, and stole down the stairs, bursting upon the group like a vision of Oriental beauty.

Leicester advanced, but Violet passed him and went to kiss Ethel. Then she shook hands cordially with Bertie, added a blush when repeating the salutation for Lord Fitz, and pretended to have forgotten that Leicester had not received a word.

"I'm so small," he said, with a smile, "that no wonder Miss Mildmay overlooks me." [134]

"Did I not shake hands?" said Violet, looking him full in the face, not with coldness, but with a pleasant, indifferent, painfully frank friendship. "Did I not? How stupid of me! But I was overwhelmed with surprise," and she gave him her hand with a cool, self-composed smile which staggered him.

Before three minutes had passed Lord Fitz plucked up courage to say:

"Miss Mildmay, you said you would show me your flowers."

"Did I?" said Violet. "Then I will redeem my promise," and, with a smile, she led him to the conservatory—that very conservatory in which Leicester had lounged but a few days ago, listening to her frank laughter and drinking in the charm of her youth and beauty.

With a blush of pleasure, Fitz walked off with her, and soon his boyish laugh could be heard from the greenhouses, joined with Violet's musical peal.

What had happened to cause her to treat him so?

Yesterday she was all frank delight in his presence.

To-day she treated him with the haughty insolence and indifference of a sultana.

"Ah!" said Leicester, with a growl. "They are all alike. The best of them cannot resist a lord."

He was not in the best of humors for a collision with the captain, but Captain Murpoint greeted him ardently.

"None the worse for your weather yesterday, I see," he said, in his soft, silky voice. "I was just coming after you. Mr. Fairfax, who is the most inventive genius in the way of pleasure I have ever had the happiness of meeting, has set up a target and we are all shooting at it with arrows which remind me of nothing so much as the arrows which the Brahmins give their children to play with."

"Confound the Brahmins!" thought Leicester, but he walked by the side of the captain to where the clever Bertie had set the arrow pastime going, and then the captain left him to order some sherry and soda water.

Mrs. Mildmay begged him to light a cigar, and Leicester, who really wanted one, gave way.

He seated himself on a bench and watched the party, wondering whether Lord Fitz had finished his second wreath, and what the pair in the conservatory were doing now. [135]

Presently he heard their laughing from the back of him, and it stung him to the quick.

"Confound her!" he muttered. "Why should I let her see her wickedness at flirting is cutting me up so? By Jove, I'll show her two can play at that game. I'll make up to Ethel Boisdale." So saying he drew his legs to the ground, pitched his cigar into the shrubbery and went up to Ethel.

"Now, Lady Boisdale," he said, "I am going to enter the lists, and I bet you a box of Jouvin's best—I have your size—that I hit the bull's-eye three times out of six."

"Oh, I shall bet," said Ethel, "because I am sure I shall win. Why, we have been trying ever so long, and have not hit it once."

"There goes then," said Leicester. "Hit or miss. Hit it is. That's once. Twice, I have missed it. Three times, that's a hit. Four times, missed it. Missed it again, missed it again. That's the sixth time, and I've lost."

Then he rattled on as lively and entertaining as Bertie himself, so startling that honest friend that he did not know what to make of it.

All through the glorious afternoon the plot and counterplot were carried on.

At dinner Leicester devoted himself to Lady Ethel, talked to her with an amount of badinage and excitement that was most unusual.

After dinner Fitz went straight up to Violet, who was sitting talking to Ethel, and seated himself in a chair beside them.

Leicester dropped down beside Mrs. Mildmay and Mrs. Dodson and joined in a discussion upon croquet.

But the captain did not let him rest.

"I think there's a frigate coming across," he said. "It's rather misty, but I fancy I can distinguish the masts."

Leicester rose and walked to the window.

From the place where he stood, he could hear, as the captain had intended that he should, every word Fitz and Violet were saying. [136]

The young lord, excited by the wine to an extraordinary pitch of courage, was making love, hot and furious.

Violet, just a little frightened, was laughingly and rather nervously evading him.

Leicester's cheeks flushed, and, his eyes, hidden by the field glass, flashed passionately.

"Consummate coquette!" he murmured, "she is either fooling the boy or angling for a coronet—she whom I thought the soul of purity and disinterestedness. Which is it? By Heaven, I will know!"

And, much to the captain's amusement, he dropped the field glass and said, with an air almost of command:

"Miss Mildmay, your eyes are better than either mine or Captain Murpoint's; pray lend us their aid."

Violet hesitated a moment, then, with a smile which barely covered a peculiar feeling of nervousness, rose and came forward.

"Step outside," said Leicester, in his deep voice, and before she knew what he was going to do he drew her hand within his arm and led her out. "Do you see," he said, "out yonder? or have you no eyes for anything to-night but Lord Fitz Plantagenet Boisdale?"

"Mr. Leicester!" exclaimed Violet, with dignity, still trembling inwardly.

"Pardon me," he said, in a deep whisper, drawing her farther from the window and speaking in an earnest, almost pleading tone, "pardon me. I was wrong to speak so, but let me plead as an excuse some provocation. I have not wounded you, Miss Mildmay, by those few words one-tenth so much as you have me by one of a thousand you have spoken to-day."

Violet tried to draw her hand away, but his strong, hard hand retained it against her will.

"Wait one moment, I implore you," he said. "Wait while you tell me wherein I have offended you."

"Really," said Violet, with a low ripple of amusement which maddened him. "This is like a charade ——"

"Tell me," he said, interrupting her almost sternly, "have you forgotten yesterday? Miss Mildmay, speak to me if you can as an honest woman should speak to an honest man. If the assurance of my devoted——" [137]

"Oh, stop—pray stop!" said Violet, with a laugh which was calculated to madden a less passionate and willful temper than Leicester's. "What a contradiction! In one breath you assert your doubt of my honesty and assure me of your devoted—what? Oh, no! no more, Mr. Leicester! Pray be assured that I am not offended—not with any one! I am quite happy, and I don't understand you in the least. Shall we go in?"

She moved toward the window as she spoke, smiling with maddening wickedness, and fanning herself hurriedly, her heart throbbing all the while like a wild animal within her bosom.

Leicester turned with stern courtesy.

"By all means," he said. "I hope you have not caught cold!"

She dropped him a mocking curtsey and passed through the window.

Leicester stood for a moment looking at her as she glided with her peculiar grace into the chatter of voices and the light dance music which Ethel, with Bertie at her side, was evoking at the piano, then turned and strode out onto the terrace.

He leaned his arms on the coping and stared into the night.

"What is she? a flirt, a heartless coquette, a beautiful falsehood, or what?"

As he asked himself the question he heard the bushes stir beneath him.

It did not attract his attention, and he did not glance down until he saw something dark move from beneath the laurels.

Then, with his usual rapidity of resolve, he lightly vaulted over the terrace and dropped close beside the figure.

It rose from the ground surprised and startled.

Leicester's hand grasped a man's shoulder, and turned him round.

It was Captain Murpoint's servant, Mr. Jem.

In a moment Leicester saw part of the hand.

The fellow was not a burglar on the scout, but a skulking eavesdropper. [138]

"You've been listening, my friend," said Leicester, angrily, and with an ominous gathering light in his eyes.

"That's a falsehood!" shouted Jem, who had been imbibing ale—and some quantity of it—at the "Blue Lion".

"Let that teach you greater caution and respect for the future, my friend," said Leicester, and he struck the daring scoundrel a straight blow full of unmitigated scorn.

Jem started, turned livid with rage, fear and hate, then slunk away like a beaten hound and stole off.

After delivering punishment to Jem for his eavesdropping, Leicester walked round to the stables and ordered the Cedars' carriage.

When the carriage was ready he returned to the drawing-room, and, going up to his mother, whispered:

"I have ordered the carriage for you; do not let them think you are surprised."

Mrs. Dodson nodded and looked up at him inquiringly. She saw that something had gone wrong.

At that moment a peal of silvery laughter proceeded from the corner of the room where Lord Fitz and Violet were seated.

Leicester started and frowned and then Mrs. Dodson knew what ailed him. She knew that he was in love with Violet Mildmay.

When Leicester had left, Violet's smiles disappeared.

She answered Lord Fitz at random, and grew cold and even stately.

Lord Fitz hoped when they were saying good-night that she would relapse into her bright amiability, but he was disappointed.

She wished him good-night with a smile that was the perfection of friendly indifference.

All the guests had gone, and Violet sat alone in the now silent drawing-room.

Her heart was heavy, her eyes and her whole frame weary.

As she reached her room she saw a light making its way from the captain's room, and heard the soft hum of his voice as he murmured his favorite air from "Faust."

"How good-natured he seems!" she thought. "He is really my friend, and yet I cannot quite like him." [139]

So she went to bed thoroughly unhappy, dissatisfied with herself for acting the flirt and dissatisfied with Leicester for being one.

Although the captain was humming so carelessly, he was not idle.

No sooner did the sound of Violet's closing door greet his ear than he ceased the humming and drew his chair to his bureau.

He had prepared his pens, ink, etc., on the table; there was every sign of a hard night's work.

He drew from the bureau his strange purchases, the sheet of parchment and the flour dredger, spreading the parchment upon the desk.

It looked very yellow and old, and anything but a nice material for a document.

But for the captain's purpose it was apparently not at all too *passé*, for he drew from his pocket a small bottle of cold coffee, and with a paint brush carefully washed the surface of the parchment on both sides.

Then he held it near the candle to dry, and after a close scrutiny nodded with satisfaction.

The ink next underwent manipulation.

It was good black ink, evidently too good, for the captain carefully diluted it with water.

Then he took from his pocket a bundle of letters, and selecting the longest spread it out upon the bureau, lit a cigar and studied the handwriting with the closest attention.

It was the handwriting of John Mildmay, and the letter was one of many he had written to his good and kind friend, Captain Howard Murpoint.

"I can imitate that, I think," muttered the captain; "let me try."

For half an hour he persevered, and at the end of that time he had succeeded in imitating the handwriting of his dear, dead friend so closely that John Mildmay's ghost, if it had risen and peeped over the forger's shoulder, could not have distinguished the forgery from the original.

"There," he muttered. "I'll defy all the lawyers in the world to detect that. Now for the deed." [140]

He drew the parchment toward him, and, proceeding with the greatest care and minuteness, drew up a document, which he signed with the name of John Mildmay.

The deed purported to be witnessed by an old coachman and his wife, both of whom were dead.

Then he took his flour dredger, and poured into it from a box which he had concealed in his dressing-case a quantity of finely powdered dust.

When the box was full he shook a little from the top upon the desk and the table.

Then he unlocked the door and touched the bell which summoned Mr. Starling.

After a few moments the door opened and Jem entered.

The captain looked up and frowned inquiringly.

There was a red mark across Jem's face, an ugly flush which rendered the sullen, ferocious countenance more evil and desperate looking.

"Shut the door and lock it," said the captain.

Jem did so and stood fingering the dressing-gown with shifting eyes and sullen, evil mouth.

"Come here," said the captain. "What's that on your face?"

"What's what?" said Jem, without raising his eyes.

"You know well enough," said the captain, eying him closely. "Are you sober enough to tell me how you came by that blow? If so, out with it. Who gave it to you?"

"It was Mr. Leicester, curse him!" burst out Jem, and with an oath. "He caught me a-listening by the terrace."

"Ah!" exclaimed the captain, with a gleam of malicious delight in his eyes. "My young lad, Leicester, was it? Oh, you must bear it, my dear Jem, grin and bear it. I think it will be black and blue. Never mind, Jem, it will make him laugh in the morning, and he'll ask you how it is."

"Don't, don't!" groaned the infuriated man, hoarsely. "Don't work me up, captain. Don't! I shall go mad! I'll be even with him! I'll make him rue the night he struck me, dog as I am!"

"Do you want revenge, Jem?"

Jem looked up from the floor with savage eyes.

"You do? Then I'll show you how to get so sweet, so rich a one that you'll bless me, Jem. But first [141] I've got a word with you, Mr. Starling. You are getting careless. You'll never make a good servant. You are idle. Look at the dust on that table!"

Jem looked and stared.

"That's a pretty state for a gentleman's writing-desk to be in! You have not dusted that for a week!"

"I dusted it this morning, sir," said Jem, looking round with bewilderment.

Then the captain took up the dredger from beneath the table and held it up with a smile.

"Conjuring, Jem—magic! By this simple contrivance we get the dust of years in one moment. Put it in your pocket and light the lantern."

Jem stared in silence profound and amazed for a minute.

"But," he said, with a troubled face, "you ain't going into that beastly room, captain?"

"I am, and so are you," said the captain. "No words; remember your blow and your revenge. You work for it to-night while you obey me."

Jem caught up the lantern with desperate bravado and lit it.

Meanwhile the captain exchanged his coat for a pea-jacket, and drew a thick pair of stockings over his boots.

Jem, following his instructions, did likewise, and then waited for further orders.

"You could pick locks," said the captain, "one time, Jem; have you forgotten the art?"

Jem grinned.

"Not quite. I dare say I could manage it."

"Good," said the captain. "Have you got the tools?"

"I never goes without 'em," said Jem, "they're very simple, and they don't take up much room, and no gentleman should be without 'em." And as he spoke he drew from his pocket a small piece of steel and a stout piece of wire bent at the end in the form of a hook.

The captain nodded approvingly.

"Quite right, Jem," he said, "and now for the deed. If you feel nervous take a sip of this," and he

poured out a glass of brandy.

Jem tossed the dram down eagerly, but, fiery as the liquid was, it did not dispel his dislike and horror of the task before him, and when the captain in his stealthy way opened the window the strong ruffian shuddered. [142]

But spurred on by his new motive—the thirst for revenge—he obeyed the signal from his master and lowered himself from the window without hesitation.

When Jem had reached the broad window ledge he loosened the rope from his waist, and the captain, feeling it slacken, prepared to descend by it in his turn.

It was a perilous attempt, no doubt. Every step had to be taken with the greatest nicety.

At last, after what seemed a terrible time and amount of exertion, he heard the short, spasmodic breathing of his accomplice, and stretching out one hand he felt about until he touched something.

It was Jem's leg, and so suddenly had the captain clutched it that Jem, whose nerves were strained to their utmost pitch, uttered a sharp cry of alarm.

"Hush," said the captain, sternly. "Quiet, you idiot. It is only I! One such another cry and we are lost. Utter a word and I'll drag you down!"

Then, exerting all his strength, he drew himself up to the ledge, and, panting for breath, seated himself beside his accomplice.

"Phew!" he said. "But that was tough work! Turn on the light."

"It is exactly as I imagined it," muttered the captain; "and made for my purpose." Then, after glancing through into the dusty window for a few minutes, he tried to push the lower sash up.

But the window was locked.

Without a moment's hesitation the captain tied his handkerchief round his hand, quickly broke the pane nearest the fastening, then he inserted his hand and pushed the catch back.

"Now, Jem," said the captain, "drop in carefully, and when you reach the floor remain motionless until I am by your side. Remember not to move a step until you get the word from me. It is of the greatest importance, as you will see."

Very sullenly, and with compressed lips as if he were keeping back his fear and horror with great difficulty, Jem dropped into the room, remaining on the spot which his feet had first touched. [143]

The captain followed his example.

"Now," he said, in a low, firm whisper, "attend to me and pay particular attention. Walk to that bureau in as few steps as possible. You can stride it in three steps. When you reach the bureau stand with your face toward the lock without moving."

Jem nodded, and, lighted by the lantern which the captain held, he strode to the bureau.

The captain followed him, taking care to tread in the same footprints.

"Now," he said, "I will hold the lantern while you try the lock with this bunch of keys. If you can't manage it, it must be picked."

Jem took the bunch and, selecting a skeleton key of the size required, tried it. But the lock was a good one and defied all his efforts.

Then he went on his knees and in a workmanlike manner picked the lock.

Then the captain commenced searching within the bureau.

"I am looking for a secret drawer," he said.

"Why didn't you say so, then?" said Jem. "There it is," and he touched a spring concealed in a part of the beading. "I knows where they are, right enough. All these old-fashioned 'uns is much alike. Why, dang it!" he added, with deep disgust, "it's empty!"

But the captain's smile was anything but one of disappointment.

"So it is, Jem, and suppose we put something in it?"

And as he spoke he took the parchment from his pocket and laid it carefully in the drawer.

Jem stared.

"This is a rum go, capt'n," he said, "to go and take all this 'ere trouble, in risking our necks and a running the chance o' meeting all sorts o' nasty things for the sake of putting a piece of paper in this old concern."

"My good Jem, don't worry yourself about what you cannot understand," retorted the captain. "Now go back, step by step, in the same footprints. Mind, go as slowly as you like, but make no more marks." [144]

Jem obeyed, grumbling and wondering, but he was a little easier when he saw the next step in the captain's movements.

Carefully guarding against stepping into fresh places, he stooped down and shook from his dredger a regular and equal quantity of dust on to the handmarks and footprints which they had made.

Then Jem understood the use of the flour dredger.

Spot by spot the captain pursued his task until he had reached the window, against which Jem leaned, stolidly watching him.

"There," whispered the captain, pointing to the polished floor, which presented an unbroken surface of dust. "If you were obliged to swear that the room had not been entered—that the floor had not been walked across for five years, would you have any objection to say so?"

"Not I, capt'n," retorted Jem, quickly. "Not that that signifies, because I'd swear to anything, but it's right enough. Anybody 'ud say this room hadn't been looked at for years. At least," he added, with a shudder, and in a lower voice, "not by human critturs. There's other sort I have heard don't make no footprints nor no noise, so they don't count."

The captain smiled.

"All right," he said, "I don't care for ghosts, Jem, they only frighten such fools as you. Get up on the sill and shake the dust down on these bare parts."

Jem laid his hand upon the sill and was about to draw himself on to it when he was conscious of a sudden stream of soft blue light in the room.

Without turning round he whispered, warningly:

"Don't turn the light on so full, captain. Somebody might be about and see it at the window."

"What light?" said the captain, who was bending down with his face to the window, powdering the spots from which their feet had removed the dust. "I have turned no light—hah!"

The exclamation which broke the sentence caused Jem to turn his head with a vague sense of alarm.

No sooner had he done so than he fell to the ground in a paroxysm of fear. [145]

There, on his knees, motionless as a statue, and his dark face upturned, was the captain, staring at a misty blue light which seemed growing out of the side of the room.

Jem uttered a groan of dismay and horror as there slipped, or rather floated into the room the dreadful figure which he had seen at the oriel window.

It was the White Nun!

Slowly, and with a floating, gliding motion, the figure advanced.

Then it seemed to see them, for it moved its skull slightly in the direction of the men and stopped.

The captain, shaking off the horrible influence of dread, sprang to his feet.

He was about to advance to the horrid thing, but the blue light suddenly disappeared, the figure glided out of the stream of light flowing from the lantern, and all the captain saw was the fiery eyes and the dull gleam of the white, ghostly drapery.

"Ghost or no ghost," he hissed, "you shall not escape me!" and he sprang forward.

But before he could clutch the apparition it drew back with a gliding motion, and seemed to vanish through the wall.

With a bewildered and daunted air the captain glared around.

The two human beings were once more alone.

White and trembling, the guilty schemer turned to the window and grasped Jem's arm.

"Come," he said, hoarsely. "We've been dreaming."

Without a word, and trembling in every limb, the pair descended one after the other, the captain remaining last, and shudderingly expecting to feel the ghostly hand of bone upon his throat.

But the vision did not appear again, and, exhausted with exertion and horror, the two men stood in their own room staring at each other's white faces.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour at which he had retired to rest, the captain was up early in the morning and, with his cheroot in his mouth, strolling round the Park. [146]

Whistling his favorite air, he leaped the old fence which divided the neatly kept rosary of the modern garden from the cold, waste little courtyard of the ruined chapel, and with cautious feet and watchful eyes, entered the broken and crumbling cloisters in the search for more evidence of the apparition which had so startled him on the preceding evening.

Next the cloisters was the chapel, or what remained of it.

The captain stumbled to the middle of it and looked up through its roofless height to the sky above.

In the center of the façade was the large oriel window.

A portion of the old organ-loft clung to it, and was lost on either side in a mass of ruined, moss-covered stone, which was the remains of a flight of stone steps.

"No one but a ghost," muttered the captain, "could walk along there."

With an emphatic exclamation he turned his attention to the wall next the house.

He fancied that he could distinguish the dark outline of a door, but, by the aid of a small opera-glass which he had brought with him, he made out that the ivy had grown over it to such an

extent that egress or exit by it was impossible.

He did not believe in ghosts, and yet if the figure he had seen were a human and alive how did it reach the deserted room?

While he pondered a footstep sounded behind him—so suddenly that he turned face to face with Leicester Dodson.

The meeting was so unexpected that both men were, so to speak, off their guard.

For a moment only was the captain's face naked, the next he had resumed his mask, and held out his hand.

"Good-morning; you startled me! This is a place for ghostly meetings, and though the hour is inappropriate, a little surprise is allowable."

All this with a genial smile.

Leicester just touched the hand and nodded.

"I am glad I met you this morning, and so early, Captain Murpoint," he said, in his grave, clear voice, "for I have some unpleasant information for you." [147]

"Indeed!" said the captain, glancing up at his face for a moment, then raising the opera-glass to his eyes. "Indeed, I am sorry for that. Of what nature?"

"It concerns your man," said Leicester. "I found him eavesdropping near the laurels by the terrace last night."

"No!" exclaimed the captain, with a look of shocked indignation. "The villain! I hope you thrashed him."

"Well," said Leicester, "I am sorry to say that I did strike him. I regret it, though I think it may prove a salutary chastisement."

"The villain," said the captain, with grave displeasure. "I will discharge him this morning! I'll pack him off! Drunk or not, he shall go. I could not have a fellow about me whom I could not implicitly trust."

"Well," said Leicester, "you must do as you think fit; yet I hope you will let the man plead his defence. There are two sides to everything."

The captain shook his head angrily.

"No; he shall go, the rogue," he said, and as he spoke he rose, with a light in his eyes which would have proclaimed to any one who knew him that he had scored a point in his game. "No; he shall go, rest assured. I would not keep him for the world after what you have told me. Are you going on to the Park?"

"No," said Leicester, "if you will make my excuses. Good-morning."

"Good-morning," said the captain, and he shook hands impressively, looking after Leicester's tall, stalwart figure as it passed under the ruined arches, with a pleasant smile.

"Oh, yes, he shall go, Mr. Dodson, and all the world shall know that Captain Murpoint discharged his man Jem at the instigation of Mr. Leicester Dodson!"

After breakfast he caught Jem as he was slowly mounting the stairs.

"Go into my room," he whispered.

Jem obeyed, and the captain, following, closed the door.

"Jem," he said, "don't be surprised at anything that happens and remember that I have promised not to throw you over. I am going to discharge you this morning."

Jem started and turned pale. [148]

"Not really, you stupid fellow! only in pretense. Leicester Dodson"—at that name Jem scowled—"Leicester Dodson has made formal complaint and I cannot do anything else but get rid of you. I shall blackguard you well and pack you off before all the servants. Of course you won't leave the village and equally of course I will continue you your salary to enable you to keep there. What you must do is to take a room at the inn—say you are going to enjoy yourself on the savings of your salary."

Half an hour afterward every soul in the village knew that Leicester Dodson had got Mr. Starling discharged from his situation.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LOCKET.

It was rather a large party at Coombe Lodge.

There were the Wilsons, the Gileses and several of the county families.

Lord Lackland had been expected, but business kept him in town, and Lord Fitz was at the head of the table.

Next him was an old dowager, but within speaking distance sat Violet, and Lord Fitz's frank face

was turned toward her all dinner time.

Ethel and Bertie were separated, as they had expected to be, but Bertie could see the pale, low forehead just above an epergne, and was fain to be content.

Leicester sat with Ethel, and for a while was grave and taciturn; but suddenly he saw Violet look over toward Fitz with a smile and a nod of significant meaning, and in an instant Leicester's jealousy arose, and he brightened up. The nod was only one of affirmation that the day was fine, and Violet, with such a sweet face, could not help looking enticing, but jealousy casts a green shade over everything great and small, and Leicester grew sibilant and fascinating too, murmuring:

"Let her flirt with her boy-lord. I could show the proud, vain girl that there are other women worthy attention beside herself."

And so Ethel was overwhelmed with his attention, his conversation and his wit. [149]

Violet, glancing down the table, saw the pair laughing and talking in that strain, she, misunderstanding, resolved to join in the battle.

When Lord Fitz came with the other gentlemen to the dining-room, it was to find a seat reserved for him beside Violet and her smile of welcome to greet him.

Fitz and she sang together and laughed and talked together the whole evening, and when Mrs. Mildmay's carriage was announced Leicester noticed bitterly that it was Lord Fitz who escorted Violet, while the captain had charge of Mrs. Mildmay.

As usual the captain was in the best of spirits; the homeward journey was as enjoyable for Mrs. Mildmay as the evening which had preceded it.

Violet was asleep, or feigning it, in the corner, so that the captain had Mrs. Mildmay to himself.

"That is an old-fashioned locket," he said, motioning to one, which was suspended by a chain to Mrs. Mildmay's neck.

"Yes," she said, with a sigh; "my brother gave me that when I was a little girl. A very long time ago that, Captain Murpoint!"

"Not very, indeed!" said the captain, with subdued gallantry. "It contains his portrait, I suppose?"

"No, I am sorry to say that it does not. I have no miniature of poor John," she replied, with a sigh. "I would give anything for one painted while he was alive."

"Would you?" said the captain, with a curious earnestness. "Then I think—I hope you are nearer obtaining your desire than you imagine."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Mildmay; "how so?—Violet, we have awakened you?"

"No, auntie," said Violet, whose eyes had opened and whose face was pale with earnestness and painful interest.

"Some years ago," said the captain, leaning forward and addressing both ladies, but keeping his eyes upon Violet's face, "my dear friend promised that he would have his portrait painted in water-colors so that I might wear it. At that time we were staying at Calcutta. In the market-place [150] there was a wonderful miniature painter—he may be there still, in all probability he is—and dear John commissioned him to paint his portrait. He sat for it two or three times, and the man finished it."

"Was it a good—a truthful portrait?" asked Mrs. Mildmay.

"A wonderful portrait," said the captain. "It was John Mildmay, living and breathing in a miniature, so to speak. He gave it to me on my birthday. I kept it, I wore it on my watch chain for years, until we started for our home voyage. Then he took it from me."

"Why did he do that?" asked Violet, in a faint voice.

"It was in a locket," said the captain, "in a double locket. The space opposite was empty, and my dear friend took the trinket from me, saying that there should be another portrait in it—one fitting to face his. Can you guess whose, my dear madam?"

Mrs. Mildmay glanced at Violet, who had sunk back into her seat.

"Yes," said the captain, expressing a deep tenderness with his voice, "it was hers—his dearly loved child's." And he drew out his pocket handkerchief and hid his eyes for a moment. "I gave him the locket reluctantly, I admit; for I was loth to part with it for so long a time as that required for his voyage home and back again. But I gave it to him, for I was anxious to possess the other portrait, that I might have the face my dear friend loved better than his life next his own."

He paused and sighed deeply.

"From the first moment of my parting with the locket I have regretted it."

"Regretted it—why?" asked Mrs. Mildmay, in a low voice.

"Because, my dear madam, I never saw it again."

Violet's hands clasped tightly, and he went on more quickly:

"No; I see what you dread, but I am not going to harrow your hearts by recalling that great sorrow. No; John returned to me at Madras, and before the first hour had passed I asked him for my treasure. With a look of dismay and a laugh of annoyance he told me that he had forgotten it."

"Forgotten it!" said Mrs. Mildmay, deeply interested. [151]

"Yes, that he had left it at home, at Mildmay Park. I asked him to write for it; but he laughingly assured me that no one could find it."

"Did he not remember where he had put it?" asked Mrs. Mildmay. "For I do hope we shall find it."

"No, he had not forgotten where he had put it, but he assured me that he had placed it where no hand but his could find it."

"And where was that?" asked Mrs. Mildmay.

"In the secret drawer of his writing bureau," replied the captain, in a low voice.

There was a long pause of deep silence.

"He had placed it there," continued the captain, sinking back and looking at Violet with half-closed eyes, "he had placed it there on the day of his arrival in England, and was so taken up with one thing and the other that he had forgotten it. He promised me that he would, on his next visit to England, have the portrait of Violet painted, and bring the locket out to me. But man proposes and Providence disposes. Heaven willed it that he should never see England again."

Violet's hands clasped, and her face grew deadly white.

Oh! how she longed for that miniature.

Captain Murpoint had never hit upon a more brilliant device for gaining his end than that which he determined upon as the lever by which his plot should be raised.

"He never reached England, and I never saw him or the locket again," he resumed, in a low voice. "He, my best—ay, dearest friend, lies at the bottom of the sea, and his portrait is buried in the secret drawer of the old bureau."

"Hush!" said Mrs. Mildmay, as a low, suppressed cry of agony came from Violet's corner.

"You say it is—it is like my father?" she said, "and that he placed it there?"

The captain inclined his head.

"Then—then," she breathed, painfully, "the room must be opened. I—I said," she added, with a shudder, "that it never should be! But if the portrait—his portrait—is there, it must be, for I must have it! I must have it!"

"It is an old bureau," said the captain. "For he assured me that his own hands placed it there. But [152]
wait until you are stronger."

"No," said Violet, "I am strong enough. I must have it at once—to-morrow!"

Jem Starling had been commanded to refrain from strong drink and to remain sober, and he had kept sober up to the day upon which the captain, with a slight lapse from his usual foresight, discharged him.

On that day he had aired his grievance among the fishermen, who sympathized with him, and, of course, had aired it in the public house.

There were plenty to stand treat, and Jem had drunk heavily.

At ten o'clock he emerged from the "Blue Lion", leaning upon Willie Sanderson's arm—or rather, supported by it—in that state which might be described as desperately intoxicated.

A small crowd of fishermen were round him, and they were all more or less hilarious or excited.

"Hold up!" said Willie to Jem, who was staggering about upon the big young fisherman's arm. "Hold up!"

"Here," said one of the others, the carrier, old Nat, coming forward, "I'll give you a hand with him. We'll take him down to my cottage and let him sleep there to-night. He's had a rare skinful."

Then he turned to the others and said:

"Willie and me 'ull take care of this chap. You get home quickly. There's work to do to-morrow, you know," he added, significantly.

The boys returned a hearty "Ay, ay," and, after an exchange of mutual and noisy adieus, turned down to their cottages by the beach.

Nat and Willie went straight on down the village street, at the end of which, and a little retired from the road, Nat's cottage lay.

As they passed down the street, with Jem rolling and shouting and singing between them, he saw a gentleman in the starlight, coming along the slope toward them.

It was Leicester, who, disgusted and dissatisfied, had turned out for a walk. He saw the group of three, and was about to pass on without recognizing them, but Willie's figure, stalwart and huge, [153]
was too well known to pass unrecognized, and Leicester, with his usual kindness, said, gravely:

"Late to-night, Willie! Good-night."

This was just what the two men dreaded. At the sound of the voice which he hated above all, the drunken man started and threw up his head.

"Who's that?" he snarled, hoarsely, staring before him with thick and bloodshot eyes. "Who's that? That's his voice, I'll swear."

"Come on," said Nat, giving him an angry jerk, "come on, and don't make a fool of yourself, Starling."

"I shan't," said Jem, with an oath. "I will stop and look at him. I'm a dog, I am, but a dog can look at a king—ah, and bite, too. D'ye hear that?" he shouted out to Leicester, who had walked on with the greatest indifference. That same indifference seemed to madden the miserable Jem, and, by a sudden jerk, whose very unexpectedness gave it greater force, he wrenched himself away from his keepers and sprang down the path after Leicester.

Leicester heard him coming, and turned round ready to receive him.

With a snarl Jem sprang at him.

Leicester raised his hand and knocked him down.

The next instant Willie and Nat were down upon him and holding him down where he lay struggling and blaspheming, shouting out oaths and threats.

"You ain't hurt, Mr. Leicester?" asked Willie.

"No," said Leicester. "He has not touched me. There is no harm done, if he has received none."

"Not he," growled Willie, "the fool's drunk."

"So I see," said Leicester. "I am not likely to resent the conduct of a drunken man, but I must and I will defend myself against any attack he may make or any annoyances he may give when he is sober."

"Ay, ay," said Willie. "That is right enough."

"Perhaps you will give him to understand that when he is capable of understanding anything," said Leicester.

"Ay, ay, I will," said Willie.

"Good-night," said Leicester.

"Good-night, Maester Leicester," said the two men, or rather shouted it, for they had to make themselves heard above the mad ravings of their companion. [154]

Leicester, calm and unconcerned, gravely walked on.

The two men exchanged glances as they looked at the dark mark of the last blow upon the drunken man's face and grinned appreciatingly.

Nat, the carrier's cottage was but a little distance from the spot, and they succeeded in getting Jem to bed without farther disturbance of her majesty's peace.

In the morning it was soon over the village that there had been another scene between Mr. Leicester and Jem Starling, and when the man appeared at the "Blue Lion" about noon they expected to hear a second edition of the dreadful threats which had broken the stillness of the preceding night.

But Jem came in silently, with the dark bruise upon his face, and sullenly kept that silence.

And so the day passed, and the little incident had before night sunk into insignificance.

But it was doomed to bear bitter fruit, and that before many weeks should pass.

"I have been thinking," said the captain, as he entered the breakfast-room on the same morning, "that this is the very day for a ride. It is not so hot and there is a delicious little breeze."

Violet looked up with an indifferent smile.

"A very good idea," said Mrs. Mildmay. "Violet, you look quite pale again this morning. I think a ride would do you good."

"I did not sleep very well last night," said Violet, flushing for a moment as she thought how many hours she had heard the clock strike, and how full those waking hours were of one individual. "And I think it would be the wisest thing this morning."

The horses were brought round, and Violet, having donned her habit, was mounted.

"Shall we try the downs?" said the captain, and, Violet acquiescing, the steeds were turned thitherward.

Violet felt trite, as she looked, and the captain endeavored to rouse her.

In consequence of those endeavors and the fresh breeze conjointly the color returned to the beautiful girl's face and the wonted light to her eye. [155]

And it was looking thus joyous and happy that Leicester, grim and unhappy, mounted upon his black horse, met her.

"An unexpected meeting. I did not think to have the pleasure of an encounter with you this morning, Miss Mildmay," he said.

"There need be no battle though you have," she retorted, with a smile, carefully misunderstanding his words.

"We'll proclaim a truce, then," he said. "May I turn my horse's head?"

"Oh, certainly," said Violet, and he turned the Knight and shook hands with the captain, who eyed the pair keenly behind his pleasant, frank smile.

"Beautiful day," said Leicester. "Quite a relief this breeze. Are you going far?"

"Only for a gallop," said Violet, whose heart was beating fast and rapidly melting under the grave and almost reproachful gaze of his dark eyes.

After all, might there not be some mistake about him and Ethel Boisdale? Oh, at that moment how she longed that there might be!

"I was going over to Tenby," said Leicester.

"A pretty town," said the captain, smiling to himself as he recalled his visit and his purchases. "I passed through it a short time since, and I thought of going again soon. I want to find a solicitor."

"A solicitor," said Leicester. "I am going to see mine this morning. Can I recommend him?"

"Why will not dear old Mr. Thaxton do?" said Violet. "He is our solicitor."

"He lives in London, does he not?" asked the captain, who did not want any solicitor, and who had been merely fishing to ascertain who the Mildmay solicitor was and where he resided.

"Yes," said Violet. "But of course he can come down at an hour's notice. He does come down sometimes. I do not know what for, but to see to things, I suppose. A lawyer is a necessary evil."

"Rather hard upon the legal profession," said Leicester, with a smile. "I thought of being a lawyer myself once," he added. [156]

"And why were you not?" said Violet, trying to speak with coquettish indifference.

"Too lazy," he said. "My new trade will suit me best, I think."

"Your new trade!" said Violet, leaning forward and stroking her horse, "and may I inquire what that may be?"

"Oh, yes," said Leicester. "There is no patent connected with it. I am going to turn traveler—not commercial traveler, for that, I am afraid, I have not head enough—but traveler and explorer. I am suddenly filled with a vast longing to see what Central Africa is like."

"You might do worse," said the captain. "But you can certainly do better; don't you think so, Miss Violet?"

Now, if he had let her alone, Violet would have broken down.

Tears had already formed in her sweet, truthful eyes.

But his question was, what he had intended it should be, an appeal to her pride, and, summoning all her presence of mind, she choked back the tears and said bravely, with a little smile:

"Mr. Leicester is the best judge of that. I think there is a great charm in novelty, and even Africa is not too far off to go in search of it."

She longed to pour out her whole mind, to accuse him of his inconsistency, but his next remark awoke a fresh thrill of feeling within her.

"May I ask a favor, Miss Mildmay?" he said. "I would not have spoken of my trip but for that."

"A favor?" she said. "What is it?"

The reply sounded cruelly ungracious, but she could not trust herself to many words.

"My mother will feel lonely when I have started—though only for a time, perhaps—would you, in the kindness of your heart, and out of that womanly charity which is the glory of your sex, take in the Cedars sometimes in your walks and drives?"

Violet's face paled.

"I will, gladly, and for my own sake," she said. "If you go," she added.

He did not notice the addition. [157]

"I am very grateful," he said, "very; and of her gratitude I need not assure you. Penruddie is a dull place, and dullness is bad for more than the 'weed on Lethe's wharf.'"

"Not so dull as the Lacklands are at the Lodge," said the captain, with a pleasant smile.

Violet flushed, simply because Leicester's grave, dark eyes were suddenly turned upon her face with an earnest gaze.

"No," she stammered, confused by her own meaningless flush.

But he did not think it meaningless.

He pulled up the Knight with an iron hand, and in a grim, hard voice said:

"I am afraid I must deny myself the pleasure of a longer chat; I am expected at home. Good-morning."

Violet gave him her hand.

He was too excited and mad to feel that it trembled.

He turned the horse, dug the spurs into it almost savagely and tore on.

"It's too true," he muttered, between his teeth, "that blush told all. Lord Fitz has won, and I have lost. Well, so be it. Africa at least will be constant, if only in death."

For some little time the captain and Violet rode on in silence.

As for him, he could have burst into a fit of wild and triumphant laughter, for he had won the day once more, and turned what would have been a glorious, joyous triumph for Leicester into a complete defeat.

That question and that wily remark had done the deed, and once more he had widened the gulf of jealousy and misunderstanding which yawned between John Mildmay's daughter and Leicester Dodson.

As they neared home, and after a little rambling conversation, he remarked, casually:

"I have been thinking, and I have concluded to wait until Mr. Thaxton comes down before I go into my little business matter. It is only a small, trivial affair about some money which I think ought to be due to me, and it can easily wait."

"Yes," said Violet, absently. [158]

She was thinking of other than the captain's words, and his voice—smooth, silky and musical—fell on her ears like the plash, plash of a distant waterfall to a weary, heartsick traveler.

But his next words aroused her.

"And it has occurred to me," continued, in a graver tone, "that if you intend opening the deserted study, it would be as well to have the lawyer with us."

Violet paled, and the agitation which always came over her when her father's death or the study was alluded to showed itself.

"Why?" she said.

"Well," said the captain, softly, "only because it is usual. There may be valuables—or papers."

"I see," she breathed. "It shall be so. I will write——"

"Or allow me," said the captain, "we will fix a day; and Mr. Thaxton shall come down."

"Yes," said Violet, "soon. I meant to have the room opened to-day, but I will wait if you think it better."

"Oh, yes, I think it better to have the lawyer with us," said the captain, "and I will write to him."

So the captain wrote that evening to Mr. Thaxton, requesting him to be kind enough to come down to Mildmay Park as soon as he could conveniently do so, as Miss Mildmay wished to see him on a matter of business.

All the evening he was as good-tempered and as amusing as usual, and there was not a shadow upon his face when he wished the unsuspecting women good-night, though already in anticipation he was tasting the horror of an ordeal which he had determined to go through.

As usual, he waited until all was quiet, then he lit his cigar and with an outwardly calm bearing smoked it and enjoyed it.

When it was finished and after another term of listening, he took a cloak and muffled himself up.

It was an old-fashioned riding-cloak, and he could pull it over his head and face and still leave a greater part of his legs covered.

In the pocket he slipped the dark lantern.

Then from his bureau he took his revolver and a short, deadly life-preserver, the thong of which he tied round his wrist. [159]

Thus armed, he smiled with a serene feeling of security, and, as an additional fillip to his courage, he tossed off a glass of brandy.

It was his intention to leave the house, and here a question arose for him which was the better means of egress.

He decided upon that which he had used formerly, and with practiced dexterity he fastened his rope, leaped on the sill and rapidly descended.

Cautiously, and looking round him with vigilant eyes, he entered the dark cloisters; and, feeling his way, crept on tiptoe to the trunk on which Leicester had surprised him three mornings since.

In a few moments he was groping on again, and at last reached what seemed to be his destination, a doorway protected from observation by a pillar, up which had grown a thick mass of ivy.

From that point he commanded a view of the whole of the chapel and of the window of the deserted room.

With a slight sigh of satisfaction he seated himself upon a stone and, revolver in hand, waited and watched.

How long he could have withstood the influence of that dreadful place and time it is impossible to say, but as the clock chimed the quarter to one his nerves, strung to their farthest, received a shock which dispelled all memories of the past, all hopes and guilty ambitions for the future.

Before him in the darkness and up in the deserted room was the blue light, dimly burning.

A shudder crept through his frame.

His hand grasped the revolver, his gaze was chained to that window.

The light grew more intense, slowly was transformed as he had seen it before, and there, plain and distinct, at the window stood the horrible, fearful White Nun!

For a while the figure remained motionless at the window, then it turned and he knew instinctively that it was coming in the direction of the oriel window.

If so it would in a few minutes be above him. He waited, and his eyes turned to the window.

For a moment he lost consciousness, the next, by a strong effort, he regained something of his old dare-devil courage, and he bit his lip to keep himself awake as the horrible figure approached [160] with floating motion toward him.

Its face was turned from him as it came, but a bird flew out of the ivy with a wild shriek of terror, and the skull face and gleaming eyes followed the bird's flight.

More horrible still, it welcomed it with a dry, hollow laugh, which chilled the watcher to the immortal soul.

Slowly it neared where he stood.

It was opposite.

Then it turned its head, and at that moment, calling up all the courage which he possessed, the captain sprang, with a hoarse, gutteral shriek in his dry, hot throat, upon the figure.

Instantly the light disappeared.

He felt to his astonishment, even in his terror, his hands grasp something firm, and then he knew that the ghost's boney hands were round his neck.

But the reckless courage born from very despair filled him, and he exerted his tremendous strength as if he was using it against a human being.

He clasped the figure in his muscular arms and threw his whole weight upon it, forcing it gradually but surely.

Inch by inch, the figure gave way; the floor was reached, the captain with a cry of mad excitement forced it backward upon the stone, then raised his life-preserver and aimed a deadly blow at the skull face.

Then there arose a shout of warning and an oath from the white, skinless lips, and a man's voice came through them hoarsely and panting:

"Hold hard, I give in!"

The captain staggered back with petrifying astonishment.

The next moment he had hurled the figure to the ground, had planted his knees upon its chest, and, leveling his revolver at its head, hissed out:

"Move an inch, speak a word, and I will shoot you like a dog."

Then with the other hand he tore off the skull mask, flung it aside and glared down with a smile of triumph and malice upon the weather-beaten face of Willie Sanderson!

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[161]

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SMUGGLERS.

The captain drew a long breath, shifted his knee a little on the chest of the prostrate man and smiled.

That smile was a study of malignant triumph and conscious power.

"Soh!" he said, between his teeth, and weighing the revolver in his hand with its barrel still pointed to the prostrate man, "soh, you are the ghost, my fine fellow? You are the White Nun who terrifies honest people out of their wits?"

Willie struggled for breath and grinned with daring audacity.

"I give in, captain. Give me a little more breathing room," and he groaned.

The captain smiled, released his prisoner, and, seating himself complacently, with the revolver still conveniently leveled, watched keenly the huge Willie rise, shake himself and draw a long breath of relief.

"Whew!" he breathed, "that's better! You are uncommon strong, captain," he remarked, coolly eying the lithe figure of his conqueror with looks of admiration.

"I am," said the captain. "Stand there. No," he added, quickly, as Willie was about to slip off the white robe and paraphernalia which constituted his disguise. "No, don't take anything off. I may want to shoot you yet, and your costume would explain everything. Stand there—on second thoughts, you may sit down."

Willie Sanderson, with a shrug of his shoulders, threw himself down beside the captain and eyed the ground sullenly and expectantly.

"Now," said the captain, "I must know the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Answer my question straightforwardly and without prevarication, or I——" and he finished up the sentence

by glancing at the revolver.

"Stop," said Willie, driven to desperation by the captain's consummate coolness. "I'll tell ye; I suppose I must."

The captain nodded. [162]

"I saw you the other night," he said; "I was walking in the garden and saw your light. My man and I climbed to the window and were looking for you. We should have caught you then, but were afraid of raising the house."

Willie Sanderson grinned.

"Beggin' your pardon, captain, you didn't see me."

The captain scrutinized him.

"No," he said, "you are right; it was a smaller-made man."

Willie nodded.

"What was he—what were you doing in that room?" said the captain. "Were you on the same errand?"

Willie nodded.

"We was, captain. But we didn't want anything in that room, and more by token we wouldn't touch so much as a candle in it, for the sake o' him as is dead. Maester Mildmay was a good friend to all o' us boys, captain, and we'd guard anything o' 'is rather nor interfere wi' it. The room and all as is in it will be all right for us."

"I understand," said the captain. "You pass through the room to some other part of the house."

"Wrong again, captain," returned Willie, laughing grimly. "The house and all in it be sacred for us. We don't touch aught as belongs to the Mildmays; we'd go many a mile for the pretty miss."

"Then," said the captain, "there's a secret passage from that old room. Where does it lead?"

"To the cliffs," answered Willie, reluctantly.

A light broke upon the captain.

"To the cliffs," he returned, quietly, though his heart beat fast. "To the cliffs, and from the cliffs to the beach? What do you want there?"

Willie made a gesture of annoyance.

"What should we want there?" he asked, sulkily.

"I see," said the captain, composedly and slowly. "I see. You are a party of smugglers, my fine friend, and you run your cargo from the cliffs under Mildmay House. Soh! soh!"

Willie nodded sullenly.

"And now, you've got it, captain, what be you going to do?" [163]

"That depends," said the captain. "I must know more. Turn so that I may see you in the light. What is that on your arms and hands?"

Willie grinned.

"That's canvas," he said. "Job be clever at painting, so he rigged up a skeleton suit. Painted it all black, ye see, and marked out the bones in white paint. Clever, ain't it?"

"Very!" said the captain, sarcastically. "And how do you manage the ghostly light?"

"So," said Willie, pointing to a small lamp. "That be filled with some spirit as Job knows on, and when that be set light to, it sets a flame all round."

"I see," said the captain, smiling against his will, as he thought how easily the deception was worked.

"There be sulphur round my eyes and on my arms, and my feet wrapped in list," said Willie, holding up one huge foot so inclosed.

The captain started suddenly.

"But," he said, "how do you manage with the footmarks on the floor in the room? Do you leave them?"

Willie shook his head.

"No," he said; "not we. That wouldn't be safe, captain. We shake some dust down from a saucepan wi' holes in the bottom."

"There are clever people as well as myself," thought the captain. "One thing more," he added, rubbing his finger along the barrel of the revolver to remind his captive that he was still on guard. "I watched you come out of the ivy in the chapel, and descend from the roof. How did you manage that?"

"That's the easiest part, captain," he said. "I can walk along the ledge, as ain't very broad, 'tis true, but do look from down here narrower than it be——"

"I see," said the captain. "But the descent—how is that arranged?"

"By a wire and a spring," said Willie. "There's a big spring hid up in that ivy, and when I swings

off that ledge the spring lets the wire down; when I lets go, up goes the wire—not up to the roof, you know, but just enough to keep it out of sight. Wire's a difficult thing to distinguish in the light of this place, and it ain't thick, like rope." [164]

"I have it all," said the captain. "Clever, very clever. There are other heads behind yours, my friend," he muttered.

"And now what be you going to do, captain?" asked Willie, anxiously. "I've behaved honorable and answered up true and straight, like an honest man. What be you going to do?"

"I will think," said the captain.

"I should think you'd never be so hard as to interfere with an honest man's living, captain?" pleaded Willie, gruffly. "It don't make no odds to you if we do give the customs a slip now and then and run a small cargo."

"A small cargo," said the captain, significantly. "You have been rather busy lately, if I mistake not, my friend!"

"Well, we have so," admitted Willie, candidly, "we have so, and," he added, desperately, "there be a cargo waiting for us now, captain."

"Now?" asked the captain.

"Ay, this very minute," assented Willie. "I've been down to see if it be all clear, and was going down to fetch the boys when you caught me—may the devil take ye!—and if it's there long we'll lose it and get the ship owners into trouble most like."

"Give the signal," said the captain. "I have a proposal to make."

"Stand behind that pillar, then," said Willie. "If the boys was to come up suddenly and see us like this they might think as I played them false, and drop us both without so much as a 'did' or 'didn't ye'!"

The captain concealed himself behind the pillar and Willie gave forth that screech which Jem and the captain had mistaken for the owls.

In three minutes dusky shadows came thronging from all parts of the chapel, and in five minutes about a score of strong, stalwart men were pressing round Willie, eagerly asking questions.

The captain knew that Willie was communicating his recent startling experiences, and smiled to himself as he realized what consternation the intelligence of their secret having been discovered would produce. [165]

Presently Willie came up to where he was hidden and said:

"Come out, captain; but, I warn you, speak them fair, for they're mighty desperate and ready for anything."

"I am not afraid," said the captain, but, nevertheless, as he stepped forward he held his revolver tightly, and was quite prepared to act manfully if his reception was too warm.

There was a buzz and murmur, threatening and emphatic, as his well-known figure came within the gleam of light from the lantern.

But some one from their midst stopped the noise from growing more distinct by a warning "Hush!"

Then this same one came forward and the captain recognized the dapper figure of Job.

"Well, captain," he said, speaking in a low, clear tone, and without a particle of fear, "you've spotted our little game, it seems, and for us at a most orkard moment. What be you going to do?"

The captain looked hard at the man.

"I have seen you before," he said.

"Most like," said Job, calmly.

"I saw you the other night," said the captain, "and in this disguise."

"You did," said Job, "and I saw you."

It was an anxious moment for the captain.

How much had the man seen?

There was a queer twinkle in his light gray eyes. Had they seen the whole of that secret drawer business?

The captain endeavored to discover by a question.

"If I had been a moment sooner I should have caught you," he said. "As it was, you took me by surprise. However, I have you to-night, all of you. Ay, you need not look so fierce, my boys; I have you all, and you know it. I can name you one by one, from Job there to Tommy Lawn. Keep back. There are six barrels here, and all loaded. If you think to frighten me, you are much mistaken. You are also self-deceived if you imagine that I shall consent to be catechised as to my intentions."

"Come, come," said Job, "don't be unreasonable, captain. We're twenty and more to one. What's to prevent us from giving you an inch of lead and sending you across the main in the ship that's at anchor yonder? Many a man has been put away quietly and none the wiser." [166]

"I'll tell you," he said; "because you all know the difference between murder and smuggling, and because there's no necessity to kill a man who means you no harm."

"No harm," said Job, coolly. "They're fine words, captain, but what do they mean? Give us your word as a gentleman that you won't split."

"I will do more," said the captain, slowly and with quiet deliberation. "I will join you."

The men looked at each other half incredulously.

Job alone remained, with his hand on his hip, calm and unmoved.

"You will join us?" he said. "On you honor?"

"As a gentleman," said Captain Howard Murpoint, with fine irony. "If you want to feel secure, show me how I can be a gainer by the enterprise, and you may feel perfectly certain that I shall remain faithful. If you mean to test me, you can do so at once."

"How?" asked Job.

"You say," returned the captain, "that a cargo waits running home. I'll help you to clear it. I shall have become an accomplice, a participator in the offense, and what peril you run I shall share in."

"True," said Job. "You're right, captain. You've got brains."

Job, instantly changing his manner from a calm to a half-excited eagerness, said:

"Get down, boys, to the beach; the boats and nets are ready. Captain, you come with me. Willie, take charge of the boats."

The men were lost in the darkness almost instantaneously, Willie, as he went, tossing the ghostly disguise to Job as he ran off.

"Where to?" asked the captain, quietly.

"By the secret way," said Job, "if you've pluck enough."

The captain smiled.

"Question that when you see cause, my man," he said. "Until then give me credit for some courage, remembering that I have made my own terms with you, twenty to one." [167]

"Right," said Job. "I didn't mean to offend. Put one o' those white cloaks on, and rub the sulphur over your face. There'll be two White Nuns to-night in Mildmay Park!"

Job made his way, with the captain at his side, to the center of the chapel, the sulphur on both their faces gleaming ghastly and horrible in the darkness.

In the center stood a tomb with the half-moldered effigy of a knight lying full length.

Job sprang upon that and motioned the captain to imitate his example.

"Now," said Job, in a whisper, "stand on tiptoe till you feel the wire."

The captain did so.

"Got it? Pull it down and climb."

The captain, without hesitation, did as he was commanded, and as his feet left the tomb felt the wire drawn up.

Slowly and carefully, for it was a perilous undertaking, he ascended, helped thereto by the knots and projections which had been made in the slender rope.

When he had reached what seemed to him a terrific height, he heard Job's voice below.

"Hold tight, and when your feet touch, give way."

Then the rope, moved by some agency over which Job had control below, commenced to swing to and fro, and the captain, with one leg extended, felt his feet touch the narrow ledge.

Presently he heard Job beside him, and the man's cool, audacious grin in his ears.

"It bean't a lady's staircase, be it?" he said; "but it answers the purpose, and cuts off the communication. Now follow me, steady, and remember that a false step is death."

At last, by the glimmer of the lantern which Job had now unmasked, the captain saw among the ivy a small door.

"Here we go in," said Job. "Stand back a bit; it opens outward."

"But," said the captain, now driven to desperation, "it is impossible. A step back is death." [168]

"Cling to the ivy, then, and don't look down," retorted Job, coolly.

The captain took the advice, and Job opened the door.

With a spring, the captain landed beyond the threshold beside Job, and wiped the cold sweat from his brow.

Job grinned.

"A hard bit, bean't it? But it's nothing when you are used to it. I've done it, off and on, three times a week, for the last three years. Now see: In front of ye is the master's study. This old door, by a whim of his, was left behind the bookcase; the bookcase opens out to it, and it was through that, ye see, we came t'other night. Look'ee here."

He touched a spring as he spoke, and passed through the opening bookcase into the study.

The change of scene from the dark horror of the narrow ledge and its abyss below to the dust-covered room with its modern furniture was striking and extraordinary.

"Now step carefully," said Job.

The captain, who had practiced that maneuver, obeyed, and the two men cleared as narrow a strip of dust as possible.

"That will be all right when we come back," said Job.

As he spoke he diverted the captain's attention for a moment, and in that moment touched the spring of the opposite bookcase.

The bookcase drew back, and a gust of air, damp and chilly, rose from the aperture.

It was that chilly, moist atmosphere which the captain had noticed when the ghost disappeared.

"Subterranean," he said.

"Ay," said Job.

He threw the light down the dark deep hole.

"A rope ladder," said the captain.

"Ay," said Job. "Get down."

Job closed the door carefully, and stepped on to the ladder, following close upon the captain.

"Careful!" he warned. "Some of the steps be gone."

The warning was not unneeded, for as he spoke the captain's feet slipped through one of the missing links, and the ladder swayed to and fro. [169]

After a silent descent for some moments he felt his feet touch the ground once more. He waited until Job came with the light, and then saw that he was standing in a small apartment cut out of the solid rock, and with only two means of egress apparent—the one by the ladder down which he had descended, and the other by a round hole just large enough to admit the body of a full-grown man.

"We are now just under the house, captain," said Job, turning the lantern. "Up above us they be comfortably asleep in their beds—rum, bean't it?"

With the lantern suspended to his neck, he commenced crawling through the hole, and the captain, whose courage was pretty severely tested, followed.

Dark and dank, the way seemed interminable.

At last the roof gradually widened.

The men raised their heads and so eased their rigid necks, and presently Job stood upright and threw the light upon a large cavern.

Their way lay now over the natural bed of a series of caverns, and as they proceeded the boom of the sea came plainly to their ears.

At last a gust of exquisite fresh, briny air blew upon them, and Job, as he masked the lantern, said:

"We're close upon the open sea. Give us your hand, captain."

So guided, the captain passed over the slippery rocks, and presently heard Job's feet plash into the water.

He was himself the next moment in the sea up to his knees; but though the shock was so sudden that it took away his breath it was grateful and refreshing.

"Not a word! Don't move," said Job.

They walked in silence, and as they walked there came before the captain's eye another scene.

Another high, dreary cliff, with two men hand-in-hand looking out upon the mighty ocean and waiting!

Presently Job bent down his ear.

"Crouch," he said. "I can see the coast guard's lantern. It's old Bolt. He's getting on in years and does his beat with a light. Ha! ha! There's an advantage, captain. When he's passed, we've got a clear half hour." [170]

"He's gone," he added, "and now for the signal."

Instantly, and for scarcely more than an instant, he turned out upon the sea that tiny beam of light. It was only for an instant, but eager, anxious eyes had been watching for that signal, and eager hands acted upon it.

Then the captain fancied that he heard some sound, but before he could distinguish it there glided a dark object close by his side.

It was a boat.

The next instant there was another, followed by another.

Then in the darkness and deep and impressive silence, lusty figures sprang into the water.

Round objects were handed from those in the boat to those wading to the cavern.

One was handed, or, rather, flung into the captain's arms, and with an excitement born of the scene, he fell to work with the others, William, Job and twenty messmates, the work of unloading was soon done.

The men went back in their boats, and Job, the captain and Willie remained behind.

With muffled oars the boats glided off.

In the secure silence the two men groped their way to a smaller cavern farther from the sea, and out of sight of the cliffs.

Then Job turned on the light and glanced with flushed, sweat-beaded face from Willie to the captain, who had thrown himself upon a rock and stood watching keenly.

"Well," said Willie, with a grim smile upon his grimed and sunburned face, "how do you like it, captain?"

"Very well," said the captain, "if it pays."

"Pays," chuckled the huge fisherman, drawing a small parcel from his breast. "Look at that!" and he unfastened the bundle and displayed a lightly-compressed heap of exquisite lace.

The captain's eyes glistened.

"Ah!" he said.

"Ah!" echoed Willie, while Job smiled with deep satisfaction. "Look at that," he continued, pointing to the barrels ranged along the side of the cavern.

"What is it?" asked the captain. [171]

"Spirit," said Job, curtly. "Come, Will, no time for talking. Bear a hand here, captain."

The captain arose with alacrity, and, with quiet admiration at their sagacity, watched the two men scrape the sand away from the crevice of a rock, which, from its weed-grown and sand-filled chinks, looked as if it had stood unmoved or shaken since the time of its creation.

But Job and Willie applied their shoulders and rolled it away, discovering the mouth of a small cavern.

Into that, the captain counting, the barrels were rolled.

When they were all concealed the stone was replaced.

Then Job, glancing at the tide, said:

"In half an hour the sea will fill this place. You wouldn't like to wait, captain? Come along, then. Give me that bundle, Will."

And with the precious bundle in his breast Job led the return journey.

The three men, Job, Willie and the captain, traversed the subterranean passage as far as the cave.

Here Job paused and said:

"I'll let you into another secret, captain. From here there is another outlet, and a more comfortable one. We can't use it, not we rough men, because it's too near the house; but you can, because if you're found near the entrance, why, there'll be no questions asked."

"I see," said the captain. "I can say that I am taking a midnight stroll and a cigar."

"Will you have one?" asked Job, taking a bundle of cigars from a hole in the cave. "They're choice, they are; you can't buy 'em under five pounds a pound," and he paused.

"My share of the booty at present," said the captain. "I will light it when we get outside."

Job went to a corner and scraped some chalk from a small hole. He then inserted his hand in the hole and pulled out an iron rod like a bellpull.

This opened a small door a few feet farther along the chalk road, and Job nodded to it.

"Here you are, captain. It's a better road than the other; not so back-breaking: You'll want a light," and he held out the lantern.

"Thanks," said the captain. [172]

He took the lantern, trimmed it, and passed into the passage.

"Good-night," he said; "you may shut the door."

The door slammed to swiftly, cutting off the sound of the men's voices, and the captain proceeded on his weird and ghostly way.

The passage was wider and higher, and the road not so painfully uncomfortable as that by which they had reached the cliffs.

He hurried on, and found himself more quickly than he had expected at the end of the long passage, which was terminated by a small door.

A bar of iron extending crossways protected it outside, and the long pin projecting inside fastened it.

The captain thrust the pin through and the door opened.

To his surprise, a gush of warm but pure air greeted him, and with a feeling of extreme satisfaction he knew that he was once more above ground.

Before the door was a large round bush, which effectually concealed it from observation.

Pushing the bush aside with some difficulty the captain looked out and saw that he was in a portion of the disused garden nearest the house.

With a thrill of delight he extinguished the flickering flame in the lantern and pushed his way through the bush, taking care to replace the disturbed branches.

Then he lit his cigar, and with his hands in his pockets, sauntered on, preoccupied, and was somewhat startled by a footstep and a sudden sensation of some one's hands at his throat.

Before he could realize the situation he was on his back.

With an exclamation deep and low, he threw up his arms and struggled with his assailant.

In a moment he had regained his feet and there the advantage was lost again, for the assailant pinned him to the wall of the house, and, in a stern voice, inquired:

"Who are you, fellow?"

"What!" exclaimed the captain, as the familiar tones smote his ear, "what! Leicester Dodson!"

"Captain Howard Murpoint!" exclaimed Leicester, for it was he, dropping his grasp from the captain's arm and staring in the dim light. [173]

The captain shook himself and glared with an evil hatred at the stalwart figure.

"You are late, Mr. Dodson, and pugilistic."

"You are late," said Leicester, utterly ignoring the latter part of the speech, and speaking in a stern and suspicious tone. "You are out late, and if there is any excuse for my attack, that and the fact of a man's figure prowling round the house at such an unwonted hour must supply it."

"Prowling!" said the captain. "Prowling is a strong term to apply to the stroll a gentleman may take at any hour in the grounds of the house at which he is a guest. It is not so strange or unwarrantable a term to apply to the uninvited and unwelcome presence of a comparative stranger."

There was reason in the retort, but Leicester disregarded it or willfully misunderstood it.

"I saw you come from behind that bush," he said, pointing to the bush which concealed the door and in vain striving to get a clear idea of the expression on the captain's face.

"Not that, but another," said the captain, readily. "I had been to light a cigar, the wind preventing it here in the open. I cannot recognize your right to put these questions, and I cannot understand your ground for doing so. May I ask, and I ask as the friend of Mrs. Mildmay, and as John Mildmay's friend, what business brought you here so late; here in the private grounds of the Park, and so close to the house?"

Leicester remained silent for a moment.

"It is a fair question," he said, at last, "and I will answer it. You cannot be ignorant that an interest attaches to these premises," and he glanced at the ruins. "There is something there to excite the curious. I may have come to see the ghost."

The captain smiled grimly.

"Have you seen it?" he asked.

"I have," said Leicester.

The captain was almost guilty of a start.

"You are more fortunate than I," he said. "I have not seen it. It is true that I have been walking on the wrong side of the house. I am particularly the unfortunate party, for if I am not mistaken, your fingers have left their marks on my arms and chest." [174]

"I am very sorry," said Leicester. "I beg you will impute all you have suffered to my excess of zeal for the protection of Mrs. Mildmay's property. To be candid, I took you for a burglar——"

"Burglars do not go about their work with a cigar," said the captain, quietly.

"Or worse," said Leicester. "Either a burglar or one of the villains who for some purpose of their own are playing the ghost trick."

The captain smiled and eyed Leicester keenly.

"You think, then," he said, "that the ghost is a trick of some of the village boys?"

"Or villains," said Leicester. "I am sure there is some trickery at the bottom of it, and I cannot conceive a man playing it for so long without an end in view. However, this is not the time for a ventilation of the subject. I am sorry I made the mistake, and I apologize."

The captain bowed.

"I am not very much hurt," he said. "Another time, perhaps, when you take your stroll of investigation round the Park you will please to give me warning, and I will keep to my room."

Leicester bowed, as if the words were meant seriously and had no covert sneer.

"By the way," he said, "are you aware that your window is wide open, and that there is a light

burning in the room?"

"Perfectly," said the captain, who had quite forgotten the fact, "perfectly. I set it open to air the room, and the light was left to frighten the ghost."

"I will find some more effectual way of doing that," said Leicester, decisively. "Good-night."

"Good-night," said the captain, and Leicester, no nearer the truth as regarded the true character of the man he suspected, strode away.

The captain waited until his firm footstep had died out on the hard road, and then went softly to the back of the house.

With great care and circumspection, he drew his rope from the ivy and climbed to his room. [175]

CHAPTER XIX.

A BITTER PARTING.

Leicester had spoken the truth when he had said, in answer to the captain's inquiry, that he had been out to see the ghost.

But he had another object.

Since the morning when he had come upon the captain seated in the ruined chapel he could not rid himself of the suspicion that the captain was implicated in the eavesdropping of his servant, Jem, and that the astute and plausible master was the prime mover and director of some plot, while Jem was only the machine or tool.

Thereupon, not being able to sleep, partly from his unhappiness concerning Violet, and his disquietude born of his suspicion, he had sauntered out and made his way to the Park.

While there he had caught a glimpse of the ghost flitting past the ruins.

He was about to pursue it when he saw the captain emerging from behind the bush.

Instantly suspecting that it was one of the gang, he bore down upon him, as we have seen.

And now he told himself he was as far from the truth as ever.

Like the captain, he sank into a chair and gave himself up to thought, with this result:

"Why should I waste time and energy on a futile object? It is like a horse turning a mill to grind wind! Violet Mildmay will marry Lord Fitz, the intellectual and the talented! She has made up her mind to marry a coronet," he murmured, bitterly, "and she would not marry Leicester Dodson, the tallow-melter's son, if he remained hanging at her apron strings until doomsday. As for Captain Howard Murpoint, he may be an honest man and he may not. I was not born to solve the problem or to bring him to justice. Let the world wag on its way; as for me, I will arise, shake off [176] this infatuation, for it is nothing better, and seek fresh fields and pastures new. I shall have something to do in Africa, and I shall forget her."

He took from the drawers a quantity of necessary articles of clothing and packed them in the portmanteau. When it was filled he locked it and attached a label addressed, "To be taken in the yacht to the Isle of Man, where the skipper will put in until I come."

"I'll go overland," he muttered, "to cut the journey short, and they shall pick me up there."

Then he carried the portmanteau into his dressing-room and placed it where his valet could see it.

The man was used to acting on such curt and sudden instructions, and would convey the portmanteau, with its terse command, to the skipper of the yacht the first thing in the morning.

Having made his arrangements so far, Leicester slowly undressed and got to bed.

"I must wake early," he thought. "Bertie is going to-morrow, and must know of my intended flight or he would feel hurt."

But the morning came and he was sound asleep when Bertie knocked at the door.

"I'm going, old fellow," he called through the keyhole. "Don't get out of bed. Good-by; I shall be back in a couple of days."

"Good-by," said Leicester, drowsily, half asleep and half awake, and Bertie was gone.

Could either have forseen even for twenty hours how different would have been the parting of the friends!

When he came into the breakfast-room he found his mother, fond and thoughtful ever, waiting at the table to see that he had his breakfast comfortably.

"Has Bert gone?" he asked.

"Yes," said Mrs. Dodson, with a little laugh. "He and your father went off together; and I was almost glad to get rid of them, for Mr. Fairfax fidgeted dreadfully."

After breakfast, Leicester, who felt anything but cheerful and high-spirited, strolled out to the cliff.

He looked down at the sea and missed the yacht from the harbor directly.

"Sailed," he thought. "All the better. I will wait until Bert comes back, and then hurrah for Afric's golden sands." [177]

He might say "hurrah!" but he did not feel very jubilant.

With a not altogether unaccountable heaviness he sauntered down to the village.

All was going on as usual, and as he passed the "Blue Lion" he saw the usual little knot of idlers collected at the bar.

Among the voices he could distinguish that of Jem Starling's raised in turbulent tones.

Then he passed down the street to the beach.

The fishermen were busy with their nets, and old Job, the carrier, stood, with pipe in mouth, looking on.

The men touched their caps, and Job gave him a rough, kindly good-day.

Ten minutes afterward, and before he was scarcely out of sight, Captain Murpoint came down the path, sauntering very much after Leicester's fashion, with a Bengal cheroot in his mouth.

With his placid smile upon his face he sauntered down the beach.

"Well, my men," he said, "good night's fishing? Beautiful morning," and then passed on.

But as he passed Job he whispered in his ear:

"Meet me at sunset behind the chapel. There is danger."

Job, by a motion with his pipe, intimated that he heard and would comply, and the captain, in his turn, passed on.

He, too, as he had gone by the "Blue Lion" had heard the strident tones of Jem's harsh voice and had felt rather disgusted.

As he returned he looked in and saw Jem leaning against the bar in a state bordering upon intoxication.

Jem saw him, but instead of welcoming him with a respectful salute scowled fiercely and sullenly.

The captain thought that it was feigned, and with a cool, "Good-morning, my man. So you've not left the village yet," was about to stroll on, but Jem, upon whom a great change had fallen, rendering him suspicious of every one, even of his lord and master, shambled on after him. [178]

"What d'ye mean?" he hiccoughed. "Didn't yer tell me to stop here? Why don't yer say what yer mean? What's a man to do to please yer?"

The captain, with an alarmed and passionate frown on his face, turned upon him, and after glancing round to see if any one was near, said, savagely:

"Silence, you idiot! Go home, and come to me to-night, in the chapel."

"No, I don't," returned Jem, with a half-drunken shake of the head. "I don't go near no chapels! I've had enough of them!"

"The cliff, then," said the captain, torn by passion and the fear that some one would overhear them. "The cliff, you miserable hound. Come sober, for there's work to do. Do you understand?"

"I understand," said Jem, sullenly. "I'm sensible enough, ain't I?"

The captain's reply was a look so full of ominous evil that if a look could kill Jem's days would have been ended there and then.

There was no time to say more, for footsteps were approaching.

The captain hurried on, bursting with rage and apprehension.

Lord Fitz rose to meet him as he entered the drawing-room.

On his boyish face there was an anxious, nervous look which would at any other time have greatly amused the captain.

"How do you do, captain?" he said, shaking hands twice in an absent, flustered manner. "I—I came over to see Mrs. Mildmay—I mean Miss Mildmay, but she can't be found. Mrs. Mildmay's gone to look for her. You haven't seen her, I suppose?"

"No," said the captain, smiling. "She won't be found far off, I expect. I know some of her favorite seats. Why don't you go and help to search?"

"Oh, I don't know whether she'd like it, you know," said his lordship, with a wise shake of the head.

"Faint heart never won fair lady," said the captain, significantly. [179]

Lord Fitz flushed and looked at him eagerly.

"What do you mean?" he stammered. "Do you know what I've come about, eh? You don't mean to say——"

Then it flashed upon the captain that Lord Fitz had come to propose for Violet's hand.

Here was another tangle!

With a readiness not to be too much commended, the captain pretended to misunderstand him.

"Ah, ha! some sly plan for an outing or a picnic, eh? Well, well, we must find her. Ah, here is Mrs. Mildmay," he said, quickly, as Mrs. Mildmay entered the room.

"I am so sorry, Lord Boisdale," she said, "but Violet is in her room, with a bad headache, and sent me to ask you to excuse her."

"Cer—tainly," said Lord Fitz, half relieved and half disappointed. "I—I think I'll go now. I'm sorry Vio—I mean Miss Mildmay—has a headache. Can I call at the doctor's as I go back—I mean, can I do anything?"

"Oh, no, thank you," said Mrs. Mildmay.

Then Lord Fitz took up his hat and nervously said good-by.

The midday post brought a letter from Mr. Thaxton.

He would have the honor of waiting upon Miss Mildmay on the morrow.

The letter broke the dreary monotony of the day, for Violet had kept to her rooms and put in no appearance at dinner.

The evening was setting in, cool and pleasant, the air seemed to woo her from her retreat.

She caught up her sun-hat, and with an attempt at gayety ran downstairs onto the lawn.

Opening a side gate, she stepped into the lane.

Still keeping up the effort to appear gay, if she really was not, she tripped along, singing, in a low, sweet voice, a merry refrain, the very refrain which she had sung with Lord Fitz.

The lane was a pretty one, little used, the grass in its center being scarcely trodden, and Violet, in her light muslin, looked like some Pagan pastoral divinity dropped from Paradise to cull earth's flowers. Beautiful, indeed, she looked to Leicester Dodson as, coming round the green, flower-grown corner, he came suddenly upon her. [180]

"What a beautiful evening," he said, scarcely knowing what she said. "I have been gathering some wild flowers."

"So I see," he said, curtly, looking down at them. "It is almost a needless sacrifice, considering the hectacombs of choicer ones offered daily; you have flowers in abundance on your tables. But it is a woman's way to spoil and spare not. It does not matter, Miss Mildmay, flowers are but flowers and of little consequence. But there are other things higher in the scale which a woman gathers with reckless mood, to fling aside with wanton scorn. You ask me what they are?" he continued, standing stern and passionate before her. "I answer—hearts. 'Hearts are only hearts,' you may reply, but I tell you, Miss Mildmay, as one who speaks from sad experience, that a man's heart counts for something in the universe, and that a man's life is too high a thing to be wasted for a woman's toy."

He paused a moment.

Violet, who had stood silent and motionless, was silent still, but a burning flush of indignation flushed to her face.

He mistook it for conscious guilt and shame, and it maddened him.

"I speak harshly," he said. "But I pray you pardon me if for to-night, the last night I shall have the happiness of seeing you, I cast off the falsities of conventionality and speak as a man wronged and injured to the woman who has wronged and injured him. That I cannot heal the wound you have inflicted on me I am assured; but I may prevent you wounding others. You are young, Miss Mildmay, and there is a life before you in which you will have it in your power to save hearts or break them. I ask you to-night, here and now, to decide. I implore you to cast off the coquette and to be, what you are at heart, a woman true and noble! Be contented with the harm you have done, and lay aside the power of which my wasted life is the dire evidence——"

He paused, more for lack of breath than words and passion to speak them, and then Violet found her tongue.

"Sir!" she said, in that suppressed voice which tells of the heart's conflict. "Are you mad?" [181]

"No!" he said, hoarsely, "but I have been. I am sane now, Miss Mildmay, sane and sorrowful. The glamour which you had cast over me I have driven off. I see you in your true light, and I rise from the trance which your beauty has wooed me to. Violet—for I will call you by that name once and for the last time—you taught me to love you but to scorn the slave who knelt at your feet. You made me a toy to be cast aside when the new one should come. It came, and your slave, your toy, was forgotten, or remembered only in your contempt. You the fair, and I——Well, being a man with a heart, I was foolish. But, oh, shame, that one so fair should be so false."

"False!" breathed Violet, her eyes flashing, her lips trembling with indignation and passionate agony.

"Ay, false!" he retorted, sternly. "False to the pure promptings of your own nature, false to your own heart, and false to mine. Enough; forgive me if you can, I do not doubt you will forget me; but forgive me, if you can, for speaking as I have done. Do not dread another reproach or accusation. You will never again hear either from these lips. They should have uttered none now, but the heart will assert itself sometimes, do what we will to keep it silent. Mine has spoken for the last time."

He stopped and waited motionless and stern as a statue, or some pagan at the altar on which his

dearest lay sacrificed.

Violet would have spoken, but she had no words. His words weighed all hers back—choked them on her lips.

He waited for the reply. None came. He took her silence as a confession of guilt.

So he turned, and, with drooped head, left her, mistaken and blind to the last.

Not a very great distance from the spot where the lovers were going through their stormy interview and farewell, the captain was waiting for Job to explain to him the danger of which he had given due notice.

Another minute and Job emerged cautiously from behind the laurels.

"Come," said the captain, glancing at the horizon, "you are late." [182]

"Can't help it, cap'n," said Job, with a shake of the head. "I been hanging about here waitin' for an opportunity for the last hour; somebody's been about, too close for me to get near you."

"Who?" asked the captain.

"Maester Leicester," replied Job.

"I thought so," said the captain, beckoning Job to come farther under the shadow of the ruined arches. "I thought so, Job; it was to speak of him I wanted you here."

He then recounted his adventures of the preceding night after parting from Job and Willie, concluding, emphatically:

"So, if Leicester Dodson has not already discovered the secret, he will do so before many hours are past, to be sure."

Job looked as grave as the captain could desire.

"It's an orkard thing," he muttered. "Who'd 'a' thought as Maester Leicester would 'a' taken the trouble to go looking about after anything? Nobody must interfere, whether it be Maester Leicester or any one else. What I'm grieved at is that it should be him."

"But, bein' him, what then?" asked the captain.

"Why, we'll have to——"

Job paused.

"What's that?" he asked, as a quick, firm step was heard near them.

"It is he, Leicester Dodson," said the captain, as Leicester's stalwart figure moved past the lane. "He is always hanging about on the watch. Rest assured that very few nights will pass before he has unearthed the secret. Remember his own words to me."

Job looked seaward, and a determined light came into his eyes.

"He is going up the cliffs at a good pace," he said. "Perhaps he's going up to the coastguard now."

"Not unlikely," said the captain.

Job nodded, grimly.

"He must be got rid of."

The captain's heart beat fast.

"What!" he said. "You think it would be easy to tip Mr. Leicester over these cliffs?" [183]

Job's face paled a little.

"Easy enough," he muttered; "but is there any occasion for such out and out work as that, cap'n? Look 'ee here," and, drawing the captain closer, he whispered something in his ear.

Captain Howard Murpoint nodded.

"I see," he said, musingly, his eyes fixed upon the figure of Leicester, which had dropped down upon the hot grass, with his face turned seaward. "I see. It is a good idea, and easily carried out."

"Well, let it go at that, cap'n," said Job, as if he had been striking a bargain. "Let it go at that. We meet here to-night, say at twelve. You'll work that part of the game, and leave the rest to me."

"Agreed," assented the captain, consulting his watch. And, after a few more words, the conspirators parted—Job stealing away down toward the beach, the captain carelessly passing through the wilderness of the ruined chapel to the trim kept lawns of the Park.

As he entered the hall, the servant brought him a note.

It was from the solicitor, Mr. Thaxton, and indicated that the writer would be at the Park on the morrow.

"To-morrow," he muttered; "there is no time to lose."

With an air of careless serenity, he entered the drawing-room, with the open letter in his hand.

For the moment, seeing no one, he thought that the room was empty, but, as he was about to leave it, he caught a glimpse of a muslin dress in a corner, and, going nearer, found that it was Violet, and that Violet herself was lying crouched in the semi-darkness as if asleep.

He laid his hand upon her shoulder lightly, and called her.

But the limp figure did not move, and, bending down, he saw that she was not asleep, but in a swoon.

Stepping back to the door, he closed it softly, and sprinkled some water from a caraffe upon her forehead.

It was some moments before Violet's eyes opened, and when they did, it was as if reluctant to return to the consciousness of her position.

Her lips parted slightly, and murmured:

"Leicester! You will not leave me?" [184]

"So," thought the captain, "there has been a scene, and my loving lass has given way. That accounted for the pace at which my Lord Leicester was striding up the cliffs."

Then, aloud, he added:

"My dear Violet, the heat has been too much for you. Do you feel better now? Give me your hand," and, with the greatest gentleness, he raised her to a chair.

Violet struggled against the deadly confusion of mind and soul, and smiled faintly, as she said, wearily:

"Yes, it was the heat."

"Let me call Mrs. Mildmay," said the captain.

Violet rose, with difficulty, and stopped him in his assumed eagerness.

"Captain Murpoint," she said, looking at him from the depths of her great, sad eyes, "do not call any one." Then, with a louder tone and a closer scrutiny, she added: "How long have you been here in the room?"

"Some little time," said the captain. "But, pray, let me summon Mrs. Mildmay."

"No," said Violet. "'Some little time.' Tell me, truthfully, please, I implore you—have you heard me—have I said anything on any point that I would not have said had I been conscious?"

"I gathered from what you let slip—a few words, merely—that you had seen and been talking to Mr. Leicester Dodson."

Violet flushed for a moment, then turned deadly pale.

"Yes," she said. "Is that all?"

"My dear young lady," said the captain, "why distress yourself needlessly? Can you deem me so base, so dishonorable, as to be capable of repeating anything I may have heard? No," and he laid his hand upon his breast, and turned his face, with a hurt expression on it. "No, I am incapable of such measures toward any one, least of all to the daughter of my old friend, John Mildmay."

Violet's eyes moistened, and the captain, taking advantage of her weakness, instantly added:

"But, my dear Violet—if you will permit me to call you so—why distress yourself at all? Nothing is so bad but it can be mended. Lovers' quarrels are proverbially bitter only to turn sweet." [185]

"Lovers' quarrels?" interrupted Violet, bitterly. "Do you think it was only that? Oh," she continued, eagerly, "if I could but believe that he did not mean or think all he said! If I could persuade myself that he did not scorn and despise me!"

"Tush! tush!" said the captain, with a gentle smile. "Leicester scorn, despise you? My dear young lady, he loves the very ground upon which you tread! Despise? He worships you!"

"No, no! He hates me!" said Violet, hiding her face. "He has started for—Africa," here she broke down, and sobbed aloud. "Gone—gone, thinking me all that he called me—heartless, vain, wicked—oh, so wicked!"

"Hush! hush!" said the captain, dreading that the girl's unusual excitement would result in a fit of hysterics, which would prove eminently inconvenient to him. "Hush, my dear girl; he has not gone. I saw him climbing the cliffs just now, looking as miserable as a starved jackal. There, let me go and fetch him back—you will thank me afterward; but you will hate yourself—and me, also—if you allow him to go. Africa is a fearful place."

Violet looked up suddenly.

"Yes, yes," she said, "I am a weak, foolish girl, but at least I would not have him go without hearing what I have to say. He—he may, perhaps, think less cruelly of me."

"I will go at once," said the captain, with eagerness. "I will tell him that, and"—he looked at her dress—"can I not take something in the shape of credentials? Ah, give me that rose at your bosom—you wore it when he saw you?"

Violet nodded, and commenced to unfasten it.

"Ah, he will remember it, without doubt," said the captain.

"Give him this," said Violet, in a low voice, taking out a lily from her little bouquet. "It will mean no more than I would have it mean—peace."

"I will," said the captain, snatching up his hat; "and rely upon my haste."

Then, with an affectionate nod, full of refined sympathy, he departed on his mission of peace-making. [186]

The lily he stuck into his buttonhole, ready for use at the proper moment.

As he left the house, the stable clock struck ten.

Now, the captain did not want to see Mr. Leicester for at least an hour and a half.

He was also particularly anxious that the offended lovers should not meet in the meanwhile.

Therefore, he made a slight detour, and comfortably ensconced himself in the shrubbery, which commanded a view of the cliffs, the cedars, the road therefrom, and a part of the beach.

Leicester Dodson could not gain sight or speech of Violet without the captain's knowledge.

With an exercise of restraint and patience highly commendable, the schemer sat and smoked until the clock struck eleven.

Then he rose, and left his post of observation. It was almost dark, and the lights in the village twinkled in the valley like so many fireflies.

Very cautiously, after inspecting Violet's window, and satisfying himself by the light which burned in the window that Violet was still upstairs, he descended the hill, and, keeping close to the hedge, gained the village.

As it was positively necessary to the success of his plot that he should be seen by as few people as possible that evening, he diverged from the high street and approached the "Blue Lion" by a back way.

As he walked quickly thus far, he knew that Leicester could not have left the Cedars for his nightly promenade on the cliffs, or he, the captain, would have seen him.

The task before him, then, was to crouch behind the cluster of outbuildings behind the "Blue Lion", and wait for him.

By the noise and confusion inside the "Blue Lion", he could tell that Martha was preparing to turn "the boys" out, and he fancied that he could hear Jem's voice among the rest.

If it should be so, and the collision could be brought about between the drunken ruffian and Leicester Dodson, how much trouble would be spared him!

While he was listening and watching impatiently, he saw the star, which Jem had seen shoot up from the sea, and which the captain knew for the signal from the smuggler's vessel, rise into the air. [187]

"They'll come now," he muttered. "They'll come; and that young idiot not here yet!"

Even as he spoke, and raised his hand to wipe the perspiration which excitement had raised upon his forehead, Martha's shrill voice could be heard.

"Out with you! You've had enough to-night, and more than enough! As for you, Jem Starling, you're a disgrace to the house, and I wish that master o' yours had hunted you out o' the village."

"He's no master o' mine," hiccoughed Jem's voice, as the small crowd poured out. "He's a nasty, mean sneak, as used me when he wanted me, and then turned me off! But he can't give me the sack so easily! I'll be even with him! I knows—I knows——"

"Come on, and hold your tongue!" cried two or three voices, and the captain knew that there were several hands dragging the drunken man away.

And, at that moment, Jem uttered a snarl, and the captain, peering out to ascertain the cause, saw that Leicester Dodson was striding down the path.

CHAPTER XX.

LURED TO HIS DOOM.

Leicester came striding down, apparently unconscious of the scene and the actors.

As he passed the group, who drew back to let him go by, he turned his head slightly, and frowned at Jem, who had suddenly become sober, and stood, with hangdog head, looking upward from the corners of his evil, little eyes.

"Seems cut up about summut," said one of the men.

"Crossed in love," said Job, with a laugh. "But that's no business o' ours, lads."

The men, with Job and Willie at their head, ran down to the beach, and again the captain saw the signal fly out into the night.

"No time to lose," he muttered. "Now, will this drunken fellow get out of the way and let me get to work?" [188]

As if he had heard the unspoken question, Jem stopped suddenly, and, after looking round cunningly, turned off to the right and commenced ascending the steep path which led to the cliffs.

He was following in the immediate wake of Leicester Dodson.

The arch plotter, who had pulled all the wires which had moved the passions of both men, softly and swiftly followed up behind, to make the murderer's task easy and effective!

Panting and breathless, the captain at last descried the thickset figure of Jem crouching on the path. With a stealthy caution, the captain crept up to him, and whispered his name.

With a guilty start, and a smothered oath, the ruffian turned.

"Hush!" said the captain. "I've followed you——"

Before he could proceed, the idea of treachery and capture had taken hold of Jem's mind, and, with a livid face, he sprang upon his late master.

In an instant they were locked in each other's arms, and struggling for dear life, afraid to speak for fear of alarming their joint victim, who stood, or lay, on the grass farther up the cliff, and out of sight.

With a fearful tensity, they rocked to and fro, struggling each to get the upper hand of the other.

Nearer and nearer they approached the edge of the cliff.

The captain's brain grew dizzy—he felt himself falling, but, by an effort gigantic and overwhelming, called up all his strength to play a feint.

With a slight cry, he glared over Jem's shoulder, as if he saw some one or something.

The feint took effect. For half an instant Jem relaxed his hold, and turned his head.

In that stroke of time the captain had freed one arm.

A knife flashed through the night and buried itself in Jem's breast. With a muffled cry and a gasp, he threw up his arms, then fell like a log on the sward.

Instantly the captain bent down, and, opening one thick, clammy hand, pressed into it the white, [189]
crushed lily which he wore in his buttonhole.

The dying man's hand closed on the flower, and his eyes opened, with a glare of hate and distrust. Then, as the light died out of them, the captain dragged the body of his accomplice and tool to the edge and hurled it over.

So short, though deadly, had been the struggle for the mastery that nothing, not a coat, or collar, was torn, and, after passing his handkerchief over his brow, he was about to hurry on, when he remembered the knife, which, in the excitement, had slipped from his hand.

He went on his hands and knees and searched carefully, but could not find it.

"It must have gone over with him," he muttered, and he decided, after a still more careful examination of the ground, that it had.

All further search for it was rendered impossible by the sound of footsteps.

Looking up, he saw the stalwart figure of Leicester Dodson coming swiftly down toward him.

Instantly, he called out, and without anxiety:

"Is that you, Mr. Leicester?"

"It is," came back Leicester's deep, stern voice.

"I am so glad," replied the captain. "I have been looking for you everywhere!"

"Were you sent to find me?"

"I should not have come on my own account, much as I esteem your society," said the captain, with a grave laugh. "I have come from the woman to whom you have lost your heart, and whom you have lashed and tortured by your romantic upbraidings and reproaches. Don't be offended with me. I have had my days of romance and sentiment, though I am not much older than you. Why, how much older am I? A few years only, if any."

Leicester moved impatiently.

"For Heaven's sake, do not keep me in suspense!" he cried. "You say that Violet—Miss Mildmay—sent for me? Where is she?"

"Where should she be but in her own house?" said the captain, banteringly. "Come, my dear fellow, you have made yourself and her quite miserable enough for one night, and I have come to make you both happy."

"You came from her?" said Leicester. [190]

"Yes, to tell you that you are mistaken, that your reproaches were groundless, that she is not heartless, and, as from herself, she bade me tell you that she required your forgiveness and good will. The word and the thing needed between you is 'peace'—no more, mind!" he added, as Leicester wiped the perspiration from his brow. "No more! We do not say any warmer word! For the present, it is only peace!"

Leicester held out his hand.

"Captain Murpoint," he said, and his voice struggled for calm, "I have wronged you. You are a good fellow, for no other than an honest, simple-hearted, good-natured gentleman would have taken so much trouble to bring happiness to an obstinate, wooden-headed, conceited young fool ——"

"No no," said the captain, disclaimingly, as he shook the hot hand cordially.

"And she sent for me!" continued Leicester, in a rhapsody of gratitude and love. "Bless her gentle

heart! What a brute I must have seemed to her! I said more than I meant, captain. I swear I did; I was mad at the time, mad with jealousy and love and wounded vanity. But enough of that. Where is she?"

"I left Violet hiding snugly in the old chapel."

Leicester started, and a slight shadow of suspicion clouded his joy.

"Hiding in the old chapel? Why should she do that?" he asked.

"That she can best tell," said the captain. "Of course, she does not expect to see you, and you are not compelled to come. The fact is, we were out for a walk, and, finding her low-spirited, I drew from her the cause. I left her seated on the old tomb, and there she sits now, depend on it, or I am much out in my estimate of a lover's endurance."

Leicester paused a second.

"You need not come so far," said the captain; "she may have gone on."

"I would go to the end of the world on the chance of seeing her to-night!" said Leicester.

"Come along, then!" exclaimed the captain. "Take my arm." [191]

Leicester raised his arm; the captain at the same moment raised his, and, happening to stumble at the moment over a loose stone, his hand struck Leicester's hat off.

"Tut, tut!" he exclaimed, with annoyance. "How stupid and clumsy of me! I thought you were going to take my arm, and I stumbled over a stone. I wonder whether I can get it?" and he neared the edge.

"No, no!" exclaimed Leicester, impatiently. "Confound the hat! What does it matter? Come away, or you'll stumble again, perhaps, and pop over. It's death if you do."

"Ah, well, I am afraid it has gone over," said the captain, apparently much vexed at his own carelessness. "I wish it had been my hat instead of yours."

"No matter," said Leicester. "Come on; remember that she is waiting there all alone."

Arm in arm, Captain Howard Murpoint and Leicester Dodson descended the cliff.

The heart of the latter was beating fast with joy born of hope.

In a few minutes he should be near his sweet Violet; should, perhaps, clasp her in his arms—for might she not in the excitement of the moment be won to confess that she returned him love for love?

"Come along!" he said. "Every moment——"

"Gently!" replied the captain, cheerily. "Remember, this path is narrow and somewhat dangerous; a false step, and over we should be."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Leicester, who felt fit for any mad thing. "I could run down it blindfolded."

Thus exhorted, the captain quickened his pace.

While going through the village, Leicester nodded toward the "Blue Lion".

"All quiet now," he said. "As I passed this evening they were just coming out. By the way, your old servant still remains at Penruddie; he was drunk, as usual, to-night, and noisy."

"Oh, he is quiet now—I dare say asleep," said the captain, with a sardonic grin in the darkness.

Leicester made some rejoinder, and he walked on until the chapel came in sight. [192]

"Strange," mused Leicester; "an hour ago I was longing for Africa; now I would not exchange England for ten undiscovered worlds."

"The wind shifts rapidly," said the captain, with his soft, treacherous laugh, "and the weathercock obeys it with all cheerfulness."

Leicester was too happy to resent the sneer, and the next moment they entered the chapel.

"Dark as pitch," he said. "Here is the torch. I do not see—where are you?" he broke off to ask, for the captain had suddenly left his side.

"Here," said the captain.

Leicester turned, but before he could utter another word he felt his arms pinned to his sides, and a bandage thrown over his mouth.

He struggled hard and furiously to free his arms and mouth, but his unseen assailants were four to one, and, after a few moments, he gave up the ineffectual resistance, and knelt, for he had been forced on to his knees at last, nevertheless glaring impotently round him.

He could see dark figures flitting about, but a dead silence reigned.

It was broken at last by a voice, which he knew well.

It was Job's.

"Maester Leicester, it be of no use to struggle agen too many. Do you give in quietly?"

Leicester thought a moment, then nodded, pointing to the gag.

"If we take it off, will 'e promise not to shout?" asked Job.

Again Leicester hesitated, and again made a motion in the affirmative.

"Take it off; he'll not break his word," said Job, and some one from behind slipped off the gag.

"Now, Maester Leicester," said Job, "we've got your word. Mind ye, you're not to speak till ye get permission."

Leicester nodded.

"Do you know me?" asked Job.

"I do," said Leicester. "You are Job, the carrier, and a scoundrel! Why am I decoyed here and treated thus?" [193]

"For a good reason, to be sure," said Job. "Maester Leicester, you've been prying about too much lately, prying into what don't concern you, and you've discovered summut as you shouldn't a knowed anything of. Don't I speak the truth?"

"I have discovered nothing," said Leicester. "But, trust me, I will unmask the villain who lured me here and the scoundrels in his pay!"

There was a threatening movement behind him, but Leicester's courage did not flinch.

Job shook his head.

"D'ye mean to threaten us, Maester Leicester?" he said. "I'm sorry for it. I'd hoped we'd come to some terms. Suppose you discovered this little game—and you've done it, for a certainty—I puts it to you as a gentleman, what harm can it do to you and yours? Do it matter to you gentlefolk if a cask o' wine and a bundle o' cigars is run in now and then without the customs knowing it?"

"Ah!" said Leicester, the whole secret breaking in upon him. "That's the villainy, is it? So you honest fishermen are a parcel of thieves, with a scoundrel at your head! That's the key to the mystery, is it? What! and you dare to ask me to connive at your rascality! Job, you know me better! You waste time and words; you should know me better. If there are any others round me who can hear me, they, too, should know me better than to hope I would make a paltry villain of myself, even to save myself from their trickery. I repeat it, if I live through to-night, I will bring you to justice, Job, and all your gang."

"Bah! Waste of time, indeed!" said a smooth voice behind Job.

"You still here!" said Leicester. "I knew you for a villain when I first saw your vile face and heard your false voice. You triumph to-night, Captain Murpoint, if that is your name; but, have a care! A rogue's day is a short one! The gallows lies in your path, and every little such paltry triumph as this draws you more swiftly down to it!"

"Bah!" said the soft voice, contemptuously. "Fine words, boys. Better waste no more time. The fool is raving mad with fear, and doesn't know what he says."

Two or three hands slipped the gag over the captive's mouth, and he was raised on two pairs of stout shoulders. [194]

"Good-night," said the captain. "I leave you in good hands, Mr. Leicester Dodson. They'll take care of you. Good-night. I will make your excuse to the person whom you should have met," and, with another mocking grin, the captain, having waited until the crowd of figures were lost in the gloom, turned on his heel and walked rapidly away.

So quietly had the capture and removal of Leicester Dodson been effected that not a dog about the Park had been roused, and the captain, standing on the lawn, waited until he saw the signal which announced the success of the undertaking, then entered the house, and stepped quietly upstairs.

Not so quietly but that a pair of ears heard him.

As he passed Violet's door, it opened, and Violet stepped across the threshold.

"I had hoped that you would not have waited," he said.

Violet knew by his words that he had been unsuccessful in his mission of peace, and a grayer tint came over her face.

"You have seen him?" she said, in a low, strained voice.

The captain inclined his head.

"Yes," he said, "I have seen Mr. Leicester."

"And you gave him the message? Oh, tell me, please!" and she clasped her hands, with a gesture of despair.

"I know not how to tell you," said the captain, brokenly. "At least, I can assure you this, that Mr. Dodson is not worth another thought of yours. You—and I, also—are utterly mistaken in him. He is neither generous, noble, nor forgiving."

Violet interrupted by a gesture.

"Will you tell me what he said?"

"When I left you," said the captain, "I walked up to the Cedars, hoping to find him at home, but a servant told me he had gone for his walk. I went down to the village, and waited there for some time, and at last looked for him on the beach. I could not find him there, and, as I was determined not to return to you until I had seen him, I made my way back to the village, and waited by the

cliff road."

He paused a moment to snuff the candle and to glance at her face. [195]

He could see she was listening attentively, and he wished her to do so.

"I waited some time, and then walked up the hill. There I met him, and—and—oh, that I could spare you the indignity of this moment!—and gave him your message. At first he treated me with a specimen of his incredulity. He was suspicious of I know not what, and it was not until I took your flower and put it in his hand that he considered I had any authority to speak to him concerning you."

"He took the flower?" said Violet, faintly.

"Yes; he thrust it in his coat, with a cynical, mocking laugh. 'Tell her,' said he, 'that I will keep her flower, but will have none of her love.' You would have me tell you," he added, hurriedly as Violet staggered slightly and flushed a hot crimson of shame and indignation.

"I did not give you any such message!" she burst forth, with a wail of wounded pride.

"Nor did I say a word which should call forth such an insult," replied the captain. "Do not think of it. He was mad at the time, I fully believe. Mad, raving mad! What could I say or do when he uttered that insult? I turned and left him. I could have felled him to the ground, but my mission was one of peace."

"And he said no more?" asked Violet, huskily.

"No more," said the captain. "I watched him as he went down the street and past the inn. The men were coming out, and I feared that, perhaps, in his mad, ill-tempered state, he should be so indiscreet as to run against my man, Starling, for he was among the group. But Mr. Dodson passed on, and the men dispersed, Starling alone going in the direction of the cliff."

He paused, to let his words, slowly spoken, carry their full weight, and make their due impression, then continued:

"Then I came on home, but I could not find heart to see you. I determined to wait until you had gone to bed; you would be stronger in the morning to bear the insult."

He paused again.

"With that resolve, I paced up and down the lane, I must confess, with the hope that Mr. Dodson would return, and, his ill-temper vented, give me a more satisfactory answer to your gentle, noble message. But he has not returned—at least, by that road; he may have ascended to the Cedars by the lower road—and, at last, thinking you must by this time have retired to rest, I ventured to come in." [196]

There was a silence, unnatural and ghostly in its intensity, then Violet spoke.

"I thank you," she said. "I thank you from my heart. I did what I thought right, and, though it has won me nothing but insult, I think it right still. Mr. Leicester Dodson misunderstood and misjudged me. He said that I had wronged and injured him. I sent to say that, neither in thought nor deed, had I intended him harm. So far, I am right; the rest let him be answerable for."

"Nobly spoken!" exclaimed the captain, in a voice apparently choked with emotion. "Nobly spoken! Yours is a proud nature, worthy the daughter of my old friend, John Mildmay. Good-night! You are wearied to death. Good-night!"

He took her hand, and bowed over it, and, with a gesture as if he were swallowing tears, hurriedly walked away toward his own room.

CHAPTER XXI.

WILLFUL MURDER.

The captain slept the sleep of the innocent and just.

He did not even dream of a white, mangled face lying on the jagged rocks.

In the morning he came down, dressed with his usual care, smiling and serene.

The breakfast threatened to go off as quietly and uneventfully as usual.

But suddenly the sound of many voices broke the monotony, and the captain, looking through the window, saw a small crowd approaching up the lane.

Presently, after the lapse of a few moments, the footman entered.

"You are wanted, sir," he said, addressing the captain. [197]

"Very well," said the captain, airily. "I will come out."

After a few minutes, the captain re-entered.

His face was very grave, almost solemn.

Mrs. Mildmay, looking at it, felt a vague alarm.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Oh—not much," hesitated the captain, glancing at Violet. "An accident has happened."

"An accident?" repeated Violet, looking up with her white face. "To whom?"

"To my man, Starling," he said, gravely. "He has fallen over the cliffs."

"Fallen over the cliffs!" echoed Mrs. Mildmay. "How dreadful!"

"Is it not?" he exclaimed. "Terrible! Poor fellow! I saw him last night," and here he glanced at Violet.

"And he has fallen over!" exclaimed Mrs. Mildmay. "And where did they find him?"

"That I have scarcely learned," said the captain. "It seems that they have taken the body to the coastguard station, and that they require me to identify it."

"You will go at once?" said Mrs. Mildmay.

"At once," he said, and rang the bell for his hat.

Violet sat quite alone, her head leaning upon her hand.

The captain gravely sipped his coffee until his hat came; then he put it on, and prepared to accompany the men.

"There is great excitement," he said. "This sort of men rush to a conclusion directly."

"What conclusion have they rushed to?" asked Mrs. Mildmay.

"They think he met his death by foul play," replied the captain. "But," he added, quickly, "that is only ignorant fishermen's supposition. I will go down to the coastguard station and see him," and he left the room.

Outside the house was a small knot of men.

The captain went out to them, and touched his hat.

"Which is the nearest way?" he asked.

A dozen voices answered him; and, thus guided and accompanied, he set off.

In silence, followed by the crowd, he made his way to the coastguard station. [198]

The door was closed, and another small crowd surrounded them.

The captain knocked, and a coastguardian opened the door, admitted him, and closed it upon the crowd.

Upon a table lay stretched out the mangled form of the escaped convict, Jem Starling.

The captain approached, and uncovered his head.

"Dreadful!" he said, turning away. "Dreadful!"

"You recognize him?" asked the coastguard.

"Oh, yes," replied the captain. "It is Starling, my old servant. I recognized him at once."

The coastguard nodded.

"Where did you find him?" asked the captain, gravely.

"Under the cliff—about a quarter of a mile before you come to the guardbox. Ben Bolt found him."

"Where is Ben Bolt?" asked the captain.

The coastguard opened a side door, and called the man by his name.

A short, weather-beaten figure entered, and, seeing the captain, touched his hat.

"The captain wants to know where you found this unfortunate body, Ben," said the man.

"On the rocks below the cliff," replied the man.

"Ah," said the captain, "just where the path is narrowest. The poor fellow fell over, no doubt. I saw him last night, and he was very intoxicated."

The two coastguards exchanged glances.

"What course do you intend taking?" asked the captain.

"We've telegraphed to the inspector of police at Tenby," said the coastguard. "He'll be over here directly, and we can tell him what we know, and give the things we've found."

"What things?" inquired the captain.

"Fetch 'em here, Ben," said the man, and Ben Bolt, touching his hat, went to a cupboard, from which he brought a light felt hat and a withered lily.

"There!" said the captain. "This is his hat, is it not?"

"No," said Ben Bolt; "it bean't, and everybody knows it. There be his hat," and he pointed to the hat which lay beside the body. "There be his hat, which he allus used to wear. This 'un was found near him—close beside him, as you may say, just as if it had fell off with him." [199]

"And the flower?" asked the captain.

"Was tight in his hand—tight as if a vise held it," replied Ben Bolt.

"Let me see the hat," said the captain.

The coastguard handed the hat, and the captain examined it.

"I have seen this hat before," he said, looking at it with a puzzled air. "I am sure I have seen it before. Ah!" he exclaimed, suddenly.

"What's the matter?" inquired the coastguard.

"N—nothing," said the captain, who seemed visibly affected.

"I know what's took you so sudden like," said the coastguard. "You caught sight o' these two letters," and he turned up the hat and pointed to "L. D.," which were marked in the inside brim.

The captain nodded, gravely.

"I confess it," he said. "I did see them."

And he turned to leave the station.

Presently he turned back again, suddenly.

"Has Mr. Leicester Dodson been to identify the body?" he asked.

The two men looked at each other.

"No, he haven't," said the coastguard.

And the captain, after a moment's pause, left the station, and walked down the cliffs, with the small crowd at his heels again.

Very slowly he walked home.

When he came to the lawn wicket, he hesitated a moment, and turned back again.

He ascended the path leading to the Cedars, and rang the bell at the lodge.

The lodge-keeper came out to him.

"Is Mr. Dodson at home?" he asked.

"I believe he be, sir," said the man, opening the gates.

The captain passed through, and reached the house.

A footman ushered him into the drawing-room.

"Will you tell Mr. Dodson I wish to see him?" he asked. "And, if you see Mr. Leicester, say that I am here," he added.

The man bowed, and left the room. [200]

Presently, Mrs. Dodson entered.

"Oh, good-morning, captain," she said, holding out her hand. "Neither Mr. Dodson nor my son is at home. Mr. Dodson has gone to London, with Mr. Lennox, and Leicester I have not seen yet."

"Oh, it is of no consequence," said the captain. "I stepped up to tell them of an accident which has occurred in the village."

"An accident? I am sorry for that! What is it?"

"A man fell over the cliff," said the captain.

"One of the fishermen?" asked Mrs. Dodson.

"No," said the captain, rising, and he told her who it was.

She looked very much shocked, but certainly displayed no extraordinary feminine alarm; and the captain, being convinced that neither Mr. Dodson nor Leicester was at home, took his leave.

When he entered the breakfast-room at the Park, he did not notice, or pretended that he did not notice, Violet, who was sitting at the window, half hidden by the curtain; but advancing to Mrs. Mildmay, he said, in a tone of grave concern:

"It is as I feared, my dear madam. The man is Starling, my late valet."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Mildmay.

"And he was found lying on the rocks below the cliffs. He had suddenly fallen over, or been thrown over."

"Thrown over!" repeated Mrs. Mildmay, with a look of horror. "Oh, who could be guilty of such a horrible crime?"

"I do not know—I cannot say," said the captain, who seemed much agitated. "Has Mr. Leicester Dodson been here this morning?"

"No," said Mrs. Mildmay. "Did you expect him?"

"Oh, no," said the captain. "I should like to see him; indeed, I went up to the Cedars, hoping to see him, but I could not find either him or Mr. Dodson at home."

"Why did you want to see him?" asked the simple lady.

"I should have liked him to see the body, and to ask him a few questions," said the captain, who knew that the white-muslined figure in the window seat was listening attentively. [201]

"But why?" asked Mrs. Mildmay. "You identified the poor fellow sufficiently, I should think, and what questions could you have to ask?"

The captain drew nearer, with an expression of troubled perplexity.

Suddenly he laid his hand upon Mrs. Mildmay's arm, and, with a grave look, said:

"I had better tell you. I had better tell you, so that you may be on your guard, and keep the news from Violet. I have seen the man, and something else—a hat which was found lying beside him."

Mrs. Mildmay glanced at the window, but the captain did not seem to notice.

"The hat was Leicester Dodson's—I knew it by the initials marked inside it—and the flower was one which I gave him late last night."

Mrs. Mildmay uttered a cry of horror, and it was echoed by a voice behind the curtain.

The next moment Violet confronted him.

"What!" she breathed, her eyes distended and her face white.

"You here!" exclaimed the captain, in a tone of self-reproach. "Nothing, my dear young lady!"

"You say his hat and the flower were lying beside the dead man?" she breathed. "What do you mean? What do they all mean? They do not say he killed him!" and, with a faint cry, she fell back.

The captain caught her, with a cry of alarm.

Mrs. Mildmay rushed to the bell.

The door opened, and the footman appeared.

"Did you ring, ma'am? Mr. Thaxton has arrived."

At his name, Violet seemed relieved.

She drew herself upright from the captain's arms, and, pushing her hair from her white forehead, said, with unnatural calm:

"Mr. Thaxton, the lawyer? Show him in!"

There entered a short, wiry, old gentleman, with a pleasant, but shrewd, face, crowned by smoothly parted white hair.

It was Mr. Thaxton, the lawyer. He looked from one to the other, with inquiring and acute attention. [202]

Mrs. Mildmay came forward, and held out her hand.

"Oh, Mr. Thaxton," she exclaimed, with agitated earnestness, "I am so glad you have come!"

"So am I, if I am needed," said Mr. Thaxton, bowing over her hand and glancing at the captain.

"This is Captain Murpoint."

The captain bowed, but, as he was pouring some eau de cologne upon Violet's handkerchief, he could not shake hands.

"Something dreadful has happened," continued Mrs. Mildmay, hurriedly; "we have only just heard of it; we did not know that Violet was in the room, and—and—oh, dear, oh, dear!"

And the simple, good-hearted lady burst into tears.

Violet rose, calm and terribly quiet.

"Do not cry, aunt," she said. "Mr. Thaxton, I am glad you have come; some terrible accident has happened."

Then she turned to the captain, and, with a gesture almost of command, said:

"Will you tell Mr. Thaxton?"

Mr. Thaxton took her hand.

"Wait a while," he said. "You distress yourself, Miss Violet, perhaps without adequate cause. What has happened? Come, come!"

And the old man patted her hand, soothingly, though nothing of his acuteness abated.

Then he led Violet to a seat, and himself drew a little apart, with the captain, who had all this time been, so to speak, measuring his man.

"What has happened?" asked Mr. Thaxton. "Nothing nearly concerning the family, I hope?"

"N—o," said the captain, gravely, and then he placed Mr. Thaxton in possession of the facts which were generally known.

A body had been found at the foot of the cliff.

The corpse had been identified as the body of the captain's late valet, Jem Starling.

Near the body a hat had been found.

That hat belonged to one Leicester Dodson.

At the name, Mr. Thaxton's sharp eyes shot a swift glance at Violet. [203]

She saw the glance, but did not flinch.

Mr. Thaxton nodded once or twice, thoughtfully.

"Where is the body?" he asked.

"Lying at the coastguard station," replied the captain.

"I think," said Mr. Thaxton, "that I should like to walk up there."

"You will take some refreshment first?" said Mrs. Mildmay.

"No, thank you," said the lawyer. "I will wait until I return." And he took up his hat.

"Is there nothing but the discovery of the hat near the body to direct suspicion against Mr. Dodson?" he asked.

"I do not know," said the captain. "I should think not. It is ridiculous to suppose that he was capable of committing such a crime."

"Exactly," said the lawyer.

And he remained quiet until they had reached the guardhouse.

Once more the captain looked down upon the dead body and distorted face with calm, grave complaisance.

The lawyer asked a few questions.

"Can I see the hat?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said the coastguard, approaching the cupboard.

While he was unlocking it, a thin, cadaverous looking man entered, in a quiet, careless sort of fashion, and went up close behind the lawyer.

"There's the hat, sir," said the guard. "It was found close near the corpse, and——Hello! Who are you?"

This was addressed to the intrusive stranger, who had suddenly pushed closer and stretched out his hand.

"What's that?" he said, pointing to a flower in the cupboard.

"That's a flower," returned the coastguard. "P'r'aps you didn't hear me ask you who you was?"

"Yes, I did," retorted the stranger, mildly. "Where did you find that flower?"

The coastguard stared.

"If you must know," he said, with dignity, "that there flower was clinched tight in the dead man's hand!"

"It was, was it!" said the stranger, quietly, pushing up to the cupboard, and taking up the flower. [204]
"A lily," he muttered. "I thought so."

Then, to the astonishment of the coastguard, he quietly shut the cupboard, locked it, and dropped the key in his pocket.

Then he turned, touched his hat to the gentlemen, who stood regarding him attentively, and said:

"My name's Dockett, gentlemen—Detective Dockett."

The captain made a gesture of assent.

"Please not to mention that I'm here, gentlemen," said the detective. "I'd like to walk round quietly a bit before the yokels gets the scent of it."

"Certainly," said Mr. Thaxton, gravely. "Any assistance I can be to you, I shall be glad to render. My name is Thaxton, and I am Mrs. Mildmay's solicitor."

The detective touched his hat again.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I think I'd like a light trap in a quarter of an hour, and a smart chap who could show me the way to Coombe Lodge."

"Lord Lackland's?" said the captain.

"The nearest magistrate," said the detective.

The captain glanced at Mr. Thaxton.

At that moment the police inspector entered, hurriedly.

"Well," said the detective, "you can speak out."

"He's gone," said the inspector. "Leastways, I cannot find him, or any tidings of him."

The detective brightened up, as if by magic, and a sharp, ferrety expression came upon his face.

"What, already?" he said, quietly. "Have you posted a man at the station?"

"I did that last night," said the inspector.

"And telegraphed a description of him?"

"Yes," said the man.

"Then I must have that light trap at once, if you please, gentlemen," said Mr. Dockett.

Hurriedly, the party left the station and ran down the path to the village.

"For whom are you looking?" asked Mr. Thaxton of the detective.

"Mr. Leicester Dodson," said the detective, shortly. "It was his hat, and he was seen on the cliff road."

"But—but," said the captain, "it is impossible!" [205]

The detective glanced at him, and smiled.

"Nothing's impossible in a murder, sir. I think I can get a trap or a horse here quicker than going up to the Park. Here, saddle me a horse, sharp, boy, and I'll give you a shilling."

There was confusion instantly all round the "Blue Lion", at the door of which stood Martha, grim and fierce, as usual.

A horse was saddled, and, after giving a few instructions to the inspector, Detective Dockett dashed off.

The captain looked at Mr. Thaxton with perplexity and dismay.

"This is preposterous and ridiculous! Mr. Leicester Dodson is the most respected man in the place."

Mr. Thaxton shook his head gravely.

"The course the detective is adopting is inevitable," he said. "We had better go to the Cedars, and see his father or mother."

"Come along, then," said the captain, who seemed all excitement and indignation, and the two gentlemen hurried off.

At the gates of the Cedars they found a policeman, and it was some moments before he would permit them to pass.

At last they succeeded in overcoming his scruples, and made their way to the house.

Mrs. Dodson came to them, pale and agitated, but her scorn at the mere idea of Leicester's committing such a deed helped to keep her up.

She answered all their questions as she had done those of the inspector.

"Leicester is not here," she said, "and I cannot tell you where he is. He often goes away suddenly and unexpectedly. He may be in London, but, if he is, he will come down at once. I have telegraphed for him and his father, who went up with Mr. Lennox. What is all this silly story about a murder, Captain Murpoint?"

The captain did his best—or pretended to do—to reassure and soothe her, and Mr. Thaxton, after a few moments' silence, asked if he could see the valet.

Mrs. Dodson dispatched a messenger to find the valet, who soon appeared, looking as bewildered as every one else. [206]

He, however, threw some light upon the matter by informing them of the dispatch of the portmanteau.

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Thaxton. "Why did you not say so before?"

The man hung his head. He was a faithful fellow, and had hoped, by concealing his master's destination, that he should give him all the more time to get out of the way, "if so be as he had committed a mistake."

"Foolish fellow!" said Mr. Thaxton. "It is to your master's interest to return and clear up the matter. We must telegraph to the Isle of Man. If, as I suppose, Mr. Leicester started last night, he would not reach there until midday. Do not be alarmed, madam; he will assuredly hurry back, posthaste, and set the affair straight, so far as he is concerned."

"That I am confident of, sir," said Mrs. Dodson, with simple dignity.

The two gentlemen rose and departed, the captain still excited, the lawyer very calm and thoughtful. They telegraphed, through the police, to the Isle of Man, and waited feverishly for an answer.

An answer came late that night.

The *Wave* had come in, telegraphed the skipper of the yacht, but Mr. Leicester had not arrived by it.

Before nightfall the hue and cry was in full voice, and the police were on the alert to arrest Leicester Dodson, wherever and whenever he might be found, on a charge of willful murder.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FADED PARCHMENT.

The days rolled on in the little fishing village, and the terrible drama which had convulsed it was still talked of and remembered, but with less vividness every day.

Up at the Cedars two sorrowful human beings, clad in black, were learning that bitter lesson which all must learn, to suffer and to bear.

Violet was their sole comfort in the hour of darkness.

She had given them the only explanation of the tragedy they would accept, namely that Leicester had slain Starling in self-defense and had himself fallen over the cliff into the sea. [207]

Violet's plump roundness gradually toned down to a spareness which was grace itself, but, alas! strangely different to her old healthful vigor.

One other person beside the relations of Leicester mourned for him, and that was little, lame Jemmie, Willie Sanderson's brother.

To the poor, afflicted lad Leicester had seemed to be a beneficent god. The child adored the man who had, in so kindly and true a fashion, ministered to his wants, and no one shed more tears than little Jemmie.

In his little chair, which he could propel himself, he would haunt the Cedars, and the walks which had been favorite resorts of Leicester, and there weep over the memory of his great friend and hero.

One evening, the lad set off in his quiet, sad way for a walk, or, rather, ride on the cliff.

Impelled by an awful curiosity, the boy drove close to the edge of the cliff, and looked down.

He drew back, with a sob of grief and was about to return, but, as he made the movement, his tear-dimmed eyes caught the glimmer of some object lying under the edge of the cliff, half hidden by the overhanging tufts of grass.

With a mechanical curiosity, he drew near to it, and saw, with a beating heart, that it was a knife.

Instantly it flashed upon him that it was the very knife with which Leicester had, in self-defense, slain Jem Starling.

With the knife hidden in his bosom he returned home, determined to destroy the weapon, with its telltale rust of blood, on the first opportunity.

Of course, the doctor was not at all satisfied with the outward calm and serenity with which Violet bore her grief.

"It is all very well," he said to Mr. Thaxton, as he and that gentleman were smoking a cigar on the lawn and conferring together as to the state of Violet's health, "it is all very well to say that she is resigned, but I must confess that I do not like the word when it is applied to the numbed stillness [208] of a young girl. Could you not get up a little difficulty of some sort? Anything would answer the purpose to divert her mind from this terrible subject."

"Hem!" said Mr. Thaxton. "I have always avoided business, though, as you are aware, I was summoned to go into some matter. Every day I offer to touch upon the subject with Mrs. Mildmay she entreats me to wait a little and to remain."

"Yes," said the doctor, "and I am very glad you are here, but still I think I would attempt to interest her. Cannot Captain Murpoint assist us? He seems to have taken the management of affairs."

"Yes," said Mr. Thaxton, and his brow clouded slightly. "Captain Murpoint is invaluable; he is extremely clever, and seems to obtain implicit obedience here."

At that moment Captain Murpoint came on to the lawn.

"Good-morning," said Mr. Thaxton. "We were talking of you, captain. Mr. Boner was suggesting that it would be as well to attempt a little diversion for Miss Mildmay."

"With all my heart," said the captain, gravely.

"In the shape of business," continued Mr. Thaxton. "You have never informed me yet why my presence was wanted at the Park."

The captain's face flushed slightly. He had been waiting for this moment, and now it had come he braved it boldly.

"I wrote to you at the request of Miss Mildmay," he said. "It was a matter connected with a locket of her father's—mine it would have been had he lived longer. But let us come in; we will find the ladies, and go into it—that is, if Violet is well enough. You, Mr. Boner, must come and ascertain that for us."

So, with his usual artfulness, he secured another witness for the business which he had on hand.

The three gentlemen went into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Mildmay and Violet were seated, the elder lady knitting, the younger, not reading, with a book open before her.

Mr. Thaxton crossed over to her, and, seating himself by her side, said, in the gentle voice with which he always addressed her:

"My dear young lady, do you feel well enough to go into business this morning?" [209]

Violet smiled, faintly.

"I am quite well," she said. "I always am. It is only your kind heart which fears otherwise. What business is it?"

"The business upon which you sent for me," said Mr. Thaxton.

Violet started slightly, and a dim look of pain shadowed her eyes.

"I forgot," she said. "I forget so many things." Then she looked over at the captain. "Captain Murpoint sent for you; he will tell you."

The captain, thus adjured, crossed over to them, and explained.

Mr. Thaxton listened.

"And this locket," he said; "you are anxious to get, my dear?"

"Yes," said Violet, sadly. "I would like to have it. I had forgotten it. Yes, I would like to have it; I must have it."

"Then," said Mr. Thaxton, cheerily, hoping to rouse her to something like interest, "suppose we venture boldly into the ghost's quarters, and find it? What do you say, Mr. Boner? Are you courageous enough to accompany us?"

The doctor smiled an assent.

"Miss Mildmay must come, too," he said, hoping to rouse her, or to awaken some feeling in place of the dull lethargy which had taken hold of her.

"Yes, I will come. Auntie!" and she called to Mrs. Mildmay; "we will go together."

The whole plan, as far as this, had worked admirably, and the captain, offering his arm to Violet, led the way to the closed chamber.

Arrived at the door, Mr. Thaxton tried the handle.

"Have you the key?" he asked.

"Yes," said Violet, and she went to fetch it.

While she was gone, Mr. Boner examined the door.

"We shall want a screwdriver," he said; "the door is screwed up."

A servant was dispatched for the tool, and Mr. Thaxton himself unscrewed the door. [210]

"The screws are quite rusty," he said; "the door has not been opened since the day on which it was first closed thus."

"No," said Violet, "it has never been opened," and, as she spoke, she unlocked it.

There was a few moments of silence, during which the lawyer's acute eyes had taken an inventory of the room and its contents.

"Yes," he said, "the room has evidently not been entered for years. Have you the keys, Miss Mildmay?"

Violet handed him a bunch of keys.

The doctor followed the lawyer into the room, and, drawing forward chairs, dusted them and requested Violet and Mrs. Mildmay to be seated.

"I suppose," said Mr. Thaxton, "that we had better try this old bureau first."

Mr. Thaxton slowly tried a key, and opened a drawer.

It was full of papers, which he merely glanced at and laid aside.

Then he opened the writing-desk portion of the bureau, and found a drawer full of trinkets.

"Here it must be," he said, pointing to the drawer. "Will you look?"

Violet rose, and, with trembling fingers, turned over the jewelry.

"These were my mother's jewels," she said.

"Is the locket in there?" asked Mrs. Mildmay.

"No," said Violet, after a pause, and with evident disappointment. "No, there is no locket here."

"Let us search another drawer," said the lawyer, and he unlocked the next in succession.

This, also, was full of papers, but nothing in the shape of a locket could be found there.

Mr. Boner came forward.

"I am rather familiar with the oddities of this sort of furniture," he said. "Indeed, I have a taste for old bookcases and secretaries. May I see if I can find a secret drawer?"

He passed his hand upon the beading running round the writing desk.

"No," said the doctor; "I am disappointed." [211]

Violet rose.

"I will try," she said, and she passed her white, slender fingers over the ornamental part of the bureau.

As she did so, there was a sudden click, and before them all the secret drawer glided out.

Violet started, then bent down and examined it.

There was only an old, faded piece of parchment.

"There is no locket here," she said. "Only this," and she laid the paper on the table. "Will you please put the papers where they were—and—and—close the room again?"

And she shuddered.

"You are chilled," said the doctor. "There is a draught here from that broken window," and he pointed to the window, in which a pane was broken.

The captain started.

He had quite forgotten that slight evidence of his dark deed.

"A bat or an owl has flown against it," he said. "Let me take you downstairs, Miss Mildmay."

Violet placed her hand upon his arm.

"One moment," said Mr. Thaxton. "With your permission, I will glance at this document; it should be of some importance, so carefully preserved."

Violet made a gesture of assent.

"A lease, or something of the sort," muttered the lawyer, putting on his spectacles and taking up the parchment. "Ah!" he exclaimed, suddenly, looking up and scanning the faces all round with a look of surprise.

"What is the matter?" said Mrs. Mildmay, nervously.

"Have you any idea as to what this paper may be?" he asked Violet.

She shook her head, wearily.

"No," she said. "What is it?"

"This," said the lawyer, tapping the document, "is a codicil to your father's will, signed"—here he glanced at the last page—"by him, legally and in due form."

Violet remained silent.

There was a general expression of surprise.

Mr. Thaxton thought for a moment, with the document in his hand.

Then he said: [212]

"I am glad there were so many present at the finding of the deed, and I think I will take the precaution of sealing it in your presence. May I ring for sealing-wax and paper?"

He rang the long silent bell, and a servant, at his request, brought the required articles.

Then, with due formality, the man of law folded the document and sealed it, using a seal of Violet's for the purpose.

"Now," he said, looking at his watch, "as it is important and only reasonable that we should learn the contents, I should recommend that Mr. Beal, the solicitor at Tenby, be telegraphed for. I would rather that another legal adviser as well as myself were present at the reading.

"I will telegraph at once," said the captain, gravely, as the party passed out of the room, which was locked and screwed up as it had been before.

In a very short time Mr. Beal, the Tenby solicitor, arrived.

Mr. Beal was the exact opposite to Mr. Thaxton in appearance and demeanor. He was astute, but a gentleman of the old legal school, and he had risen from a heavy dinner at the special summons with not a little of ill-humor.

"This is a singular discovery," said Mr. Beal. "Of course, it has considerably surprised you, madam."

Mrs. Mildmay murmured "Yes," and the lawyer, after conferring for a moment, broke the seal.

"It is very short," said Mrs. Beal. "Will you read it, or shall I?"

"You," said Mr. Thaxton.

Mr. Beal opened the parchment, and continued:

> "'I, John Mildmay, being in sound bodily and mental health, do declare this to be my true codicil to my last will and testament. I do hereby bequeath to my dear and beloved daughter, Violet Mildmay, the whole of my real and personal estates, with the exception of the legacies mentioned in my will, to hold and to have on these terms; that is to say: That I hereby appoint Howard Murpoint, captain in Her Majesty's army, sole guardian and trustee of my moneys and estates, in trust for Violet Mildmay, who shall have and [213] hold them so long as she remains unmarried or marries with the consent of the said Howard Murpoint; and I hereby will that, in case of Violet Mildmay's death unwedded or her marriage without the consent of the said Howard Murpoint, that all moneys and properties held under my will shall revert to the said Howard Murpoint, with the exception of the bequests and legacies contained in my will; and I bequeath the sum of five thousand pounds, to be raised from the estate, or from my personal assets, to the said Howard Murpoint, to have and to hold for his own use. And I do assign to him the sole charge and care of my beloved daughter, Violet Mildmay, and do beseech him to hold her as his own daughter, and to guard and cherish her as such. The aforesaid are my last bequests and wishes, subject, so far as legacies to servants and relations are contained in my last will and testament. Dated the — day of ——, 18—. As witness my hand.
>
> "'(Signed) JOHN MILDMAY.'
>
> "'Witnesses: Henry Matthews, Mary Matthews.'"

Mr. Thaxton looked gravely from one to the other, and examined the document.

"Is it in my brother's handwriting?" asked Mrs. Mildmay.

"Yes, madam," said Mr. Beal. "The late Mr. Mildmay's handwriting, I should say, undoubtedly."

"It is only my duty to state," said Mr. Thaxton, after a moment's silence, "that this document is singularly informal, and that it could be set aside—I do not say that there exists any wish to set it aside—but I say that it would not, in my opinion, hold good in a court of equity."

"Just so," said Mr. Beal, with legal solemnity.

"You say that it is my father's handwriting?" asked Violet.

"I should say so. Yes, certainly," said Mr. Beal.

Mr. Thaxton remained silent.

"What is your opinion, Mr. Thaxton?" asked the captain.

"I have formed none at present," said the lawyer, quietly. "I have not examined the document sufficiently to do so. I know that it was an oft-expressed wish of the late Mr. Mildmay that his daughter should be placed under your guardianship." [214]

"And it is so set down," said Violet, rising with her usual decision. "My father's will is mine!" She held out her hand to the captain, with a sad, gentle smile. "He has assigned me to your charge, and I resign myself. Will you undertake that responsibility? Will you be the guardian of the daughter of your dead friend?"

The captain took the little thin hand and bent over it while his tears—by some miraculous effort—dropped on it.

"I will," he breathed, struggling with his emotion. "I will cherish you, as he says, as if you were my own!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE EARL'S SECRET.

We must return for a while to the kidnaped Leicester.

Gagged and completely powerless, he was hurried along by his captors, through the ruins and down, by a circuitous path, terribly narrow and steep, to the beach.

Though his mouth was gagged, he could still see and hear, and when they had reached the beach he saw the starlike signal which had often puzzled him and heard the sound of muffled oars.

Presently, amidst a dead silence, he was lifted into a boat, which instantly put about toward the open sea.

After some little time he saw the spars of a small schooner looming in the distance.

The boat reached it.

He was lifted from the boat and carried on deck.

There he was instantly surrounded by a crew of desperate and ferocious-looking sailors, half of them Lascars, a few Spanish, and one or two Englishmen.

Job, who had remained on deck, drew aside with the captain, and, after a few minutes' rapid conversation with him, returned to where Leicester lay.

"I am going, Maester Leicester," he said, gravely, and almost sadly. "I be sorry to leave ye like this, but ye wouldn't come to terms and there was naught else to do. I'd advise ye to give in like a wise gentleman; no harm'll come to yer if yer keeps quiet. Good-by, Maester Leicester. I be sorry, mortal sorry, and I'd give a sight of money if it was any one else as we'd had to play the trick on." [215]

So saying, he turned and dropped over into the boat, which instantly rowed away.

Immediately afterward the order was given to crowd all canvas and put the ship about.

While it was being executed the captain of the motley crew strode up to Leicester and unbound his hands and removed the gag.

Leicester sprang to his feet.

"Stranger," he said, with that nasal twang which proclaimed the Yankee, "I guess we'd better understand each other. I'm captain of this yere vessel, and what I say I mean; and no gentleman, whether he's an etarnal Britisher or a free man born under the Stars and Stripes can mean more. You've been consigned to my charge under peculiar circumstances. I'm to take care of you, keep yer safe and sound, and drop you soft as a kitten at a sartain place. Them's my instructions, and them's my intentions."

"I will offer no resistance to this villainous oppression," said Leicester, "on the condition that I am not kept in confinement and am allowed to mingle with and assist your crew."

The Yankee thought a moment and nodded.

"That's fair," he said. "And I agree, with this yere stipulation, that you comes no nonsense with my men, none of yer pitching yarns or tempting to a mutiny."

Leicester smiled bitterly as he glanced at the villainous countenance of the crew.

"I give you that promise," he said.

Leicester took off his coat, waistcoat, boots and stockings and quietly joined the crew at their task of setting the sails.

It was his wisest course of action, for had he been left idle and fettered with nothing to do but to think and dwell upon his position he must have gone mad. [216]

It is a beautiful spring morning, and the London season is, like the time of year, just at its greenest and most verdant state.

This afternoon the Lady's Mile in the park is tolerably full, and the loungers against the railings especially numerous.

At the corner, near the old elm, leans little Tommy Gossip; everybody knows Tommy, and, what is worse, Tommy knows everybody and everything.

"Who's that, my dear boy?" says Tommy, as a green chariot dashes by, in which are seated a stout elderly lady and a companion; "that's the Duchess of St. Clare," and he lifts his hat. "She's the queen of fashion, my boy, and can make or mar a reputation with a word. Jingo! how she paints! Ha!" And here Tommy Gossip brightens up into a state of mild excitement. "Here she is!"

"Who?" asked the lad at his side.

"Who? Why the beauty of the day, the new belle, the Ice Queen, as Madam White called her. By St. George, she grows more beautiful every day—and more pale."

And as he spoke he raised his hat, with an emphasis of reverence and eagerness, to an open carriage which slowly passed by.

In the carriage were seated three ladies.

Two of them were old, but one was superbly beautiful, with a beauty that was not only captivating but absorbing in its expression of pensive, resigned and dignified repose.

"There she goes! Look at the men. There's not a head covered, and there's not a heart, my boy, that would not jump out of its shoes at a smile from her. Who is she? Why she is the beauty and the belle and the mystery of London. Her name is Mildmay, Violet Mildmay. One of the old ladies with her is her aunt, Mrs. Mildmay. The other is a Mrs. Dodson—a relation of the family, some say, others a mother of that singular fellow, Leicester Dodson, Bertie Fairfax's sworn friend, who cut his throat down at some outlandish watering-place. Look, you see those two gentlemen, those riding toward us on horseback? That is Howard Murpoint, Esq." [217]

"Which," said the boy, "the old one?"

"No, the young one; the old gentleman is Mr. Dodson, poor Leicester Dodson's father. No, the young one; watch his face, my lad, for it is the face of a great man. That man can command millions. He is chairman of the great Confederated Credit Company, and director of half a hundred companies besides."

At that moment, while Mr. Gossip was running on to the delight of the lad, a tall, golden-haired man came slowly by.

Tommy Gossip caught his arm as he passed.

"Hello, Bert, back again! Dine with us at the Theseus to-night?"

"I can't, I'm busy," said our old friend. "I'm very sorry. Ah, there is Miss Mildmay," and, dragging himself from the gossip he made his way to the carriage.

Barely two years had elapsed since the time of that tragedy in the little watering-place of Penruddie, and wonderful changes have come about.

Captain Howard Murpoint, no longer known as captain, but as Howard Murpoint, Esq., M. P., is, or is supposed to be, one of the great capitalists of the day.

How he has made his money and found his position is a mystery and a marvel.

And what of Violet? Has she forgotten her love-passion? Has she forgotten her ill-fated lover?

Look at her face, and see if it is the face of a woman that forgets.

None know how much she remembers, how much of the past she still clings to.

To no one, not even to Mrs. Dodson, whom she loves as a daughter loves her mother, does she ever mention that familiar name.

"Leicester" may be graven on her heart, but it never passes her lips.

We shall see her to-night, for there is a ball, the first of the season, at the Duchess of St. Clare's, at which she will be present, in company with the *élite*, including Bertie Fairfax.

Bertie Fairfax, the favorite of the club and the drawing-room. Still the handsome Apollo Belvedere, but not quite the light-hearted, free, laughing fellow as of old. [218]

He is a celebrated man, an author of great repute, whom men point out to their sons as a modern genius, and to procure whom at their balls and dinners women will do much.

Bertie was fond of a dinner once and loved a ball, but it seems now as if "man delighted him not, nor woman either," at least not women.

He will always go to a ball or a dinner if he is sure that Lady Ethel Lackland will be present.

For the rest, he spends his life, writing hard, in those very set of chambers which his dear friend Leicester shared with him, and which his spirit still visits.

There is to be a crowd at Clare House to-night, and Bertie will see Ethel—perhaps speak to her.

As he leans against the Mildmay's carriage he tells Violet that he will be there, and he knows by the gentle smile with which she looks down at him that she knows why.

"I am so glad," she says. "Will you look out for me? Lady Boisdale will not be there till eleven."

There is indeed a crowd at Clare House. The huge staircases are one great crush, the saloons a scene of warfare.

To dance is almost impossible, save to those young and ardent votaries of Terpsichore who are willing to whirl in the mazy waltz reckless of their own dresses and other people's toes.

Still, however, there is breathing and moving room in some of the corridors, and thither many have taken refuge.

Violet dances, and she sings, and laughs sometimes, but not as she did of old.

The earl and Howard Murpoint were alone in a corner.

"A great crush," said the earl, stroking his white mustache. "The young people seem to be enjoying themselves, which brings me to the remark that you ought to be classed with the juveniles, Mr. Murpoint."

And he looked at the capitalist with a cold smile.

"I am not very old, certainly," said Howard Murpoint. "Some would call me very young."

"For so successful a man," put in the earl, with another smile. [219]

The successful man bowed.

"I have had my fair share of fortune," said Howard Murpoint, "but perhaps, like Sempronius, I have done more than deserve success—worked for it. That reminds me, my lord, that you have not yet made up your mind to join us in the new Penwain mines."

He glanced at the earl as he spoke, then looked away to the ballroom with a careless air.

"Eh—hem!" said the earl, "you wish my name to appear on the list of directors."

"Exactly," said Mr. Howard Murpoint. "An earl pleases, and—pardon me, my lord—soothes the monetary public, as you are aware."

The earl frowned, if a slight contraction of the eyebrows can be called a frown.

"I am already on the board of several of your companies, Mr. Murpoint, at your request."

"Certainly at my request, my lord; but you have not undertaken any responsibility, and I trust, have found your reward."

"Eh? Yes," said the earl. "To put it plainly, I have received certain shares as an equivalent for the use of my name, and they have paid tolerably well."

"Very well, I think," said Howard Murpoint, with quiet and smiling emphasis.

"Tolerably well," resumed the earl, as if he had not been interrupted. "But as you seem to attach so much importance to my—the fact of my name appearing on the list of the Penwain Mine Company, it has occurred to me that—ahem!—it may be worth more than I receive for it. I speak plainly."

"I am honored by your candor," said Howard Murpoint, with a crafty smile. "You have forgotten, while enumerating the equivalents received, some slight service which I have been enabled to render you."

"Loans, my dear sir," said the earl, "loans; which, of course, I shall pay. Merely loans."

It was Mr. Murpoint's turn to "ahem!"

"My dear lord," he said, in his sweetest voice, "we men of business know a great deal more than most people give us credit for knowing. One little bird—pray don't think I wished him to whisper secrets—came to me one day and whispered your name and that of a certain well-known money-lender." [220]

The earl's face grew more fixed, but he did not move a muscle or show the slightest anger or surprise at the captain's knowledge of his embarrassments.

"Do not be afraid, my lord," said the schemer, in his softest voice; "the secret is safe with me. I shall not tell any one that Lackland Hall is mortgaged to the neck; that there is a lien on every other house your lordship holds; that there is a bill of sale upon the furniture, and that Lady Lackland's diamonds are at the jewelers, being repaired. I shall not tell all this because it is not to my interest to do so."

The earl sat stroking his mustache and looking straight before him.

"You do indeed speak plainly, Mr. Murpoint," he said, "and, while I will not endeavor to disprove or deny your assertions, I must at least confess that they startle me. Granting, merely for argument's sake, that I am er—er—somewhat embarrassed, I cannot see how it can be to your interest to help me."

There was a pause.

Presently a couple—a handsome man and a beautiful woman—passed them as they promenaded after the dance.

"What a couple they make. My ward is beautiful and well-bred, my lord, and Lord Boisdale and she are good friends."

The earl scrutinized the sleek, serene face of the speaker with acute anxiety.

"I see," he said, "I see. You are right, you are right, Mr. Murpoint; they would make a handsome and suitable pair. It is a capital idea."

"Which requires capital," said Howard Murpoint.

The earl flushed.

"Your ward is wealthy——"

"And your son must needs be noble, my lord," continued the captain. "A match between them is a thing to be desired."

"You would give your consent?" said the earl, almost feverishly.

The captain smiled. [221]

"Let us talk of something else," he said. "It is a shame to dispose of the young things without their consent."

Then suddenly he said:

"Did you hear that the prime minister had spoken of my scheme for negotiating with the Swedish mines with much favor?"

"Yes," said the earl, not understanding why the conversation had been so rapidly changed.

"A friend told me that I deserved a baronetcy for it, hah! hah!" and he laughed softly. "Fancy plain Howard Murpoint made Captain Sir Howard Murpoint, Bart., M. P.!"

"I see!" said the earl as a sudden light began to burst in upon him. "Let me follow your excellent example, Mr. Murpoint, and speak plainly. Do I understand that you will give your consent and bring about a marriage between my son, Lord Boisdale, and your ward if I obtain for you through my influence the baronetage which seems to cause you so much amusement?"

"My dear lord!" exclaimed the schemer, with a deprecating smile, "that is indeed speaking plainly. I am very grateful for your good intentions, very, but if I am anything, my lord, I am disinterested. From my boyhood I have worked for others; I am working for others now. It is enough for me that I can see my ward—my dearest friend's daughter!—happy. Be assured that if I thought a marriage between her and the admirable Lord Boisdale would tend to increase that happiness I would use every influence I possessed to bring about such a match, which would do us so much honor and would, I hope, be beneficial to the interests of your noble house."

The earl held out his hand and his cold, icy eyes glittered.

"You are a clever man, Mr. Murpoint, and a generous one. England is blessed indeed in the possession of such men as you! I am honored by your confidence—and—ahem—I think you really deserve the baronetcy!"

"You are very good to say so," smiled the captain, with a cunning light in his dark eyes.

"Shall I," he said, as the earl took up his crush hat and prepared to depart—"shall I have the pleasure of adding your name to the list of directors of the Penwain Mining Company?" [222]

"Certainly, certainly, I shall be delighted," said the earl; "I will go on to the club, I think," and after shaking hands warmly he departed.

Howard Murpoint leaned back in his chair, and watched the tall form of his latest dupe disappear amid the crowd.

"Snared at last," he muttered. "Did I speak too plainly? No; I think not. I have committed myself to nothing. Shall I get the baronetcy? I think so; if not, let the Earl of Lacklands beware. I have him in a cleft stick."

At that moment Bertie and Ethel approached. As they entered the corridor, Mr. Murpoint rose with a scowl and passed out.

"Those two," he murmured; "they must be disposed of before long. She thinks, poor girl, that Fate will prove kind and give her to the arms of Master Bertie. Lady Boisdale, I am your Fate, and have other intentions respecting you."

Bertie and Ethel entered as the curtain fell over the doorway through which they had passed.

"I thought papa and Mr. Murpoint were here," said Ethel.

"They are not far off, I dare say," said Bertie. "Will you not rest a while?"

"How warm it is," said Ethel, leaning forward and fanning herself. "Every one looks hot excepting dear Violet. See where she goes, pale and unruffled as usual. Dear Violet!" and she sighed.

Bertie's eyes followed Violet as she passed, leaning upon Lord Boisdale's arm.

"Do you think Miss Mildmay is ill or unhappy?" he asked, in a low, grave voice.

"I cannot say. I do not think her ill, and I would like to say that she is unhappy. I think she scarcely knows herself the exact state of her own feelings. See how dreamy and yet serene she looks; she is not thin either, and yet—oh, how terrible a puzzle is life—how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable."

Bertie looked up at her.

"Not to you—you are happy, Lady Boisdale. What should you know of the temptations, the sorrows, the failures of life." [223]

Ethel smiled.

"I may retort," she said, "in kind. What failures can the celebrated and popular Mr. Fairfax know?"

"The greatest failure a man can experience," said Bertie, leaning forward. "The failure of a hope, that at the best never deserved the word! Lady Boisdale, if you could read my heart at this moment you would see how bitter life is to me, how hollow the mockery of success which has fallen to me! Once I would have welcomed it, longed for it. Now it is as bitter Dead-Sea fruit which crumbles to dust beneath my touch. Once—nay, listen, I implore you to listen," for Ethel had half risen, pale and confused. "Once," he continued, very pale and earnest, and with a sad music in his voice. "When I was young enough to cherish such daring ambitions I dreamed that I could make a place for myself in this great struggling, writhing world, a place high enough to satisfy my ambition and feed my hope. I hoped to reach that place and to seat another there beside me, rather let me say, upon the throne itself while I knelt at the feet. This was a boy's dream, Lady Boisdale, and like most dreams only the bitterness of its unreality is left to me. I have made a place for myself, but it is empty and desolate. A desolate and bitter mockery because I dare not, I dare not hope that she whom I would have for my queen will ever deign to fill it. Lady Boisdale, could you see me as I really am, solitary, alone in the great world, bereft of my dearly-loved friend, bereft of my hope, you would pity me. Others might laugh me to scorn for a presumptuous idiot, but you, whose gentle heart I know so well, would pity me."

He took her hand as he spoke, his voice trembled.

A tear fell on the hand which held hers.

He looked up and saw that she was weeping.

In an instant his reserve, his determination to go no further was broken down.

He drew the hand to his lips and, looking up at her averted face, passionately said, in a voice trembling with love and supplication:

"Lady Boisdale—Ethel! you know for whom my heart has thirsted, you know why to me the world is bitter and life a mockery! It is because I love you—I love you, Ethel, and I have not dared to hope. If you can forgive me my presumption. If you can—if you can love me—oh, Ethel, you know I have loved so long and hopelessly. Forgive me if I have forgotten the gulf which yawns between us. Why should I not?" he exclaimed, suddenly and passionately. "Is it a crime to love a noble woman, because she is an earl's daughter? Hearts are not given to the rich and mighty alone. The peasant revels in the power to love, and I—I who kneel at your feet pleading for your pardon, feel that I have not sinned against Heaven or man, but have simply obeyed the pure impulse of my soul in daring to love you. Ethel, Ethel, you too condemn me!" [224]

And with a tone of despair and reproach, he half rose.

"No! no!" cried Ethel, turning to him and laying her white, trembling hand upon his arm. "No, no. Condemn you! I love you!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A TRYING INTERVIEW.

So Bertie had declared love, and won an acknowledgment from Ethel that his love was returned.

"Ethel," he said, and the name sounded wonderfully sweet as he dwelt upon it with loving tenderness, "Ethel, I must go to the earl and ask for my pearl of price. Shall I go to-morrow?"

Ethel turned pale and sighed.

"To-morrow?" she said. "Yes, must it be so soon?"

"Yes," he said, quietly and gravely, "the world will say that I should have asked him first; but we cannot always control our hearts, they will have their way sometimes, and mine has been under bolt and bar so long—so long."

"So long?" she murmured, blushing and turning away from him.

"Almost from the day when I first saw you—do you remember the time? Poor Leicester was alive then, and I poured all my hopes and fears into his ears. Ethel, I thought it hard that I should be debarred from hope; you were an earl's daughter—as you are now—and I was penniless, struggling, unknown." [225]

"But it is all altered now," breathed Ethel, pressing his hand. "You are famous, and—and not poor."

Ethel rose, intoxicated with her new born happiness, to meet Lady Lackland, who was seen approaching.

"Ah, Mr. Fairfax," said the countess, eying him suspiciously with a cold smile. "How good of you to take care of Lady Boisdale. I suppose you have been cooling yourselves. Ethel, my dear, the carriage is waiting; I don't know where your papa is."

There was a crush in the street, and while Bertie, bareheaded, was placing the ladies in the carriage the earl and Lord Fitz came up.

Mr. Murpoint was with them, serene and self-composed as usual, though the crush and confusion were bewildering.

"Here you are!" said the earl. "We were just going to look for you. Fitz has been seeing the Mildmays to their brougham."

Howard Murpoint closed the door as the two gentlemen entered the carriage and stood with his dark eyes, half closed, fixed upon Ethel.

Then the carriage was on the move, and Bertie and Howard Murpoint stood looking after it.

Howard Murpoint regarded Bertie with a smile.

"You do not fear influenza," he said, nodding at the other's bare head.

"Eh? Oh, no," said Bertie. "I'll get my hat now, though."

And with a cool nod he strode into the hall again.

Howard Murpoint turned to make his way to his own brougham, and in doing so nearly knocked down a gentleman who was standing near him.

"Ha, Smythe," he exclaimed, "you here?"

"Eh? Yes," said the man, a short, nervous-looking creature, with fair, insipid face and timid, restless eyes. "Yes; just passing on my way to the club and—and stopped to look in."

"Club!" said Howard Murpoint. "Better come home and coffee with me."

And he linked his arm within that of his acquaintance.

Wilhelm Smythe, for that was the name, or rather improved name—it had been William Smith—of [226] the stranger, was the son of a retired tea merchant.

His father had left him an enormous amount of property and a very small amount of brains.

The captain—or rather Howard Murpoint, as he preferred to be called, had met him at a club some few months previously and had found out all about him.

He had won the good opinion of the half-cunning simpleton, who thought Howard Murpoint the nicest and most disinterested of friends.

All the way home Howard Murpoint gave a glowing description of the ball, to which, of course, Wilhelm Smythe had received no invitation, and the poor fellow was in agonies of envy.

"Delightful!" he exclaimed. "And she was there, for I saw her."

"Whom?" asked the captain.

"Can you ask me?" sighed Mr. Smythe, "when you know that I am madly in love with her."

The captain smiled.

"'Pon my word, I've heard nothing," he said, encouragingly.

"Why, all the fellows have been chaffing me," said the simpleton.

"And who is the lady?" asked the captain.

They were ascending the stairs to the smoking-room as the question was asked, and Mr. Smythe flung himself into the most comfortable lounge of the great man's luxurious sanctum ere he answered.

"Don't you know? Can't you guess?"

"Not an idea," said the captain, handing him the cigars. "Come, who is she?"

The little fellow sighed, and replied, with due solemnity:

"Lady Boisdale!"

The captain's eyes flashed. He had wanted a tool! Here was one, ready made to his hand.

"Come," said the captain, pushing the bottle, and eying his dupe keenly, "if you have set your heart upon marrying Lady Ethel Boisdale I think I can help you."

"You can!" exclaimed the young fellow.

"I can, and I will," said the captain, quietly, "on one condition—that you will never mention that [227] you are indebted to me for your success."

"I promise that," said Mr. Smythe, eagerly; "and you really will——"

"Do my best to recommend you to the earl and his peerless daughter, and, what is more, I will venture to bet you something, that I succeed."

"Eh?" said Mr. Smythe, scarcely catching the idea.

Then suddenly he saw what Mr. Howard Murpoint meant.

"I see!" he said. "I'll bet you—you a—a—five thousand."

The captain raised his eyebrows.

"I never bet," he said, "unless the stake is worth something. If I am to enter it in my book it must be twenty thousand."

Mr. Smythe hesitated—only for a moment.

"Twenty thousand be it," he said. "If I marry Lady Ethel I pay you twenty thousand, and if I don't ——"

"I pay you," said Mr. Murpoint, softly. "It's a wager."

And he held out his long, clawlike, white hand.

Mr. Smythe rose, clasped it eagerly, and, after a fervent and excited "Good-night," took his departure.

It was morning, bright, beaming morning, by that time, and Mr. Murpoint had too many great matters on hand to allow of his retiring to rest.

Instead he stepped into a cold bath which was ready for him in an adjoining room, and, dressing himself in his business suit of dark Oxford mixture with an imposing white waistcoat, made his way to his office in Pall Mall.

Seating himself in his chair in his own private room he touched a small bell.

In answer to the summons there entered a tall, thin and cadaverous-looking man with a small dispatch case.

"Good-morning, Ridgett," said Mr. Murpoint.

The man bowed, and took from his portfolio a number of papers.

The captain went over them with a quick scrutiny and issued his instructions.

"You will proceed in this case, Mr. Ridgett," he said, throwing one letter over.

"Yes, sir. The woman is a widow, and very poor, and suffers from an incurable complaint." [228]

"The office has nothing to do with that," said Mr. Murpoint. "We did not kill the husband, and we did not undertake to cure her complaint. She came into our hands of her own accord, and we simply demand the fees due us. You will proceed without delay. Have you bought up the L debts yet?"

"Not all, sir," was the reply. "You instructed me to wait further commands."

"Wait no longer," said Mr. Murpoint, "but get as many of the Lackland bills together as you can. You understand?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Ridgett.

And, dismissed by a nod, he took his departure.

Scarcely had he gone when the small and weather-beaten face of the smuggler entered the room.

Job, who had often paid visits to the captain at various places, but never at the office, was awed for a moment by the grand furniture and piles of papers and documents.

"Mornin', captain——"

"Have you brought the account?" said Mr. Murpoint.

Job nodded, and produced a greasy bag, which he placed on the polished table.

The captain turned out the contents of the bag, and commenced counting the heap of gold and silver.

Then he examined an account which was made out on a dirty piece of paper Job had handed to him, looking up at last with a dark frown.

"How is this?" he said, in a low, stern voice. "There is some mistake. Here is only a third of the profits—there should be a half."

"There bean't no mistake, capt—sir," said Job, with an emphatic nod. "They've sent all they means to send, and a hard job I had to get that. The boys say that they don't see the justice like of one man—gentleman or no gentleman—taking half the swag when they've worked for the whole of it."

"Oh, they don't?" said Mr. Murpoint, with a soft smile. "Tell them that unless I have the remainder of the money by this time next week, and a fair half for the future, paid to the very day, I will peach upon the lot of them. Not a man shall escape me. The police shall know how the great smuggling trade is done and who does it. You tell them, will you, with my compliments?" [229]

"I'll tell them," said Job, quietly.

"Any news from sea?"

"About Maester Leicester?" asked Job, looking at the ground with a sudden change of manner.

"Hush, no names," said Mr. Murpoint, cautiously.

"No, no news," replied Job. "He's dead by this time, p'r'aps."

"All the better," said Mr. Murpoint. "Dead or alive, he's safe."

"Ay," said Job, and, touching his forehead, he departed.

The captain leaned back in his chair and gave himself up to thought.

"Leicester Dodson is dead, or buried alive. Violet's money is in my hands; the earl and all his clan are in my power; I am master of thousands, some say millions; and the world calls me one of its greatest men. Who says that honesty is the best policy?"

And as he concluded with the momentous question, he laughed with the keenest enjoyment and insolence.

Bertie was very happy that night as he sat in his solitary chambers and smoked his favorite pipe.

All the weary, hopeless months gone by since first he had seen and loved sweet Ethel Boisdale seemed to have vanished like dark spirits before the joy of that night.

He had told her that he loved, and had won the sweet confession from her lips that she loved him in return.

How bright seemed the world to him—how full of hope and enjoyment!

His dull, book-lined rooms assumed a new aspect under his happy eyes and all at once appeared comfortable quarters, full of pleasant peace and quiet.

But in the morning, after a night of happy, glorious dreams, came the stern reality.

He dressed himself with unusual care, and surveyed himself in the glass.

Would the earl, proud Lord Lackland, accept him as a son-in-law?

He dared not answer his own query, but whiled away the early hours by pacing to and fro, doing a little work, smoking at intervals and thinking always. [230]

As the clock struck eleven he took up his hat and started on his momentous business.

While he was on his way to the Lackland mansion in Grosvenor Square the earl himself was seated in the breakfast-room munching his toast and sipping his coffee.

Lady Lackland was seated at the table.

Fitz and Ethel were out in the park at their morning gallop.

"Extraordinary thing," said Lady Lackland, in answer to a remark of the earl's, "I cannot understand it. The man has done so much, made so much money and obtained such wonderful power that he makes one afraid. I always said he was clever. I could see it the first moment I saw him. Do you remember the conversation I had with him the day of the thunder storm? It seemed almost as if he knew the codicil would be found. And he has actually consented to Fitz's engagement with Violet Mildmay. More, he has promised in an indefinite, cautious sort of way to advance the match. A wonderful man. I hope he will succeed; we want money, we must have it."

"We must," said the earl. "It is a singular thing that we have not been ruined long before this. I feared that the bills would have been called in long ago, but I seem to have heard very little of them lately."

"Perhaps your creditors think that Fitz will marry well and are waiting till you should get some money."

"Perhaps so," said the earl, coolly. "I wish Ethel were as well disposed of."

Lady Lackland sighed.

"Ethel is my great trouble," she said. "She is beautiful enough to make a really great match, but there is no doing anything with her; she is as cold as ice to all of them, and I am powerless."

"Hem!" said the earl, and he shifted in his chair to get more comfortable. "There is one little difficulty about Ethel which you seem to forget; perhaps you do not know it."

"What is that?" asked the countess.

"That her private fortune has long since been swallowed up." [231]

Lady Lackland looked grave.

"And if she marries, her husband will want it—at least, ask for it. If he should, where is it to come from?"

He put the question quite calmly, and Lady Lackland sighed.

"Nobody was ever so poor as we are——"

"Or spent more money," said the earl, comfortably. "Ethel is a difficult question; a big marriage would bring questions, questions would bring awkward answers. I have spent her fortune, and I cannot replace it."

At that moment, while the countess sat with a look of annoyance and distress, silent and dismayed, a servant entered with a card.

The earl glanced at it, and handed it to the countess.

"Bertie Fairfax!" she breathed.

"Show Mr. Fairfax into the library," said the earl.

Then, when the servant had withdrawn, he smiled over his cup quite calmly and unmoved.

"Bertie Fairfax," said the countess, with a frown.

"What is to be done? Of course he comes to ask for Ethel."

"Not having seen him, I cannot say."

"What shall you say if he does?"

"It all depends," said the earl, wiping his mustache. "I may have to order him to leave the house, or I may——"

"Be careful!" said the countess.

The earl smiled coldly, and left the room.

Bertie rose as the earl entered.

"Good-morning, Mr. Fairfax," he said, fixing his cold, steely eyes on Bertie's face, and holding out a cold, impassive hand.

"Good-morning, my lord," said Bertie, who had determined to remain self-possessed and unembarrassed, whatever might be the issue of the interview, or, however the question might go. "Good-morning. I am afraid I am rather early, but I have come on a matter in which impatience is permissible."

"Pray sit down," said the earl, seating himself as he spoke in a hard, straight-backed chair, and looking as straight as the chair itself. "Nothing has happened, I hope." [232]

"Nothing of harm, I hope," said Bertie, gravely. "I have come, my lord, to ask you for the hand of Lady Boisdale."

The earl raised his eyebrows, assuming a surprise which, of course, he did not feel.

"I had thought it best to declare my purpose and put my request as plainly and as straightforwardly as I could. I do not undervalue the prize which I pray for at your hands, my lord, and I am humbly conscious that I am not worthy to receive it from you. I can only plead that I love her with all my heart and that I have loved her for years. But, a few months ago, I should have deemed my request presumptuous to the extent of madness, but now, although I am not one whit more worthy of her, I am, perhaps, in the eyes of the world a little less presumptuous."

The earl listened with an unmoved countenance, as if he were listening to some passage from a book which in no way concerned him.

"May I ask, Mr. Fairfax," he said, "if you have made Lady Boisdale acquainted with the state of your feelings?"

Bertie flushed the slightest in the world.

"I regret to say that I have, my lord. No one can regret it more than I do. I know that I should have come to you first, and have gained permission to place myself at your daughter's feet. But the depth of my devotion must plead for me; may I hope that it will? We are all, the best of us, the slaves of impulse. There are times when the heart asserts itself and enslaves the will, which, perhaps for years, has bidden its voice be silent, as mine has done."

The earl bowed.

"May I ask," he said, "in what way Lady Ethel received your advances?"

"I found that, for once, true love had won its best return."

"She consented, do you mean?"

Bertie bowed.

"Then, doubtless, Mr. Fairfax," said the earl, as softly as ever, "you were kind enough to place her [233] in possession of facts of which I am in ignorance?"

Bertie did not understand, and looked as if he did not.

"In such matters as this," said the earl, "it is best, as you say, to speak with candor. I refer to your position in the world, and your ability to keep Lady Boisdale in the society which, all my friends tell me, she so greatly adorns."

Bertie bowed.

"My lord, I should have shamed her by any such allusion, and lost all hope of winning her heart. To you I may say that I am not poor in the eyes of many, though I may seem poor indeed to one of your lordship's position and wealth."

The earl winced inwardly, but showed nothing of it outwardly.

"I have an income of two thousand pounds a year, and I trust that I may be able before long to own with gratitude that it is doubled. It is not a large sum, my lord."

"I may conclude that the sum you mention is the whole—in fact, that you are not prepared to make any settlement?"

"All that I have shall be hers," said Bertie. "The richest man in England can do no more."

"No settlement!" said the earl, coldly. "Under the circumstances, you would not, therefore, expect a fortune with her?"

Bertie crimsoned.

"Your lordship forgets," he said, with quiet dignity, "that I came to ask for your daughter and not for your money."

The earl showed no displeasure at the stern retort, but took it simply as an assent, and nodded.

"Mr. Fairfax, to be candid, as we have been all through, Lady Lackland and I have had higher hopes for Ethel, much higher. It is true that you are famous, and that you are well descended; the Fairfaxes run with ourselves, I think. It is usual—nay, it is the duty of a father to endeavor to place his daughter in a higher station than the one which she inherits from him. If I ignore that duty and consent to give up that hope, I trust I shall be pardoned if I make one suggestion."

"My lord, I am in your hands," said Bertie, with simple dignity and earnestness. [234]

"And that is that you will give me, both of you, a formal quittal of any fortune or estate that may be due to her. I simply suggest it as a fair and honorable thing. You may be aware, or you may not, that Lady Ethel has some small fortune of her own; under the circumstances I must make the condition that should I give my consent you will agree to let the money remain in the estate, vested, so to speak, in the family."

Bertie smiled.

"As I said before, my lord, I ask only for Ethel. What money she may have is at her own disposal. I don't wish to touch one penny of it, directly or indirectly."

"My dear Mr. Fairfax, do not let us continue this branch of our subject, then," said the earl, with a smile that was intended to be cordial, but was more like a stray sunbeam on an October morning. "I will confess that I merely put the question to test you, not that I doubted your honor, but—well, well, you are young, she is young, and I am obliged to guard both of you. But, there, if you still feel confident that you can make her happy, and that you can take her for herself alone, my dear Fairfax, I give her to you, and with her my most hearty blessing."

Bertie gasped with astonishment.

To him, knowing nothing of Ethel's fortune which the earl had appropriated, his consent to Ethel's betrothal was simply astonishing.

He had expected to be repulsed, refused.

The tears sprang to his eyes, his gentle nature was filled with gratitude.

"My lord," he said, grasping the cold hand, "I cannot thank you; thanks for such a gift were idle and vain. Only one who has waited for years, hoping against hope until the heart was sick, can tell what I feel now. My lord, if you will pardon me I will take my leave."

"Good-by, my dear boy," said the earl, "good-by; you will find Ethel in the park. Heaven bless you!"

Bertie found himself outside—how he scarcely knew—bathed in delight and satisfaction.

Where should he find Ethel? Every moment he was away from her now seemed an insane delay. [235]

Where——As he hurried to make his way to the Park there came around the corner, smiling and serene as usual, Mr. Howard Murpoint.

A short gentleman leaned upon his arm.

"Ah, Mr. Fairfax, how d'ye do?" said the captain, with a sunny smile of friendly greeting. "What a delightful morning. Allow me to introduce my friend—Mr. Wilhelm Smythe, Mr. Bertie Fairfax."

Bertie shook hands with the captain, and bowed slightly to his friend, then with a nod hurried on.

He turned at the corner in time to see the captain and his friend standing on the doorsteps of the Lackland house, and as he saw an indefinable and intangible shadow crept over him and chilled him.

By some strange course of reasoning or feeling, he had grown to connect the captain with every mishap of his life.

What were he and his friend doing thus early at Lackland house?

Casting from him the dim foreboding which had fallen upon him at the sight of Howard Murpoint and Mr. Smythe, Bertie hurried to the park.

It was the unfashionable hour—at eleven the Upper Ten are either in bed or just thinking of breakfast—and the Row was nearly empty.

Bertie did not meet with much difficulty in finding his quarry, for they were galloping up and down the tan in the height of enjoyment.

Ethel saw Bertie first, and exclaimed:

"Fitz, there is Bert—Mr. Fairfax."

"What, Bert out of his den as early as this! Hello, old fellow," he exclaimed, as Bert came up, "what's the matter? Temple burned down?"

"No," said Bert, "not that I am aware of."

Then he took off his hat as Ethel rode up.

"I've come out for a run," he said, the happiness and delight within him showing itself in his eyes,

"and I thought perhaps I should find you here."

"Do you want me?" said Fitz, rather puzzled, for there was something in Bertie's face that looked momentous.

"No, I don't want you," said Bertie; "I wanted a word with your sister." [236]

Fitz looked puzzled still, but nodded to Ethel.

"Do you hear that, Eth? He wants to speak to you."

Ethel steered her horse near the rails, and Bertie went up and patted it.

Now that he had the opportunity he did not know what to say, or rather he was loath to say it before Fitz; he would rather have had Ethel alone, and, besides, his news was so precious that he clung to it and hugged it.

"Fitz," he said, "do you mind lending me your nag? It isn't far to walk home."

"Eh?" said Fitz, "what do you mean? I say, what's up? Something between you and Eth, I'll bet a pound. Yes, here you are, old fellow, here's the nag. Don't you two get up to mischief."

He got off in a moment, like the good-natured fellow that he was, and Bertie sprang into the saddle.

"You're a good fellow, Fitz," he said, gratefully.

"Just so," said Fitz, "that's what every man says; but, I say, I don't know whether it's the right thing. What will the earl and countess say? They're mighty particular, you know."

"I'll be responsible," said Bertie, laughing. "Good-by, old fellow; you are a good fellow, too."

Fitz nodded smilingly, and trotted off.

The two lovers, left thus, sat still, Ethel blushing and trembling, Bertie flushed and excited.

"Shall we have a gallop?" he said, and accordingly Ethel, without a word, put her horse into a run.

They rode to the end of the Row, then Bertie said:

"Don't you think it is very impudent of me to borrow your brother's horse and capture you?"

Ethel smiled faintly.

"Oh, my darling!" he burst out, triumphantly, delightedly, "you are mine! I have seen the earl this morning and he has given you to me."

They rode side by side, Bertie speaking of all his hopes and plans, she listening and drinking in the music of his voice.

Somehow or other they found themselves out of the Row and away to a secluded road, where there were no spectators. [237]

Then Bertie took possession of the hand, and while he murmured soft, sweet words, as lovers can and will, he performed a feat of equestrianism which would have made him a worthy candidate for a circus, for with reckless daring he bent forward and actually snatched a kiss from the blushing but forgiving Ethel.

Then they rode home, happy, glowing, at peace with all the world, and as madly in love as any young couple in England.

"We shall meet to-night," said Bertie, "at Mrs. Mildmay's?"

"Yes," said Ethel, "to-night," and, though it was then one o'clock, "to-night" seemed as far off to her as the week after next.

Bertie left the horse at the Lacklands' stables and walked home to his chambers.

As he sat down at his table, his man entered with a letter.

Bertie glanced at the envelope and tore it open. It was stamped with the Lackland crest. It contained a short note, which Bertie had no sooner read than he turned as pale as the paper and staggered back into his chair like a man mortally wounded.

Before we glance over his shoulder and ascertain the contents of the letter which had so affected him let us return to Mr. Howard Murpoint and Mr. Wilhelm Smythe as they stand on the doorstep of Lackland House.

When the servant opened the door Mr. Murpoint inquired for Lord Lackland, and was soon, accompanied by his friend, Mr. Wilhelm Smythe, ushered into the earl's presence.

When they entered the room Howard Murpoint introduced Mr. Smythe to the earl and then proceeded to business.

He said that Mr. Smythe had been anxious to see the earl, as one of the directors of a certain mining company, to ask a few questions.

The earl admitted that he was on the board of directors and answered the questions, or rather the captain answered them for him.

Then Mr. Smythe announced his intention of becoming a director, and incidentally mentioned that he would, if there was any occasion for it, purchase the mine. [238]

This made the earl stare, as the captain had intended that it should; and when Mr. Smythe rose

to take his leave, Lackland's adieu was a great deal more cordial than his greeting.

When the rich Mr. Smythe had gone the captain eyed his dupe warily.

"A nice young fellow," he said.

"Very," said the earl. "A good business man, I have no doubt."

"Immensely rich," said the captain—"immensely. I wonder if the countess would oblige me by sending him a card for her next ball? I should take it as a personal favor."

The earl stroked his mustache.

"I am sure the countess would only be too delighted," he said. "But are you sure that Mr. Smythe would care to come?"

"I am certain that he would," said the captain. "Indeed, he was speaking of it only this morning. Poor fellow, he has become infatuated with the beauty of Lady Boisdale!"

The earl was almost guilty of a start.

"Indeed!" he said. "I am sure we are very much flattered by Mr. Smythe's preference. It is a pity we did not know him. Unfortunately there is no chance of his wishes being fulfilled. I have this morning promised the hand of Ethel to Mr. Fairfax."

"To Mr. Fairfax!" echoed the captain, with as much polite astonishment and disgust in his voice as if the earl had said "His Satanic Majesty." "To Mr. Fairfax!"

"Yes," said the earl. "Mr. Fairfax called here this morning, just before you came, and pressed his suit so earnestly that I yielded and gave my consent—a very reluctant consent, I must confess."

"Write a letter to him recalling your consent."

"Impossible," said the earl.

"Why so?" inquired Mr. Murpoint.

"My word has been given and if I were to break it I should be cut by every man in London. I dared not show my face in a single club." [239]

"It is very unfortunate," said the captain, coolly, "more unfortunate than you can imagine, for I have not told you all."

"All?" inquired the earl. "What else is there to tell?"

"Mr. Smythe is a determined man," said the captain, quietly, "and he assured me this morning that if he did not get your consent to his suit he should go to extremities."

"Extremities! what do you mean?"

"Simply this: that he will buy up the mortgages and the numerous bills which you have given, and come down on you like a hawk. He is a most determined young man. He will sell Lackland Hall and everything you possess, as sure as you stand there."

"He cannot," said the earl, with a smile. "I can make arrangements with my creditors. I can purchase the bills, raise the money, pay off the debts."

"I am afraid not," said the captain. "Because, you see, the bills are all in my hands."

"Your hands?" exclaimed Lord Lackland.

"Yes, mine," answered the captain, softly and with the sweetest smile. "It is very unfortunate! I promised this worthy young man that I would use my influence with your lordship to gain your consent. I gave my word of honor, and if I were to break it I should be cut by every man in London and should not be able to enter a single club."

As he used the earl's own words, and smiled his soft, deadly smile, the earl sank into a chair and gasped for breath.

"Are you a man or a fiend?" he breathed.

"I am simply a man of business," said Mr. Murpoint, "and a man of my word."

"What am I to do? I am in your power!"

"Write a letter to this Mr. Fairfax and tell him that you cannot consent, that you rescind the promise you gave this morning."

The captain stood over him, quite the master of the situation, and dictated.

[240]

> "DEAR SIR: I regret that circumstances have occurred which compel me, on consideration, to recall the consent which I reluctantly gave you this morning. I must beg of you to believe that I am obliged by the force of circumstances to rescind that promise, and that I am strengthened in my resolution to refuse you the hand of my daughter by the countess, who is strongly opposed to any engagement taking place between you. If you have already seen Lady Boisdale, and acquainted her with your hopes and wishes, I must beg that you will, by writing, inform her that all engagements between you must cease, and that you are compelled in honor to refrain from prosecuting your suit. With regret I have arrived at this decision, and sign myself most sincerely your well-wisher, LACKLAND.
>
> "P.S.—It would be as well, perhaps, if you could make arrangements to leave London

for a time. If it should be inconvenient to you to do so, I will remove Lady Boisdale to one of my places in the country."

This letter was written and signed by the earl.

It was carried by a servant to the Temple, and it was read by our friend, Bertie, as we have seen.

Its effect upon him was beyond all description.

CHAPTER XXV.

"MAN OVERBOARD."

Leicester had not much to complain of on the score of treatment from the captain and crew of the smuggler.

He went about his work silently, and with a certain dignity which repelled any advances on the part of his companions.

A year and some months passed wearily enough for Leicester, who hoped day by day for opportunity of escape.

But none presented itself, and at last he had almost determined to fling himself overboard, when the captain came one day to where he stood in the forecastle, and addressed him thus, in his Yankee drawl:

"Stranger, I guess we understand each other by this time?" [241]

"I hope we do," said Leicester, moodily. "I am hoping that this accursed vessel will wreck some day," said Leicester, "and then——"

"And then what?" asked the captain.

"Then I may stand a chance," said Leicester, fiercely.

"So," said the Yankee, "that's the game, is it? Here!" and he called to two or three of the crew. "Clap this chap into irons."

The men came forward reluctantly, and Leicester, after a fierce struggle, was forced down upon the deck and heavily ironed.

Then he was hoisted and dragged to the mast, and lashed there, an example and a warning to all others who might be inclined to be "obstreperous," as the captain said.

All this time the schooner was making to get clear of the Channel, which they hoped to reach before dawn on the morrow.

The crew, already favorably impressed by Leicester's conduct and his uncomplaining capability, were much aggrieved at this treatment.

The Yankee skipper appeared to take no notice of the complaints for some time, but when the dissatisfaction arrived at that point when the men declared they would not work the vessel while Leicester was tied up the captain, with an oath, drew his revolver.

"Who says I mayn't do what I like on my own vessel?" he roared. "If there's one o' you as wants an inch o' lead let him stand out!"

One man, a weather-beaten little fellow whose face Leicester seemed to have remembered as having seen before he was carried on board, stepped forward and, with a savage sort of courage, stared the captain in the face.

"Wal, Stumpy," he said, "what have you got to say?"

"Why, this 'ere," said the courageous little fellow, "that it ain't the square thing to keep a man as does his duty and ain't shown no cheek skewered on the masthead."

The captain lowered his revolver.

"If you've all o' ye set your minds upon having this yer tarnation mighty gentleman a darncin' round agin, let him darnce." [242]

Here the men set up a shout, and Stumpy leaped forward and commenced knocking Leicester's irons off.

With a malicious spite the Yankee set Leicester—almost exhausted as he was—and Stumpy, his advocate, to the hardest tasks.

In spite of all efforts to keep the vessel from going coastward the schooner gradually but surely drifted toward a line of reefs, and the strain was so great on the rudder that the Yankee issued an order for bracing it.

Of course Stumpy and Leicester were told off, and without a moment's hesitation they seized the necessary ropes and commenced the perilous task.

Leicester expected every moment that he and his comrade in danger would be blown or buffeted overboard, and so kept a keen lookout for Stumpy and grasped a spar, upon which he knelt, with the determination of an already drowning man.

The result showed that his fears were well grounded.

Suddenly he missed from his side the small but courageous form of his comrade.

Stumpy had succumbed to the latest billow.

With a shout of "A man overboard!" he hung over the side and peered into the heaving deep.

Grasping the spar in both hands Leicester rose to his full height, and, amid a roar of warning and excitement from the crew, leaped into the sea.

The drowning man was very nearly finished by Leicester's well meant effort at rescue, for the spar just missed his head by a foot.

As it was, however, he seized it with a convulsive grasp, and the two men were once more together.

For a few moments the ship was lost to them.

They were pitched up and down, backward and forward, the rain cutting their faces, and the cold numbing their hands.

Then it was that Leicester hit upon a means of securing them to the spar.

The rope which had been fastened to his waist still hung there, and he managed, by dint of sheer force, to drag it up, and drop it over the spar once or twice, at each turn passing it round the armpit of Stumpy or himself. [243]

By this means they were completely entangled, and in a rough fashion lashed to the long piece of wood in which all their hopes of life rested.

Dawn broke at last, and the storm subsided; but long before then they were half unconscious and wholly numbed.

When Leicester came to, he found himself lying on his back, and the weather-beaten face of Stumpy over him.

He smiled, and the man groaned back in reply; but for quite an hour no words were spoken.

At the end of that time, when they had almost recovered from the exhaustion, Leicester struggled to his feet and approached Stumpy, who was sitting, hugging his knees, at a little distance on the beach.

"Come," he said. "We are safe, thank Heaven! Cheer up! We must move on."

The man rose and looked at him, but although he nodded his head in assent he made no allusion to their late peril or made any attempt to thank his preserver.

They scrambled up the beach for some little distance, then Stumpy stopped.

"It's no use of my going any farther, sir; I can't indeed."

Leicester, fully appreciating the "sir," by which the man addressed him, stared in astonishment.

"Why not, man? We must go on! Why should you be afraid to go on? This is Ireland, you say. Do you fear anything from the people on the coast? Ah, I forgot!" he added, as the remembrance of his comrade's occupation flashed on him. "You fear the coastguard!"

"That's it," said Stumpy. "I should be in quod in half an hour."

"But how should they know you?" asked Leicester. "You need not proclaim yourself."

"No need for that, sir," said Stumpy, with a grin. "Look here," and he pulled up the bottom of his trousers and showed Leicester a mark branded upon his leg.

Leicester colored in spite of himself.

"You are a convict!" he said.

"That's it, sir; I am," said Stumpy, "and, what's more, I haven't served my time. That's the mark of the chain-gang, and it will never come out. The first thing the guard will ask will be 'Show us your leg, mate,' and then where am I?" [244]

Leicester thought for a moment deeply.

"All right," he said. "I've hit upon it. You get into that cave there, and I'll hasten up and hunt out some people. I can get some provisions, and will not be here until dark. We can creep away then and gain one of the towns."

So without waiting for any more objections or refusals, he hurried up the beach.

Stumpy crawled into the cave as he had been directed, and fell to nursing his knees, muttering:

"And to think as a gentleman should act like this to a hinfamous rogue like me! If I'd a known what he was like, if I wouldn't a spiked that villainous skipper and led a mutiny!"

In a short time he heard voices, and peeping out, saw Leicester coming down the beach accompanied by a crowd of people.

Stumpy at once concluded that Leicester had thought better of his generous offer to stand by him, and had sold him to the coastguard.

Therefore he kept in the cave until Leicester crawled in to him, and cried out, laughingly:

"Here's a pretty Irishman!" pointing to a peasant in a blue blouse and with an unmistakably French countenance. "Why, man, this isn't Ireland at all! We're on the coast of France!"

Stumpy's relief of mind at Leicester's intelligence that they were cast ashore in France instead of Ireland was intense, and he fell to and ate heartily of the food which Leicester had brought, but not until he had seen Leicester himself hard at work in a similar way.

The French peasants hung round them while they ate the bread and meat, and then were for taking them into the village to be examined by the notary.

But Leicester, after a moment's conference with Stumpy, told the simple people that he and his companion were very tired, and that they would prefer to rest a while before presenting themselves for examination.

The peasants, with true French politeness, immediately left them. [245]

"Now," said Leicester, as the blue blouse disappeared round the corner, "we must give those good people the slip, I suppose. Do you speak French?"

Stumpy shook his head.

"The only furrin language I knows, guv-nor, is a bit o' Spanish."

"Spanish!" said Leicester. "The very thing. I know enough of it to pass muster in a society where it is seldom spoken. Stumpy, I see it all. I must be a Spanish artist, a musician, and you—if you don't mind playing second fiddle—shall be my servant."

Then he decided to tell Stumpy his story; and a wronged man never had a more sympathetic listener.

When it grew dark the two stole along the beach, and entered a village some miles farther along the coast than that against which they had been cast up.

Leicester had a little money with him sewn in his canvas belt, and Stumpy, having received his wages on the day of the storm, was similarly supplied.

By dint of great economy and carefulness they reached Paris uninterfered with, and here Leicester, without loss of time, commenced to put his plans into execution.

At a broker's shop he purchased a capital wig of white, or rather iron-gray hair, invested in a pair of broad-rimmed spectacles at an optician's, and purchased at a ready-made tailor's a suit befitting an elderly foreigner of modest means.

Stumpy was accommodated with decent clothes, his long black locks well oiled and combed, and a small pair of gold rings set in his ears.

After waiting about a week in Paris to accustom themselves to their disguises the two sham Spaniards crossed to England.

Leicester took tickets, second class, for himself and Stumpy to Penruddie.

They arrived at night, and boldly determined to put their disguises to the test.

Leicester marched slowly down to the "Blue Lion", Stumpy walking at his side and carrying a small valise.

"Can we have something to eat and to drink?" asked Stumpy, in broken English. [246]

Martha nodded irritably and waved her hand toward the parlor.

The two entered.

Leicester looked round the room and seated himself in a distant corner.

A thrill of indignation ran through him as the door opened and Job entered, and he could scarcely refrain from springing at the wily little rogue and securing him at once.

But he was slightly mollified by observing on Job's face, as on that of all the others, a peculiar look of dissatisfaction and discontent.

Job eyed him and Stumpy with suspicious glances, and nodding to the others, took his old seat, calling as he did so for some ale.

Presently Job rose to light his pipe, and instead of reseating himself in his old place dropped into a chair near Leicester.

"Come far, sir?" he said, opening up a conversation.

Leicester raised his eyebrows and shook his head, waving his hand toward Stumpy, who interpreted the sentence, and replied, in broken English:

"No, not far; from London."

Then he commenced to talk of fine houses and big fees, and somehow drew from Job the story of the murder of Starling and the fact that most of the people concerned in the tragedy had gone away.

"It is very strange," he said, "very! A murder is not what you would call common in England? What did you do with ze Mastro Leicester; hang him up by ze neck?"

"No," said the man, shaking his head. "He died without that. He fell over the cliff with the chap he'd done for, and so the country was saved the trouble of that."

Leicester sat like a man in a dream, but gave no outward sign that the story had affected him.

Stumpy, thinking that he had pumped quite enough for the present requested Polly to bring

cigars for himself and his master, and leaned back with an air of enjoyment.

After a few words with Leicester, who was known as Signor Edgardo, Stumpy asked if they could have a bed. [247]

Martha answered shortly and decisively:

"No! I haven't got any beds to spare."

Stumpy inquired where he could get one.

"Here, Will," said the talkative fisherman, shaking Willie Sanderson, who had been asleep. "Can't you let this gentleman and his man have a couple of beds?"

Willie rubbed his eyes and nodded.

"I dare say," he said, staring about him.

Then the signor rose, bowed all round, and took his leave, followed by Stumpy, with Willie Sanderson to lead the way.

Slowly they tramped down to the Sandersons' cottage.

Willie opened the door and beckoned to the visitors to enter.

As they entered the small sanded room a lad rose from a chair and hobbled forward on a crutch.

He was a frail boy with a pale, intellectual, and mournful face.

Willie nodded to him.

"Jamie, these gentlemen want a bed; show 'em upstairs to the best room."

The lad took the candle and hobbled up the stairs.

At the stairhead he stopped and looked hard at Leicester, who turned his face slightly and adjusted his spectacles.

Stumpy, who had been warned to be careful, took the candle and thanked the lad.

Then the two Spaniards entered the room.

Leicester lay on the bed for an hour, without moving—plotting, planning; and Stumpy, after a prolonged entreaty that he would undress and get some rest, desisted and sat down patiently to wait until his master and preserver, and hero—for Stumpy considered Leicester to be everything that was courageous and noble and good—should choose to move.

Leicester rose at last full of self-reproach.

"I had forgotten you," he said. "You should have got to bed. Come, let us get some sleep. You want it badly enough."

As he spoke, and commenced undressing, their candle sputtered and went out. [248]

Leicester took no notice, and Stumpy, after a moment's grumbling at having to undress in the dark, was just getting into one of the beds—there were two in the room—when Leicester said:

"Hush! Listen!"

Stumpy listened, and heard a noise of crying and sobbing in the next room.

He stared at Leicester and shook his head.

"It's that young lad we saw downstairs," he said. "Listen! Some one's giving him a beating."

"No," said Leicester, in the same low voice, "there's no other voice or noise in the room. What can be the matter?"

Stumpy looked up at the ceiling.

It was an old cottage, and the partition between the rooms was in some places worn through; light came between these chinks, and supplied Stumpy with an idea.

Without a word he bent down close against the wall and, in silence, motioned Leicester to get on his back.

This Leicester for some time declined to do; but as the sobbing broke out again his curiosity overcame him, and he stepped lightly on to Stumpy's back and then supported himself by clinging to one of the rough beams.

Having gained a position, he peered through one of the holes.

He was looking down into a small room, poorly furnished.

On the bed, in an attitude of abandon, sat the boy, Jamie. His face was hidden in his hands, but his whole figure shook and quivered as he murmured, loud enough for Leicester to hear:

"This is the night he died! The very night! What makes me think of him so? It must be 'cause he was good to me—and he was good to me! He was like no one else! And now he's dead—shamefully murdered and slandered. Oh, Mr. Leicester, Mr. Leicester, if you could only come to life again and prove your innocence! It is false! You did not murder him—you couldn't; and yet ——"

Then he stopped suddenly, shuddered, and looked round the room fearfully. [249]

Then he drew himself painfully from the bed and to a box lying in the corner of the room, opened

it, and, with another shudder, took something from it.

This something he held in his hand and stared at with an evident horror of fascination.

In his anxiety to see what the article was, Leicester nearly lost his balance, and made a slight noise.

The lad started, and the something dropped with a clash to the floor, revealing itself to be a large clasp-knife.

Leicester could scarcely believe his eyes.

Was the lad mad? or had he committed murder? Why did he sit and shudder over a clasp-knife which he kept hidden in his bedroom?

He got down and motioned Stumpy to his place.

Stumpy was just in time to see the knife hidden away, and on receiving a full account of all Leicester had seen was equally puzzled about it.

"It's very rum!" he said, shaking his head. "There's been some foul work somewhere, sir, take my word for it. What's that youngster got that knife for? It's no common one, or he wouldn't carry on like that over it. All the more reason, all this is, that we should keep dark and play a waiting game."

Then, with respectful earnestness, he implored Leicester to take some rest, and Leicester, to humor the man, who, however much a convict, had served him honestly, yielded.

On the morrow both men were up at sunrise.

Stumpy went down to the beach, and smoked a cigarette Spanish fashion among the fishermen, to whom he chatted and listened with the greatest liveliness.

He could not, however, learn anything and returned rather disappointed.

Not so Leicester, who entered the room looking as white and stern as a ghost, and who laid a soiled sheet of paper upon the table.

"Look at that!" he said. "Stumpy, look at it!"

"Where did you get it, sir?"

"I took it from an old wall at the end of the village," said Leicester, pacing up and down. [250]

Stumpy read it.

It was the handbill offering a hundred pounds reward for the apprehension of Leicester Dodson, charged with the willful murder of James Starling.

No sooner had Stumpy read it than he grew alarmed.

"Some of 'em don't think you're dead," he said; "and this here's a dangerous place. That wig might blow off in the wind, and then where would you be? No, no, London's the place for us! We shan't get any more out of this yet a while, and if we stop here somebody will get suspicious. That bill's enough to make the dullest chap in England sharp. A hundred pounds!"

Leicester was not loth to leave Penruddie.

The place was hateful to him now that all he loved were in London, so the next morning they paid their bill and went up to the great city.

Very changed did Leicester seem as he passed familiar places, and remembered that he must not enter them. Stranger still, he saw some familiar faces, and they passed him and did not recognize him.

In a political paper he read news which astounded him.

The city article was nearly full of one name, and that—Howard Murpoint, Esq., M. P.

Leicester could not believe his eyes, and it was some time before he could realize that the villain who had entrapped and betrayed him was a man of great wealth, influence and power.

He determined to see him in his triumph and set about a way of doing it.

There was at that time a club in London to which foreigners were admitted who could give a reference.

Leicester went there and gave the name of his father, who was well known as a merchant.

At this club, in the smoking-room, he in a feigned voice conversed with several men and learned enough to astound him.

Carefully he led up to the great name, and inquired if Howard Murpoint lived in London.

"Oh, yes," said his informant, "he has two large houses, and another place down in the south—a wonderful man. There is a dinner *conversazione* on at his place to-night." [251]

"Indeed!" said Leicester, who felt that he would give all he possessed to be a guest.

"Yes," said the gentleman. "A sort of gathering of the lions, you know. Open house. I have a card—two in fact, one for a friend who has discovered a new slab in Assyria. He ought to be here by now."

Just then a servant brought a letter for the gentleman.

"Hem!—can't come; just like that sort of man! I don't know whether you care for this sort of thing, but if you do there is his card."

Leicester thanked his generous acquaintance gratefully, and they dined together on the understanding that they should drop in at Howard Murpoint's house afterward.

Leicester could scarcely eat or restrain his excitement, but by an effort he managed to conceal it and assume a certain amount of indifference.

About nine o'clock they started for their *conversazione*.

Howard Murpoint's house was magnificently lighted up and a crowd of servants were massed in the hall to receive the guests.

"Heaps of people here to-night," said Leicester's useful friend. "I'm afraid you won't thank me."

"I am anxious to see the great man," said Leicester, "and would go through a greater crush than this."

"Well, he's a great man and worth seeing," said the friend, as they entered the grand *salon*.

Leicester looked around in astonishment at the assembled crowd of people of the very best sort, the guests of Howard Murpoint.

Where had the money come from?

He left his friend a few minutes after they had entered, and made his way toward the orchestra, where a splendid band was playing.

There, in the midst of a group of lords and ladies, he heard a smooth, serene voice he remembered only too well.

He turned suddenly and came face to face with Howard Murpoint.

For a moment he forgot that he was disguised, for the moment his face flushed, his hand clinched, his lip curled with scorn and contempt, but the next, as Howard Murpoint's eyes met his smilingly and unconsciously, he remembered all, and stepped aside. [252]

In doing so he pressed rather heavily against a lady. With a low and hurried "Pardon me!" he turned and looked upon Violet Mildmay!

This time it was the blood left his cheek, and he staggered.

Violet thought that her long train had inconvenienced the tall old gentleman.

"I am very sorry; but the rooms are so crowded," she said, in her sweet, gentle voice.

The tears sprang into Leicester's eye, his heart leaped as if it would spring from his body, his arms were half extended; but, with another smile, Violet had passed on.

Then a great and terrible feeling of loneliness and desertion came upon him, and he crept back into a corridor all dazed and dreamy.

Round him were the promenaders, about him the exquisite music floating through the perfumed air, the voices of the guests; about all the serene, soft, falsely sweet tones of the villainous schemer; and within him the consciousness that Violet—the woman he loved best in all the world—was near him!

CHAPTER XXVI.

A PARDONABLE TREACHERY.

For the first few moments Bertie's sensations on reading Lord Lackland's letter were anything but distinct, then gradually, as he realized the blow which the earl's duplicity had dealt him, indignation predominated.

He had been basely deceived and betrayed, and his betrayal was rendered all the more bitter by the foretaste which he had been allowed to have of his happiness.

He wandered listlessly down to his club.

In the smoking-room, to which he repaired, he found Fitz extended at full length, sipping a brandy and soda.

He determined on the spur of the moment to confide in him.

"Hello, Bert," said Fitz. "What have you done with my nag?" [253]

"Taken him to the stable," said Bert. "I suppose you half feared that I had bolted?"

"No," said Fitz. "What is in the wind? No mischief, I hope."

"Fitz," said Bertie, seating himself beside the good-natured Fitz, "I'm in great trouble."

"No!" exclaimed Fitz. "I thought that nothing ever troubled you, Bert."

"Something does now," said Bertie, gravely. "It's about Lady Boisdale—Ethel."

Fitz shook his head gravely.

"I was half afraid there was something on there, Bert, between you and Eth. I've noticed it for

some time, and I thought perhaps you'd speak. I wish you had, because I could have told you that there was no chance for you."

Bertie colored.

"No," said Fitz, heartily. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure; but it can't be, Bert. Look here, one secret is as good as another. There's nobody listening, is there? I'll tell you something," and he sighed deeply. "Eth and I are as much slaves as any nigger going. We can't marry where we like, and we can't do as we like. People think because I'm the eldest son and she's the daughter of the Earl of Lackland that we can do just as we like. Bert, it's a mistake. We're tied hand and foot. We must marry money. Why?" And he looked sadly at Bertie, who stared in astonishment. "Why? Because we haven't a single penny ourselves. We Lacklands are as poor as church mice. There isn't an inch of land, there isn't a brick of stone that isn't mortgaged, and we young ones, Eth and I, must bring it all right again by marrying money. She'll have to marry some retired tea-dealer, and I—well, I know where I'd marry, and marry money, too; but I can't. The angel—for she is an angel, Bert—is too great, too grand, too good for me. You know, Bert, that there is no man under the sun I'd like to call brother more than I would you, but it can't be. Take a cigar and some liquor and give it up as a bad job, for it can't be. Eth would never marry you without the earl's consent, and he never will give it."

"But," said Bertie, "he has given it." [254]

"What?" said Fitz, with surprised astonishment.

"Given it and taken it away again. Read that," said Bertie, and he handed the earl's letter to Fitz.

Fitz read it, and his eyes opened their widest.

"But—but," he said, "do you mean to say that the earl gave his consent to your marrying Ethel—don't be offended, old fellow, I know you are worthy of her if any one is—without striking a bargain?"

"N—no," said Bertie, as the earl's words concerning the private fortune of Ethel recurred to his mind. "No, he informed me, very unnecessarily, that Ethel's fortune would be retained or forfeited."

"What!" exclaimed Fitz, springing up, with angry astonishment. "Do you mean to tell me that her money is gone? that she is robbed with the rest of us?"

"I tell you nothing but what I heard," said Bertie, calmly.

"It is gone," said Fitz, white with passion, "of course it is gone! Idiot that I was to think he would spare that when he has taken all else! He has spent—squandered the poor girl's fortune, and then sells her, bargains her away to the first comer. It is shameful. It is unendurable; and, by Heaven, I will not endure it!"

"The bargain is off," said Bertie, bitterly. "You forget that the earl has thought better of it. He has recalled his consent."

"Yes, because he has received a higher bid! I know him!" said Fitz, sternly. "He would sell her to the highest bidder as if she were a horse or a piece of furniture. When did this occur?"

"This morning," said Bertie, and then he placed Fitz in possession of such of the facts as he himself was cognizant of.

"I see it all," said Fitz, pulling at his yellow beard in a frenzy. "That Howard Murpoint has been at the bottom of it. But have you noticed how thick the earl and he have been lately? I begin to hate that fellow. Do you remember the old time down there at Penruddie, when he was a regular bore?"

"Shall I ever forget it?" said Bertie, softly.

"Oh, no! poor Leicester!" said Fitz. "Well, we said there was more in the captain, as he called [255] himself then, than appeared at first sight; and now look at him! He's the heart and soul and the whole machinery of the Mildmays, his name is good on 'Change for any amount, and now—now he has taken an interest in us. Bert, there's mischief brewing, mark me if there ain't. Who is this Mr. Smythe you saw with him this morning?"

"A millionaire, one of his city friends, a nob and an idiot," said Bertie, calmly.

"Then that's the fellow Ethel will be sold to," said Fitz, with calm despair.

"No," said Bertie, rising, white and passionate. "I'd shoot him first."

"Shoot him and be hung?" said Fitz, groaning. "You can't prevent it. Howard Murpoint is cleverer than us all, and if he has set his heart upon Ethel's being sacrificed to this Smythe fellow, why, sacrificed she'll be."

"I will help it," said Bertie. "I do not believe that Ethel will ever consent."

"She will," said Fitz. "I'll tell you why. They'll represent that if she marries the fellow, she'll save the family; and Ethel has such straight ideas of duty that she'll consent to sacrifice herself."

"Never!" said Bertie. "I would sooner see her in her grave. I would sooner tear her from them by force."

"I'll tell you what," said Fitz. "You'd better get her away by cunning."

Bertie thought for a moment.

"My honor——"

"Bids you do it," said Fitz. "She will sacrifice herself for a mistaken idea of duty. Nothing will save her unless——" He hesitated.

Bertie's blood raced through his veins.

"Fitz," he said, "give me your consent, and I will do it. You know how I love her. You have been more of a parent to her than her father. Say you consent, and I will snatch her from their clutches."

"I consent," said Fitz, "with all my heart, and I should think you less than the man you are if you didn't."

"I am thinking of her," said Bertie, rising and walking to the window. "Will she ever forgive me?"

"Try her," said Fitz, rising and walking toward him. "Try her. She loves you, Bert, I know, and—— [256] What's the matter?"

"Look here, quick!" exclaimed Bertie, who had started suddenly. "Look there—among the crowd now crossing the road! Isn't that the very figure and walk of poor Les? Heavens above! How like. It sent every nerve of me thrilling," and he sank into a chair, staring out of the window still.

"I didn't see him," said Fitz. "Poor fellow! you were great friends. Was it anything like him in the face?"

"No—too old," said Bertie, with a sigh. "Poor Les! Poor Les!"

Then he fell to walking the room, and drank his soda and brandy like one parched with thirst.

That night Ethel was taken to Coombe Lodge, and Bertie, who had called at Grosvenor Square, was told that the family had left town.

Meanwhile Fitz remained, and the conversation he had with Bertie had nerved him to courage.

They say that one marriage makes nine, by example, and Fitz, seeing that Bertie had been brave enough to declare his love, determined to do so also.

That night there was another *conversazione* at Lady Merivale's, and Fitz knew that the Mildmays would be guests.

He had an invitation, and he determined to go, though such things were not in his way, hoping to find an opportunity of declaring his long love for Violet.

The night was hot, and Fitz felt burning uneasiness and fear, for he feared Violet as much as he loved her.

He knew within his heart of hearts that she was too good for him, and yet he could not deny himself the pleasure or pain of putting the matter to the test.

Lady Merivale's rooms were not too crowded. Her ladyship had mercifully asked no more than her rooms would hold, and Fitz, as he entered rather early in the evening, could see that the Mildmays party had not arrived.

"Just my luck," he murmured. "Of course, now I've plucked up courage, she won't come. Serve me right. I know she's far too precious for me."

He sauntered to a corner and sat down beside an Italian, who had a series of sketches to show [257] and tried to get poor Fitz to speak to him.

But the Italian only knew "Yes" and "No" in English, and Fitz only knew "Macaroni" in Italian, so thus the conversation did not afford much amusement to either party.

Presently, as the rooms grew fuller, a tall gentleman with white hair and wearing spectacles approached the two, and, bowing to the Italian, asked permission to see the sketches.

He spoke in Spanish, a language as strange to Fitz as Italian, so after a few minutes, Fitz rose and left the Italian and Spaniard together.

The Spaniard looked up wistfully.

"Do you know that gentleman?" he asked.

"No," said the Italian.

"I do," said a stranger who stood near, and who was none other than the club newsmonger, Tommy Gossip. "That is Lord Boisdale, eldest son of Lord Lackland. He's engaged—or going to be —to Miss Violet Mildmay."

The Spaniard bowed, smiled and departed.

At that moment Violet entered on the arm of Howard Murpoint.

The Spaniard saw Lord Fitz approach and take her from Mr. Murpoint and frowned.

"Is it true?" he murmured to himself. "Is she going to marry him? Has she forgotten me?"

Then he sighed and sauntered off with a melancholy smile to a retired alcove.

He was not in the humor for the gay and talkative crowd, and wanted a little quiet.

He sank down in a cool corner of the velvet lounge and fixed his dark eyes upon the floor.

"Why did I come back?" he mused. "They think me dead; they have forgotten me—they have ceased to mourn for me, and others have stepped into my place. I had better leave the world

which knows me no more, and try for a new life in some new land. I see the best and fairest—she whom I loved—has no thought, no faith that lasts more than twelve months. I see that the rogue flourishes. I am disgusted with the world, and I will leave it. That poor fellow, the escaped convict, has more gratitude and affection and faithfulness than all the rest put together. We will [258] go together—he and I, outcasts—and see the world no more."

He half rose in his bitterness as if to carry out his threat at once and leave the world, but at that moment two persons entered the alcove.

They were Fitz and Violet.

Fitz led Violet to a seat, then, murmuring something about the draught, let down a heavy curtain before the couch on which sat the melancholy Spaniard.

Thus the muser was cut off from the others, a listener, and made a spy much against his will.

Before he could move to make known his presence Fitz spoke, and his tone, more than his words, transfixed the listener to the spot.

"Miss Mildmay," said Fitz, plumping into his task with a nervous precipitance, "I am so glad I can see you alone for a few minutes."

"Yes?" said Violet, looking up with a dreamy, calmly serene gaze, which had nothing of embarrassment and, therefore, nothing of love in it.

"Yes," said Fitz; "I have been longing for this opportunity for some time. Miss Mildmay, I am a bad hand at speaking what I mean, but you know I mean all I say. You know that, though I'm a poor, good-for-nothing wretch who oughtn't to be allowed to breathe the same air with one so good and clever as you, but you know that I love you——"

Violet's face grew pale and very sad and mournful.

She raised her hand to stop him, but Fitz had made the plunge, and now, like all nervous people, was reckless.

"Don't stop me, Miss Mildmay; let me go on and say my say. I've kept it within my bosom so long that I feel bursting with it. I love you with all my heart, and no man, let him be as clever as he may, can do more; and if I'm not worthy of you—which I am not—I am sure no one else is. Violet, look at me a little more kindly, you look so pale and sorrowful. Can—cannot you love me—only a little—just enough to say that you will be my wife?"

Violet turned her pale, sad face to him.

"Lord Boisdale—I—how can I answer you? You know that I have no love to give. It was thrown [259] with all my hopes in the sea; that sea which breaks beneath those awful cliffs at Penruddie. You see I can speak calmly. I can look back at that dreadful past bravely and without shame! I am not ashamed to say that I have no heart for anything but the memory of a vanished past."

There was a slight stir behind the curtain, but the speaker did not notice it.

"But," said Fitz, "you will not spend your life in utter mourning, you will not sacrifice your own happiness and my life to such a shadow as that memory——"

"It is no shadow to me," said Violet, softly, sadly, her voice dreamily distinct and low, her eyes fixed as if gazing upon something very far off. "Oh, no! I see it all, day and night, I hear his last words—the man I loved—with the roar of the sea upon the shore. I see that past life of mine ever, day and night, and I am wedded to it. You see," she said with a start, and evidently arousing from her reverie, and remembering, "that it is useless to ask me for love. You would not have me without, Lord Boisdale?"

"I would," said Fitz, his eyes filled with tears. "Violet, dear Violet, you need some one to watch over and guard you—you need some one who could and would devote his life to recalling the smile and the sunlight to yours. I am willing, I am anxious. Confide in me, Violet; trust yourself to me. My love asks for nothing at your hands but yourself and the right to guard you. Oh, Violet, I have loved you so long—I—I would have died for you."

"Do not speak of death!" said Violet, with a shudder and a hurried gesture of entreaty. "I cannot bear that! I will have no one speak of dying for me! I believe—the dread clings to me—that he—Leicester—came to harm through me. No, no; no one shall die for me!"

And she half rose, wild and pale.

"Be calm, dear Violet," implored Fitz. "See how wild, how frightened you have become. Confess now that you need some strong right arm to protect you, to save you from the terrible state into which you have fallen! Violet, I do not ask you to love me, I only ask that you will promise to try. Have pity on me! You have a little, you say, but remember how I have been hoping for so long, [260] and say that you will promise to try and love me."

Violet closed her eyes, and seemed lost in thought, then she opened them and smiled sadly.

"I have been thinking of all you say, dear Lord Boisdale," she said. "I am grateful, very, very grateful. I know how good, how true you are, and I would implore you to give that noble love to some one more deserving of it, but that I feel it would be an insult to do so. I know I am weak—perhaps that I am wicked. Oh, that I knew what was right!" she broke off wildly and with clasped hands.

"Say yes," pleaded Fitz. "You cannot trust yourself to any one who can understand you or love you better."

"Give me time, time," pleaded Violet. "I must have time to think."

"A week?" said Fitz.

"No, no; a month—a month!" said Violet, in a low, constrained voice.

"Well," sighed Fitz, "a month, if you will have it so long. Say a month. It's a very long time, but ——" and he sighed again. "Well, a month! Try to say yes, dear Violet."

"I will," breathed Violet. "I will try to do what is right. I ought not to sacrifice you if—if you love me as you say. I am weak and feeble and selfish, but I will do what is right."

Then Fitz rose and looked down upon her, pale and struggling with her weakness.

"I will leave you now," he said. "I am sure you are tired and—and excited."

And he raised her hand to his lips.

But before he could kiss it the curtain was pushed aside and the tall, white-haired Spaniard came before them.

Fitz dropped Violet's hand with a nervous start.

Violet herself rose to her feet and stared wildly, but the Spaniard paused only for one moment, then, fixing his dark eyes upon her face, bowed low, murmured gravely "Pardon, señora," and vanished as noiselessly as he had appeared.

Violet, seated on a footstool at her aunt's feet, told her all that night, and Mrs. Mildmay, as in duty bound, informed Howard Murpoint. [261]

In some way, before night fell, the world had got at it, and the clubs were rumoring that Lord Fitz Boisdale was engaged to Miss Mildmay.

In a few days a rumor still more exciting and relishing was produced, to the effect that Lord Lackland had accepted the wealthy millionaire, Mr. Wilhelm Smythe, as suitor for the hand of Lady Ethel Boisdale.

Bertie, at his club, heard the rumor, and dashed off in search of Fitz.

He found him seated moodily and dreamily in an easy-chair at the smoking-room of his favorite haunt.

"Ha, Fitz," he exclaimed, "is it true?"

"What?" said Fitz, flushing. "What have you heard? Don't say it's too good to be true; don't cast me down, old fellow; you don't know how my heart is set upon it!" he exclaimed, thinking that Bertie alluded to the understanding between Violet and him.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you?" asked Fitz.

"Why, this—this—false report that—that Ethel is to be married to that odious fellow, that miserable young money-bag?"

"I can't say I've heard," said Fitz, frowning earnestly. "If I thought that there was anything in it, I'd go for my big whip and thrash him!"

At that moment a waiter put a letter into his hand.

He opened it, and his face grew red with indignation.

"Read it," he said, and thrust it into Bertie's hand.

It was an intimation from the earl that Mr. Wilhelm Smythe had proposed and been accepted.

Bertie, in his passion, could not speak a word.

Fitz tore the letter into a hundred pieces, and threw the fragments into the grate.

"Cheer up! But," he said, "he shall no more have her than those pieces shall come together again. We'll show them that right is stronger than might in this case."

Bertie clasped his hand.

"You will come down with me?" he said.

"I will, and will put our plot into execution; no time must be lost."

"I'll go to-night," said Fitz. "You stay here and wait till I telegraph. I'll put it carefully so that nothing happens. I'll telegraph that 'wheat has gone up.' Then you'll know that you're to come down." [262]

The two talked together for a few moments excitedly and eagerly, then Fitz went off, calling to a servant to saddle a horse at once.

He started that night for Coombe Lodge, and appeared there the following morning as fresh and as light-hearted as usual, but with the determination to stand by his friend and save his sister at all costs.

Ethel was not up when he arrived, and she entered the breakfast-room without any expectation of seeing him.

"Fitz!" she exclaimed, the warm blood rushing to her face as she sprang to him.

He held her in his arms, but would not show any emotion.

"Hello, Eth!" he said, "why you've gone pale again! where's that summer rose? I've heard the news—don't tell me any more—I'll congratulate Mr. Smythe when I see him."

Her face went paler, and her eyes filled with tears.

She crossed her hands upon her breast.

"I have done right, Fitz, have I not?" she said. "The earl has told me all—how poor we are, and how necessary it is that you and I should sacrifice ourselves for the house. You will not sacrifice yourself, though, Fitz, will you? There need be no occasion. You will give your hand where you give your heart. Dear Violet."

Honest Fitz turned his face aside to conceal his emotion.

"No, Eth," he said, "that will be all right."

Then, to avert suspicion, he rattled away to the countess, as she came in, in his old style, and actually spoke of Mr. Smythe in a friendly way.

It cost him something to be deceitful, but he did it, and succeeded in blinding them all.

The next day he was particular in his attentions to the ladies, and allowed himself to be inveigled into a game of croquet—a game he detested.

In the afternoon he went into the servants' hall and nodded to Ethel's maid.

She came out into the garden, and a conversation took place between her and Fitz, which was concluded by Fitz dropping some gold into her hand. [263]

That evening he was more merry than ever, and not even a letter from Mr. Smythe, saying that he should be down the day following, depressed his spirits.

That night, when the countess and Ethel were seated in the drawing-room, the former gloating over the approaching wedding, the latter inwardly shrinking from and shuddering at it, Fitz rode over to Tenby and telegraphed the few significant words:

"Wheat has gone up."

The following morning broke finely.

"What time is Mr. Smythe to arrive?" asked Fitz, cheerfully.

Ethel flushed, and bent her eyes to her plate.

"He will be here before dinner," said the countess.

"See that the horses are sent for him," said the earl from behind his paper.

"All right, I'll see to that," said Fitz. "Meanwhile, just to spend time, suppose you and I have a gallop, Eth?"

Ethel thanked him with her eyes.

"Then go and get your habit on at once," said Fitz.

On the staircase Mary, the maid, met her crying.

"If you please, my lady, my brother's broken his leg, and—and—and can I go home at once?"

"Certainly," said Ethel, softly. "I am sorry, Mary. You must not wait for anything. Fitz," she called down, "can you let Mary have the brougham?"

"Yes," said Fitz. "What does she want it for?"

Then when the sobbing handmaid told him all, he said, like the kind fellow he was:

"Yes, and tell William to put the pair of grays in for you. They'll take you to the station fast enough to catch the train."

Mary went off gratefully, and Fitz and Ethel soon afterward mounted and started for their ride.

"I wouldn't heat him too much," said Fitz, who seemed to be saving his horse, to Ethel.

"We are not going far, are we?" asked Ethel.

"Oh, not if you like, though I think we had better take the opportunity. We may not have many more rides together, Eth." [264]

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Let us have a long ride, Fitz, then," she said.

They rode on, Fitz saving his horse and showing no disposition to turn.

At last Ethel said:

"Don't you think we had better turn, Fitz? We shall not be in time."

"Let us go as far as that signpost," said Fitz. "Then——"

"We shall not be in time for—for Mr. Smythe," said Ethel, forcing herself to say the hateful word.

"Oh, yes, we shall, I think," said Fitz, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Hello, here's my horse gone lame!"

"Where?" said Ethel, but Fitz had jumped off.

"What shall we do?" said he, "he's dreadfully lame; I've noticed it for some miles, but said

nothing. I can't ride him back, and you can't go alone."

"What shall we do? Where is a post town?" said Ethel.

"I don't know," said Fitz. "Here's a carriage!" and he pulled out his watch as he spoke, muttering, "Punctual, by Jove!"

Then he called to the coachman:

"Can you tell us the nearest post town? We want horses or something."

"I'm going that way, sir," said the man. "My young fellow will take your horses on, and you can get inside."

Fitz, without giving Ethel time to consent, hurried her in and jumped in himself.

"Drive on, my man," he said. "We are in a hurry."

"Fitz," said Ethel, who had been looking out of the window, "do you know anything of this man? He is taking the horses in another direction."

"No," said Fitz, but was spared any other falsehoods by the approach of another carriage which pulled up, as did theirs.

The door of the other carriage opened, and there ran across the road a slim young lady who rushed toward Ethel.

"Mary!" exclaimed Ethel.

"Jump in," cried Fitz, hurrying the maid in. [265]

At the same moment some one mounted the box of their carriage, a heavy weight was thrown upon the top and away they started.

"What does it all mean, Fitz?" asked Ethel, looking half frightened. "Where are we going?"

"We are going to Penwhiffen—to that place where there is the pretty church," said Fitz.

"Church!" said Ethel, "and Mary!—and——Oh, Fitz! who is that on the box going with us?"

"That is the luggage," said Fitz, with a twinkle in his eyes. "The luggage and Mr. Bertie Fairfax. The cat's out of the bag, Ethel, my pretty one! We're running away with you! Bertie's got the special license in his pocket, and Mr. Smythe will have his journey to Coombe Lodge for nothing."

Then as Ethel burst into a flood of tears he caught her to him and gave her a hearty pat on the back.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE WEB.

While Bertie—happy, lucky Bertie—was standing at the altar with his darling Ethel's hand in his, Howard Murpoint, Esq., and Mr. Wilhelm Smythe were driving through up the avenue to Coombe Lodge.

Howard Murpoint's luck had never deserted him since he had entered the drawing-room of the Park on that night of the dinner party. Everything had been smooth sailing.

He had conquered, so to speak, the whole world. He was rich, influential; he held the happiness, the fate of many in his hands; his brain was full of plots and schemes for his own advancement and others' ruin and discomfiture. Never, since the world began to wag, had the Evil One found a cleverer and more sympathetic servant, for Howard Murpoint, the gentleman, the member of parliament, the influential capitalist, was merciless, avaricious, cunning, and—superstitious. Yes, clever as he was, strong as he was, this was his weakness. He believed in luck; he was superstitious, and he felt a presentiment that the first stroke of bad luck would be the beginning [266] of something more dreadful.

But to-day, as he dropped from his horse, which a groom had sprung forward to hold, he felt no presentiment, and the calm, cool smile which he threw to the nervous Mr. Wilhelm Smythe was one of supreme confidence.

"Be calm, my dear fellow," he whispered, as they were ushered into the drawing-room by the obsequious servant. "You will be the husband of Lady Ethel, and I shall win that twenty thousand pounds before a month has passed."

As he spoke Lady Lackland entered.

Shaking hands with the two, she said, with a troubled look upon her face:

"Did you meet Fitz and Ethel? They have gone for a ride, and should have gone your way."

"No," said the captain, with a smile. "We lost that pleasure."

Mr. Smythe sighed.

"No," he said. "I wish we had, but—but I'm almost glad, for it gives me an opportunity, Lady Lackland, for putting my request. I have come down with my friend—he has indeed been a friend to me—to ask you to persuade Lady Ethel to name an early day for our—our wedding——"

At that moment the door opened and the earl entered.

His face was dark as night, and his lips working with some emotion; he held a letter in his hand, and when he saw the two men he, by a great effort, set his lips with a rigid smile and tried to conceal the letter with a hasty movement.

"Something has happened!" exclaimed the countess.

"Not to Lady Ethel!" almost shrieked Mr. Smythe.

The earl smiled with despair.

"Read that!" he cried, thrusting the letter into the countess' hands.

She read it aloud, with a puzzled air at first which rapidly gave place to a shriek of despair and rage.

> "My Dear Father: By the time this reaches you Ethel and I shall be at Wivlehurst. Bertie Fairfax goes with us with a special license in his pocket, and he and Ethel will be married, all well, to-day.
>
> "Forgive me my share in the affair, and remember that it is the first time since their birth that your children have dared to show that they have wills and hearts of their own! Your affectionate son, [267]
>
> "Fitz."

There was a moment's silence, which was broken by a hoarse cry of disappointment and misery.

It came from Smythe.

With an oath he sprang at the captain and seized him by the throat.

"You villain! You've tricked me! You planned all this, you scoundrel! You did! You did! You have sold me, but I'll sell you! I'll have the money, or your infernal life!"

The captain struggled and fought to free himself from his dupe's grasp, but he could not, and Mr. Wilhelm Smythe, nerved and goaded to madness, pushed the earl and his servants aside and dragged Mr. Murpoint into the hall.

"Now," he hissed in his ear, "get out your check-book and write me a check for twenty thousand pounds, or I'll kill you! I'll do worse; I'll publish the story and the bet in every club in London! d'ye hear? you thought to get the better of me, to play the idiot and hold me up to ridicule, but you shan't! you shan't! I'll have the money, the money, or I'll crush you!"

"Silence!" hissed the captain, glancing round at the astonished group of guests and servants. "Come outside," and he in turn half dragged and half led the unfortunate man into the courtyard.

"I'll give you the check to-morrow."

"Now, now! this moment, or I'll split all!" cried Smythe, and with an oath he darted his hand in the captain's face.

Howard Murpoint's eyes grew dark, but he was as pale as death. Fear ran in his heart, for he saw that his first ill-luck had set in.

"Confound you!" he cried, "you shall have it! I'll give you a hundred thousand pounds to be rid of such a madman," and with a shaking hand he took a check from his book and filled it in.

Mr. Smythe snatched it from his hand, glanced at it with bloodshot eyes, and leaped upon his horse, which he had shouted for as he came into the yard. [268]

The captain looked round, and murmuring something like:

"He's mad, not safe! I must follow him!" called for his own horse and rode off likewise.

His face was a study for a picture of the fiend, disappointed and checkmated.

"Married!" he muttered, hoarsely. "Married! I have been tricked—tricked! And I have given him bills in full for twenty thousand pounds. I'll stop the check!" And with an oath he drove his spurs into the horse's sides and urged it on.

The animal reared and tore forward. He spurred it again and again, and reached the station in time to see the train, which was bearing Mr. Smythe to town, steam away from the platform. It was his first failure, and his bold, bad heart misgave him.

The next train did not start for three hours, and after a few moments' reflection the schemer turned his horse's head toward Penruddie.

"I'll give the rogues a look up!" he muttered, with an angry scowl. "They showed some disposition to rebel. I'll cow them!"

He reached Penruddie, and the first thing he noticed was a group of men lounging at the door of the "Blue Lion".

They glanced up at him as he pulled up and scowled, but not one raised his hand to his cap, or gave him good-morning.

The captain's face grew dark, and his voice was harsh and stern as he said:

"Can any of you men tell me where the carrier, Job, is to be found?"

One man jerked his finger over his head toward the house, and at that moment Job, hearing his name spoken, came out.

His dark eyes twinkled savagely as he saw the captain, but he touched his hat and came toward the horse.

"I hope I see you well, sir," he said, "and that the young and old lady be well."

"All well," said the captain. "Send some one to take the horse to the stable; I want a word with you, Job, aside." [269]

Job nodded, beckoned to a man to take the horse, then followed the captain into the parlor.

"Now," said the captain, "I have come down to put my threat into execution. I am going to punish you, my friend, and all the rascals with you. Where is the money? Where is the share I was to have regularly of the profits out of your precious trade? Where are they, I ask?"

"There ain't any, captain," said Job, sullenly. "The men won't work; they say if you want all the profit, you may do the work, and take the risk yourself. 'Sides, they're cantankerous, captain, about another matter."

"What else?"

"They wants to know what's done with Maester Leicester."

"What!" sneered the captain. "Actually sentimental, are they? They want to know what's become of that idiot? I can tell you, and I'd have told you six months ago if I'd thought it would have interested you! He's gone where all such as he should go—out of the world! He's dead, rotting at the bottom of the sea!"

"Fetch Sanderson," said the captain, after a moment's pause, and with the air of a slave owner to a slave.

Job stepped out and returned with Willie, who had been among those standing outside.

Job had evidently told him that Leicester was dead, for Willie's face was cool, as well as sullen.

"Sanderson," said the captain, "you are a good fellow and no fool, or I am much mistaken. What does this mean with the men? Do they refuse to run the cargoes?"

"We do," said Willie, sullenly.

The captain took up his hat.

"Then I'll waste no more time. I'll give them a week to think about it, and then—well, if you don't be in jail every mother's son of you, it will be no fault of mine."

He went out as he spoke, glared savagely at the men at the door, and mounting his horse, rode off.

That night he returned to town, and, although clerks and secretaries, detectives and spies, his servants and tools, were waiting to see him, he would see none, but went straight to his own room, which was double-locked and guarded. [270]

After a slight rest, during which he slept the peaceful sleep of an innocent child, he dressed himself with scrupulous care, and went down to the Mildmays' house.

"Was Miss Mildmay up yet?" he asked.

The servant took him to Violet's drawing-room, where Violet sat, a letter in her hand, and a thoughtful and pained, yet glad, expression on her face.

She rose as he entered.

"I am so glad you have come," she said, wearily, but with a smile. "I have just had a letter," and she held up the open envelope.

"And I have some news," he said, "or I would not have intruded so early.

"Perhaps you know it," he added, with grave face. "Lady Ethel Boisdale and Mr. Fairfax have eloped."

"Yes," said Violet, with a sigh. "It is all so sudden and—and what is strange, Lord Boisdale has accompanied them."

"It is strange and most dishonorable," said Howard Murpoint. "For Mr. Fairfax to forget or ignore honesty is one thing; but for Lord Fitz Boisdale to lend himself to an underhanded and dishonorable course is quite another. Lackland is in the deepest grief; Lord Lackland is stricken down with affliction, and, of course, my dear Violet, you will show your disapproval of the scandalous affair by withdrawing your friendship from both parties."

Violet, who had listened with shamed and pained attention, flushed deeply.

"Do you know," she said, slowly, "that Lord Fitz asked me to be his wife?"

The captain did know it, but he professed complete ignorance, and grew deadly pale and haggard. Violet rose with alarm, but he stopped her from calling out for assistance by grasping her arm.

"Do not call—give me time. Oh, Violet! Violet!" he groaned, hiding his face in his hands.

Violet gazed at him with her deep, mournful eyes opened to their utmost. At present she did not understand his elaborate acting. [271]

"How have I pained you?" she murmured. "Do you not like Lord Boisdale?"

"Do you love him?" he retorted, suddenly, gazing searchingly and with quivering lips into her face. "Answer me, I implore you, dear, dear Violet! Do you love him? If you say yes; if you tell me that you have given your heart to him, I will say no more; I will leave you—leave England, and I will pray that you may be happy! Answer me, oh, answer me!"

Violet trembled and looked troubled.

"I do not understand," she murmured, hurriedly. "Why should you leave England? Why should you leave me?"

"Answer me first," he replied, brokenly, and with fearful earnestness, partly real, partly feigned.

"I will answer, and truthfully," said Violet, with low intensity. "I do not love him; you know that my love is buried forever, and that I have no heart to give. My hand would have been his, all unworthy of its acceptance as it is, but—but—for this."

"I forbid it! I forbid it!" cried the captain, grasping her arm. "You shall not marry him, Violet, if you do not love him. I would rather see you in your grave than the wife of Fitz Boisdale! Oh, Violet, forgive me this wildness, but you do not, you cannot, know the state of my heart. Violet, I love you!" he added, rapidly, in answer to the look of deep and profound amazement upon Violet's beautiful face. "I love you, and have loved you since I first saw you—do not turn from me! I am not worthy of you, but at least I love you for yourself alone. Can he—can that foolish boy say that? I am rich, he is poor. His family is ruined, and he seeks in a marriage with you but the means wherewith to rebuild his crushed fortunes. Do not speak!" he continued, eagerly, leading her to a sofa, and leaning over her where she sat, silent, motionless, as if under a spell. "I know it to be true, for I have heard him own it. I have heard the earl speculate on it; the very money-lenders are waiting for it, that they may seize upon the wealth which you will bring him!"

"It is false!" said Violet, starting to her feet. "It cannot be true!" [272]

"It is; see here," he replied, rapidly, and with lessened yet telling earnestness he reasoned and convinced her.

Then she sank upon the couch and covered her face with her hands, sobbing violently.

"Are all men base and vile?" she cried. "Oh, where can I turn to find the true and the real? Where, where?"

"Here!" exclaimed Howard Murpoint, touching his breast, and speaking in a soft, soothing, almost paternal tenderness. "Here is succor and safety, dear Violet. I do not ask you to love me; that I cannot expect, until I have proved, ere long, my undying devotion to you! I do not ask you anything else but the right to protect you from the worthless adventurer and mercenary rogue. Oh, Violet, if you could but know that it was his—your dear father's—last wish that we should be united. He would, had he lived, pleaded for me more eagerly than I can dare plead for myself. Will you not listen to his voice, which, though dead, speaks through me, and be mine? Come to me, Violet, my own, my darling! Let me be protector, worshiper, husband!"

Violet struggled to rise, but he had knelt, in his eagerness, on her dress. She felt faint, swooning, charmed, and thoroughly overcome. She dropped, and fell back.

"Say 'yes'—say you will be mine—say you will let me guide and protect you!" he whispered, tenderly.

Violet, driven to bay, confused, bewildered, overcome, placed her cold, trembling hand in his, and the captain knew that at last he had won the great stake for which he had been so long playing.

Do not blame her, gentle reader. What could she do?—helpless, deceived, overwhelmed as she was. To her, since Leicester's death, all men were the same. This man had been kind, and had been, in a sense, her guardian and protector. It was natural, considering the fearful, deadly power of his will, that she should fall a helpless prey to his wicked wiles.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN EX-CONVICT'S STORY.

We last saw Leicester passing from the alcove where he had overheard Fitz's proposal to Violet.

With a tempest of jealousy and injured love he returned to his humble lodgings, to brood over all he had heard.

The moment he entered the little sitting-room Stumpy came to meet him, a smile of welcome on his rough face, which soon lengthened to an expression of sympathy.

"Here you are, sir," he said; "and you've been at it again, I see."

"What do you mean?" said Leicester.

"You've been making yourself unhappy with the grand folks again," said Stumpy, shaking his head. "I knows it by the look o' ye. Now, I've been among old folks, and it ain't made me unhappy, not a bit o' it; but there, that's different. Come, cheer up, sir," and he drew a chair to the table for Leicester, who sank into it wearily. "I've been among the old folks, sir, and I've got my advice—and good enough it is, and no mistake. It's a wonderful thing, it is, how we drop upon lucky meetings. How this afternoon I met an old friend who used to be in our line—smuggling, you know, sir—and be blest if he didn't just give me a regular hint as is worth a bad half-crown."

"What was it?" said Leicester, rousing himself.

"Just this here," said Stumpy, setting some food before Leicester as he spoke. "But I shan't tell you if you don't eat, sir. Come, just to please me.

"And myself, too," said Leicester, "for I am sick and hungry."

"What this old friend of mine advises is to take the whole gang down at Penruddie by storm. Go down yourself, only dead and alive again—a regular ghost, you know—and work upon 'em."

"I see," said Leicester, sadly. "A good idea, but there still remains another and a worse point to defeat. How do you propose to overcome the villain who has worked all this mischief? I have seen [274] him to-night again, Stumpy, and victorious, and wealthy, and triumphant—ruling the destinies of those I love, and holding them in his talons. Now I am fragile and helpless—no, not helpless, for I have you, my friend—to do battle with him."

"I should like to see this great gentleman," mused Stumpy. "I've a sort o' curiosity to see a man who works the oracle so nicely as he does. When can I see him, guv'nor?"

"You can see him in another hour," looking at the clock. "If you care to mix in a crowd and watch and hang about for him. There will be plenty to tell you his name and point him out. His name is Howard Murpoint.

"Hem!" said Stumpy, "I don't mind a crowd, master. I've been in a good many. I've faced one as I don't want to see again, and that was at the Old Bailey."

He glanced at Leicester as he spoke, and muttered:

"I'll keep him alive and jaw to him, just to keep his thoughts away. They're black enough to-night."

"Yes, that was awkward, master, that was, to see the judge and all the other fellows in wigs a-staring you out of countenance, and a-trying to make you out wus than you was. And to think when they gives me transportation for life! for life! that I didn't deserve it, and should never have had it but for another man."

"Another man?" repeated Leicester, half unconsciously.

"Ah!" said Stumpy, delighted to see that he had drawn Leicester from his thoughts, and throwing himself down upon the hearthrug with his knees up to his nose, so that he might continue his tale more comfortably and with his face turned from Leicester. "Yes, all through another person. I was honest enough till I met him. I was a costermonger, a steady chap, as costers go, and I got my living, and was tolerably comfortable; but you see I was a bit proud, and they says as pride is allus one too many for you. I was very strong in the arm. Look here, guv'nor," he broke off, jumping up and seizing the poker; "I can bend that poker in two—so," and he did it, dropping on to the floor again, as if there had been no interruption.

"I was very strong, and I could do a'most anything with my arms, like a monkey; and I was, of [275] course, very much given to dropping into pubs. Sometimes they'd ask me in a friendly way to show 'em a few tricks, and I used to—such as knockin' a man from one end o' the room to the other with a little tap on the nose, or lifting six chairs slung together with my elbow, and pleasin' things o' that sort. One night I was showing off in this manner at a small pub in Whitechapel, and when they was closing and I was going home, very much the worse for liquor, a chap comes to me all soft and smooth, and asks me if I'd join a little party as was goin' on at his house. I said I would, and I went with him, and he was the pleasantest-spoken chap you ever see, with a soft voice like a musical snuff-box, and a pair o' eyes as looked through you and made you do what they liked. Well, I went with him and joined his party. They was all different to him, though he warn't dressed any better than the likes o' us, but I know'd some on 'em for bein' no better than they should be, but I'd never seen him before. And his friends, when they had all got friendly like; they calls him 'General,' and whispers and nods their heads at me. O' course I see something was up, and I warn't much took about when this general, in a pretty little whisper, asks me to join his friends in a little joke on a gentleman's house in the country. I was half drunk—I swear I was, sir—and I yielded. They wanted me, being so strong in the arm, to do some climbing, and when I'd said I'd join 'em they never let me out o' their sight. Day and night that general was always in the way, purring like a cat, and 'ticing the others on. Oh! he was a false-hearted 'un, he was. Well, to cut a long story short, we does the trick, or very nearly. I spoiled it. You see, they'd made me nearly drunk before we started, and when it came to holding on to a window-grating for ten minutes, half drunk, I failed it. I come down with a run, made a clatter, and give the alarm. We was caught, every man o' us—me with a broken leg. Then there was the trial, and then the general showed his teeth. He wasn't soft-spoken then, be sure. He turned on us all in his defence, and ruined us. He was so savage it should all a' been spoiled, and him there in the dock, through [276] me, that in the most natural, mournful sort o' way possible he pitched a tale about me being the ringleader and drawin' the rest on, that the jury gives me as much as it does him—transportation for life! That was my only affair, master, excepting the smuggling, and I was drove to that."

Leicester nodded.

"And you escaped?" he said.

"Yes," nodded Stumpy, with a laugh, "and there I was luckier than the general. He made a shy at it, killed a man in the attempt, but him and another chap as tried it with him was drowned off the coast. Drowned in the pitch dark! It warn't a pleasant ending, but it was better than he deserved, for of all the false, smooth-faced villains he was the worst."

Leicester seemed lost in thought. He roused suddenly and looked up at the timepiece.

"If you want to see the most successful man and the greatest rogue in London to-night, or rather this morning, you must be quick, my friend. Light your pipe and run away. While you are gone I will turn over your friend's advice, for I think I see a chance of adopting it."

"I'm off," said Stumpy, and after Leicester had directed him to the mansion he started.

It was the night of the great ball.

Fitz had made his proposal and gone home, before Stumpy had reached the house and taken up his position in the shadow of the huge portico.

The guests were coming out, and for a while Stumpy almost forgot the object of his watch in his admiration for and astonishment at the dresses and jewels. But suddenly a footman's voice called "Mrs. Mildmay's and Mr. Murpoint's carriage," and Stumpy was suddenly aroused to a sense of his purpose.

Crouching unseen against the iron railings he could see the face of every individual as it came out into the bright light pouring from the gas lamps at the door.

In twos and threes the brilliantly dressed people came out talking, laughing, and gathering their cloaks and wraps round them.

Presently there was a little excitement in the crowd of footmen, and two or three in handsome liveries called out, "Make way, make way," and Stumpy staring with all his might saw an old lady descending the staircase leaning on the arm of a tall gentleman. [277]

"That's the earl and Mrs. Mildmay," said a footman, who had been telling the names of the various guests to a friend near him. "And here comes Mr. Murpoint, the M. P.—great man, you know—with Miss Mildmay, the heiress, on his arm. Get out of the way; he don't like a crowd round the door——Here he comes."

As he spoke the dark, handsome face of Howard Murpoint came into the light.

Violet was leaning on his arm, her pale face more sad and dreamy than usual.

They stepped on to the light, and Stumpy stared for a moment, then sprang forward so close to the railings that he struck his nose a severe blow.

He stared with open mouth and distended eyes, as if he were going into a fit, and as the great individual passed him—so closely as to touch him with his clothes—he gasped for breath, and dashing the perspiration from his face, muttered hoarsely and with an air of the most tremendous amazement.

"It's the general!"

Then he set off running as hard as he could and did not stop until he had burst into the sitting-room of Leicester's lodgings.

He found Leicester dead asleep on his chair, his head resting upon his arms on the table.

The sight of his exhausted master somewhat subdued Stumpy's excitement, and as he stared down at him thoughtfully he made a resolution not to communicate his discovery to his master too suddenly.

So when Leicester awoke he said:

"Been asleep, sir? Quite right. To my knowledge you haven't slept a wink for three nights."

"Well," said Leicester, "have you seen him?"

"Yes, I have," said Stumpy, evading Leicester's glance, "and a very handsome man he is. Lord! he looks as innocent as a lamb and as sweet as a sucking-pig! Quite the swell, sir; all the flunkeys made as much fuss as if it was the Emperor of Rooshia coming out to his carriage."

"Ay," said Leicester, "the wicked flourish nowadays, Stumpy; it is bad policy to be honest. Even your friends cannot forgive you that; see how all mine have forgotten me! If I had done anything bad enough they would have remembered me, but I was passing honest and so—but no matter. I have been thinking over your advice, and I am determined to adopt it. Look on that table; there is a letter addressed to a solicitor whom I used to know. He was an honest man, and we shall want an honest man to help us. To-morrow you shall take that to his office, and then we'll start off to Penruddie. If we win and succeed it will not be for the last time, but if we fail I shall set sail for the tropics and leave England forever more to the rogues who rule it." [278]

The next morning the eminent and respectable Mr. Thaxton received a short—a very short—and very mysterious letter.

> "Dear Sir: If you have any desire to learn more of the mystery of Penruddie you may satisfy your curiosity to some extent by meeting the writer of this letter at the ruined chapel in Mildmay Park. Should you decide to come, make your way there to-morrow night unseen and conceal yourself behind the middle pillar near the turret, where you may see and hear much that will astonish and enlighten you."

The letter was unsigned and the handwriting was a strange one to Mr. Thaxton.

He sat and turned the letter over several times, reread and reread it, and at last he muttered:

"I knew that mystery would turn up again. I felt certain of it, and here it is. I will go."

Thereupon he rang the office bell and issued an order for the packing of his traveling-case.

That next day the Penruddie train bore three passengers important to this history—Mr. Thaxton, Leicester and Stumpy.

Leicester saw Mr. Thaxton alight and knew that his letter had taken effect; he carefully avoided the keen eyes of the old lawyer, and he and Stumpy cut across a field near the station and left the village behind them.

Toward midday Stumpy cut out toward the village and found a boy loafing about. He gave him a [279]
letter for Job, the carrier, and told him to take it to him and give it him quietly.

The lad, delegated with a sixpence, tore off, and soon slipped into Job's hand this note:

"Be at the old chapel to-night at midnight. H. M."

Job read it and asked the boy who had given it to him.

The lad told him a gentleman, and described Stumpy.

Job at once concluded that the captain had disguised himself, and determined to obey the mysterious missive.

The night fell dark and cheerless.

Toward midnight Mr. Thaxton carefully picked his way to the old chapel, and, not without sundry shudders and quakings, took up his place behind the center pillar.

For some time the silence and awful solitude of the place was unbroken save by the whizz of the bat and the subdued screech of the owl.

Mr. Thaxton began to grow cold and shivery, and had almost decided to return to the inn when a slight noise attracted his attention and he saw a light approaching.

It was carried by a short man, whom he at once, by the aid of the light, distinguished as Job, the carrier.

Here, at least, was something tangible and corroborative of the letter.

He dared scarcely breathe, so eagerly curious was he, and he watched Job, who looked round cautiously, and at length seated himself upon the tomb and shaded his lantern.

Midnight struck in solemn, monotonous tones, and immediately there appeared a blue, misty light from among the pillars.

Job started to his feet with an oath.

"Come, no larks with me, lads!" he said, savagely. "This is a stale game——"

The words died out on his lips, for as the light approached nearer it disclosed the form of the long-lost Leicester Dodson.

There was his pale face and lank hair, all dripping with water, sea weed clung to his white shroud and hung at his elbows.

He looked as if he had just risen from his watery grave. [280]

Job's knees shook and he fell to the ground; the spirit drew nearer and scowled down upon him with fierce eyes, which glowed like fire from the chalky-hued cheeks. Job's fear grew almost to madness. Here was a ghost indeed! One to make his heart quake and his soul shudder to its innermost core.

"Maester Leicester!" he grasped. "Maester Leicester! have mercy on my soul! Have mercy!"

The fearful words rolled through the chapel, and the ghost seemed to hear them, for in a sepulchral voice, it formed the word, "Confess!"

"I will, I will," gasped Job. "I'll confess all—before a magistrate, Maester Leicester, dear Maester Leicester—oh, Heaven, how terrible! Oh, Maester Leicester, I didn't think you'd be drowned! I'd never a done! I'll confess all! I'll confess what I've seen, I'll tell how the captain put the paper in the old bureau! I see him do it—I see him and Jem Starling; and I know who killed Jem! I know! I know! Oh, Maester Leicester, have mercy on a live man and I'll tell all!"

"Confess!" said the ghostly voice.

"I will," said Job. "I'm a smuggler, we are all smugglers, but the captain is the chief; he drives us to it and takes the money—oh, mercy, Maester Leicester!—and knows a secret way through the dead squire's room to the beach! The captain knows! and the captain sent you away Maester Leicester, and murdered you as he did Jem Starling. Spare me, Maester Leicester, and I'll tell all if they hang me for it. I've meant to do it many a time, but now your ghost has come I'll do it, or you'd never leave me! Oh, Lord! oh, Lord!"

"Confess," said the ghost, drawing near.

"I will! I will!" screamed Job, and then he fell face downward upon the earth in a swoon of horror.

At that moment two figures sprang out from the darkness.

One was Stumpy with a lantern, the other Mr. Thaxton.

Both rushed at the prostrate man, over whom the ghost was bending.

Stumpy seized Job, Mr. Thaxton seized the ghost, and commenced tearing off its shroud. [281]

"Stop!" said a voice. "Stay your hand, Mr. Thaxton. I am indeed Leicester Dodson."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Thaxton, falling back with astonishment. "What! you alive!" and then he snatched at the linen-bandaged hand, and shook it like a madman.

"Yes, me," said Leicester, with a thrill of triumph and exultation in his voice. "I have not come back to the world a moment too soon," he added, significantly. "You have heard this man's confession."

"I have," said Mr. Thaxton.

"And believe it?" asked Leicester, slowly.

"As I believe that there is a sky above us," said Mr. Thaxton. "I always knew that Howard Murpoint was a villain, and I was waiting for a Nemesis to track him down. Little did I think that you would be that Nemesis! And who is this?" he asked, motioning toward Stumpy.

"My best and truest friend," said Leicester.

"Then give me your hand," said Mr. Thaxton, and, to Stumpy's astonishment, the respectable lawyer grasped the ex-convict's hand and shook it heartily.

"And now what is to be done with this fellow? He is too precious to be lost sight of."

"I have a cart near here," said Leicester, "and I thought that if you would stand my friend you would not mind taking charge of him till the morning."

"Certainly," said Mr. Thaxton, eagerly. "A capital plan! He shall not leave my sight, and to-morrow he shall be before the magistrate."

"Lend a hand, sir," said Stumpy, "for he's coming to."

The three carried the senseless Job to the cart, jumped in themselves, and Stumpy drove to Tenby, while Leicester removed his ghostly disguise and reassumed his Spanish one.

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CHAPTER XXIX.

THE COMING WEDDING.

Quite unconscious of the Nemesis which was already on his track, the captain was rapidly bringing his scheme to a climax.

The world was, of course, very much astonished to hear that Mr. Howard Murpoint was the man Miss Mildmay was to marry, and many blamed her for her fickleness.

But Violet was perfectly indifferent to praise or blame; she pursued the even tenor of her way, calm, serene as usual, with the peaceful and almost sad smile on her face and her usual gentle manner to all.

Mrs. Mildmay had been very much surprised to hear that Violet had, so to speak, changed her mind. But Mrs. Mildmay thought it was a very good change, for she believed the captain to be the best and cleverest man in the world, and perhaps considered him the handsomest.

When Violet went to old Mrs. Dodson, the mother of the man she had loved and whose memory she cherished, she was fearful that the old lady would be grieved.

Perhaps Mrs. Dodson was, but all she said was:

"Violet, my dear, you will do what is right, I know, and—and if this seems to you right, do it. But do you love him?"

"I cannot do that," said Violet, kissing the old lady's hand with a loving tenderness. "You know where my heart is—it will never leave Leicester, never! But Mr. Murpoint does not ask me for love, but for respect and esteem."

"And you give him these?" asked Mrs. Dodson, with a slight shade on her brow.

Violet's face shadowed and reflected that shade of distrust, but almost instantly she replied:

"I cannot conceal anything from you who have been a mother to me, dear. One time I neither esteemed nor trusted Mr. Murpoint—indeed, I disliked him. But all that feeling has gone," she continued, hurriedly. "He has been a true, a kind friend to me—he was my father's friend, and [283] how dare I distrust the man he loved and trusted. No, when the feeling I have spoken of has come over me I have cast it off as unworthy and unjust. Lately"—and she sighed—"it has not come. Mother, I seem to have no feeling, no emotion. Life is but a dream and a sleep to me sometimes, and I think that I shall wake perhaps, and—but there!" she broke off, springing to her feet and putting up her hand as if to ward off the feeling of unhappiness which was creeping upon her. "I will not give way to it. I will trust my father's best friend, and I will try with all my heart to be a good wife to him."

"Heaven bless you!" said Mrs. Dodson, sobbing. "Would that I could have been a mother indeed to you. But it was not to be. My boy was taken from your side, and it is not right that you should remain alone in the world, wedded to a shadow. Violet, you will not change to me? You will love me still?"

For answer the gentle girl threw her arms round the old lady's neck and burst into tears.

"You will always be my mother!" she said, "for are you not Leicester's?"

So the pure, just-minded girl strove to trust and love the man whom she had consented to take as a husband.

He, meanwhile, was all smiles and honeyed words, looking handsomer and more confident than ever.

The world declared that there was no end to his successes and that he was the most wonderful man of the times.

Soon it was rumored that the marriage between him and the wealthy Miss Mildmay was to take place almost immediately, and that when it did Howard Murpoint, M. P., would be made a baronet.

No wonder the great man looked happy as he rode his magnificent hunter in the park or appeared in the *salons* of the *élite* with his beautiful betrothed on his arm.

But was he happy?

Who could see him when he was alone—at night when he sat crouched within his easy-chair in his own room, or pacing up and down with the sleek restlessness of a tiger caged and ferocious, well fed but distrustful?

None saw him but his bad angel and himself as he looked into the mirror which reflected his [284] dark, working face.

The world knew nothing of the twenty thousand pounds which Mr. Wilhelm Smythe had extorted from him.

The world knew nothing of the scar on his leg which the convict gang-chain had left there; of the perjury which his brain had plotted, or the vile murder his hands had wrought.

These and other crimes the world knew nothing of, but he knew, and though he strove to forget he could not. In the dead of the night, or perhaps in the gray dawn when he had thrown himself upon the bed to woo sleep after a day of willful pleasure or a night of dancing and fashion, sleep would come, but bring bad dreams with it.

He dreamed he was in the prison cell; toiling in the hot sun under the Portland cliff, with the horrid chain galling at his leg. Then visions of the haunted chapel at Penruddie crowded his brain; and one night he started up, cold with horror, from a vision of Jem, mangled and ghastly, standing beside his bed pointing to a red, gaping wound. Then, too, in those dreadful waking hours, when sleep would not come, fear took its place, and he moved in an agony of dread, fancying that his secret was known, that the detectives were on his track and that the gallows was looming before him.

But in the morning these disquieting visions always fled and breakfast time found the great man serene, placid, watchful and smiling, ready to do battle with the world and conquer it.

Preparations for the wedding were proceeding, hastened by the great man's commands and purse.

It was to be a grand wedding, much against Violet's wish, and the fashionable world was on tiptoe of expectation. For it was known that Mr. Murpoint was to be made a baronet and that he would take one of the largest mansions in Belgravia and commence a series of entertainments immediately after the happy couple returned from the wedding tour.

Violet's dress was ordered, the bridesmaids chosen, and the tour arranged before Fitz had returned to town from the execution of his little plot with Bertie and Ethel. He called for his [285] letters at his club, and thrust them in his pocket unread; he noticed that men looked rather strangely and almost commiseratingly at him, and wondered what was the matter. Without much loss of time he called at Mrs. Mildmay's and asked for Violet.

Violet was upstairs in her own room, alone and musing, when the maid came to tell her that Lord Boisdale was in the drawing-room.

"Lord Boisdale!" repeated poor Violet, turning pale. "Did he ask for me?"

"Yes, miss," said the maid. "Particularly for you."

"Well," said Violet, sadly. "I will see him."

She was surprised that Fitz should ask to see her after the letter she had written to him, for it was a letter full of true womanly gratitude and kindness, explaining everything, and begging him, if he loved and respected her, not to see her before the wedding.

Now, Fitz had called, she thought, to harass her with reproaches, perhaps to accuse her of cruel insincerity. She determined to be brave and see him, so she went with rather faltering feet into the drawing-room.

Fitz rose at once and came toward her with suppressed eagerness.

"My dear Miss Mildmay—Violet!" he exclaimed, "I have come back, and left Ethel and Bertie the happiest couple in the world! You have heard the news, of course, and you think I have done right? Ah, if you could have seen them when the parson had made them one both turn to me and bless me! Bertie shaking my hand off, with tears in his eyes, and Eth, dear gentle Eth, clinging round my neck and declaring I had saved her! Well, well," and Fitz broke off to wipe with a hasty hand a suspicious moisture in his own eyes. "They are off to Italy, and I left them on the packet

looking as happy as a couple of children, and I don't care what the world says and what the earl and countess say; I know I've done the proper thing and those two were made for one another!"

So he rattled on in his eager, simple way, utterly unconscious of the pallor of her face, with its look of astonishment and dread.

For Violet knew by his manner that he had not received her letter, and that she should have to [286] tell him that she had refused him and accepted Howard Murpoint.

"Well," said Fitz, "they sent all sorts of messages to you, and Ethel implored me with tears in her eyes to assure you of her affection and love. Poor Eth, all her troubles are over now, and she's happy. Violet, dare I hope that you forgive me and think I have done right? And will you make me happy, too, Violet?" and, with an imploring look, he tried to take her hand.

Violet drew it from him and sank on to the sofa. Fitz looked perplexed, and stared.

"You don't speak! You haven't said a word!" he said. "What is the matter?"

"Have you not received my letter?" she breathed.

"No," said Fitz, thrusting his hands into his pocket. "Perhaps it is here; I haven't opened them yet. Oh, Violet, you have not refused me; you don't mean to make me miserable for life! Don't say it, don't say it!"

"I have written it," said Violet, paler and paler each moment. "I have written a full explanation. It cannot be; it is forever impossible. Lord Boisdale—Fitz, I am to marry Mr. Murpoint."

"What?" exclaimed Fitz, "am I dreaming—am I mad? Violet, you are to marry the captain!"

Violet rose.

"Let me leave you, my lord! I am so sorry that my letter"—then she turned and tried to leave the room.

But Fitz strode after her and seized her arm.

"Violet," he said, "one word more. I see I am not dreaming, that it's truth you are telling me. But if it is true there is villainy somewhere! You are right to reprove me. Heaven knows I am not worthy of you—but the captain!

"Violet, if Leicester could come to life again, I would have yielded to him quietly, without a word, for I know you were his. But not to the captain! You never did and you never can care for him, and if you marry him it will be against your will. Violet, listen to me, I implore you. I believe—I am sure within my own heart that the captain, Howard Murpoint, is a rogue and a villain."

"Silence!" said Violet, sadly, yet indignantly. "You forget yourself, my lord! You have no right to [287] say such cruel things, to attack an absent man. Mr. Murpoint will be my husband, and I will not—I dare not listen to such a groundless accusation. Enough! Not a word more. Leave me, I beg, my lord!"

"Yet one word more, I implore," said Fitz. "I will leave you and I will not see you again; but, mark me, I will not let the matter rest, and if you care for Howard Murpoint, as you would have me believe you do, warn him that there is one on his track who will search him to the heart, and who will, cost him what it may, find whether he is an honest man or the rogue he thinks him. Violet, Ethel has escaped his clutches, and you have fallen into them. Escape while there is time, I implore of you! See, I beg you on my knees to take time, to do nothing rashly, to break off this hateful, this horrible engagement!"

"If there had been one thing wanting to confirm me in the path I have taken, Lord Boisdale, your words have supplied it. I will do my duty by an innocent man maligned, and be true to him. I will be true to the man I have promised to marry, though all the world rose to slander him."

"Violet, you do not love him!" groaned Fitz.

"No," said Violet. "But, though I have lost the power to love, I can still act with honor."

And, with a sad smile, she left the room.

Fitz rose, stunned and dazed.

He took up his hat and, leaving the house, walked in a daze to Lackland House.

As he was about to enter a footman came up to him.

"My lord, the earl is desirous of seeing you."

"Eh?" said Fitz, who was scarcely conscious of what he was about.

"Upstairs, my lord, in the earl's study."

"All right," said Fitz, and he ascended the stairs with a heavy gait.

Knocking at the study door, he received a cold, stern "Come in," and, entering, found Lord Lackland seated in the same chair at the same table in the same room in which he had sat that morning when he informed Fitz that the Lackland estates were mortgaged and that the Lackland [288] purse was empty.

"Good-morning," said Fitz.

The earl bowed with cold politeness.

"You have arrived this morning?"

"This morning," said Fitz. "I haven't been in town three hours."

"I am glad of it," said the earl, "as I wished to see you immediately you arrived."

"I left Ethel——"

"Thank you," said the earl, interrupting him with stately politeness. "I do not wish to know anything of your disobedient and undutiful sister. If I should at any time, I will come to you, who, it seems, is a partner and chief abettor in her misconduct. Be good enough not to mention her name to me."

"But, my lord," said Fitz, who was nearly out of his mind, "surely you do not mean to say that you intend to be hard upon Ethel for marrying where she liked? She has not married a chimney-sweep, or run away with one of the coachmen. Bertie is the best, the most famous man in London ——"

"Thank you for the information," said the earl. "I know nothing of Mr. Fairfax, and I do not wish to add to my knowledge. Be kind enough to leave the subject where it is; it is one that is extremely distasteful to me. I wished to see you on business. Here are a number of bills—they have all been contracted by you—I pass them to you for payment."

Fitz stared at them.

"My lord," he said, "I cannot pay these! You know that it is impossible!"

The earl shrugged his shoulders.

"I have nothing to do with that," he said, coldly. "You are over age, you were twenty-two last month; you are liable, I believe."

"I am liable, I know," said Fitz, in despair, "but, of course, sir, I have always looked to you."

"And, I believe some time back, in this very room, I warned you that you could no longer do so. I have my own bills to pay, and I cannot concern myself with any others. Be good enough to take them away; they litter my table." [289]

"But," said Fitz, "I cannot pay them, and you know that I cannot. What is to be done?"

"I regret that I cannot inform you. I should advise you to pay them, or in all probability the creditors will endeavor to compel you."

"In other words they will put me in prison."

The earl shrugged his shoulders.

"I cannot say; I know nothing about it. May I remind you again of the conversation which I before mentioned as taking place between us in this room? I ventured to advise you; my advice was not taken; you cannot be surprised at my reluctance to repeat that advice."

"Is it my fault that Violet Mildmay very properly refuses to enrich a ruined house by marrying the poverty-stricken eldest son and heir, who, love her as he does, is utterly unworthy of her?"

"Your fault!" retorted the earl, with icy scorn. "I know nothing of your affairs, but unless I am grossly misinformed it is your fault that Ethel has married a boy and refused a millionaire; that is enough for me. Go on in the course you have before you, Lord Boisdale. Go in the path you are treading, and find yourself a penniless debtor, rotting in jail; it is perfectly indifferent to me. I have pointed out to you the secret of success—you have scorned it or failed to get it by rank foolery. I have done with you! Lackland Hall and money will last my lifetime; afterward it can go to the dogs, which I can see already at your heels. I am busy, and therefore compelled to wish you good-morning."

So saying, the earl pointed to the pile of bills, and then to the door.

Lord Fitz took up the bills and quietly left the room, dazed still, and more like a man walking in his sleep.

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CHAPTER XXX.

UNDER ARREST.

We left Leicester and Mr. Thaxton, assisted by Stumpy, carrying Job to the nearest magistrate.

When Leicester had, as well as he was able, removed his disguise, and Job saw that Leicester was alive and in the flesh, he had shown the greatest joy, and that notwithstanding the personal peril which Leicester's whim had placed him in.

After a time, when Job reflected upon all the consequences which would fall upon himself, he grew wonderfully quiet, and sat at the bottom of the cart sullen and moody.

"I suppose I'll be hanged," he said, "and I deserve it; but I'll tell the whole truth, Maester Leicester, every word of it."

"In that case," said Leicester, "I will do my best to shield you from punishment."

"I'll turn King's evidence," said Job, with a grin. "I won't turn on the boys; but I'll be even with the captain, curse him!"

Mr. Thaxton exchanged glances with Leicester, and drove on in silence.

As the morning broke they had left the ruined chapel a long way behind, and were nearing Tenby. At this point Mr. Thaxton pulled up, and desired Leicester to step out of the cart, as he wished to say a word to him.

Leicester alighted, nodding to Job, warningly.

"Do not attempt to escape," he said; "I warn you."

"You leave him to me, sir," said Stumpy, cheerfully and significantly, and Leicester followed Mr. Thaxton.

"It has just occurred to me, or rather I have been thinking of it all the way—that you are under a warrant still, Mr. Dodson! Any moment you are liable to arrest. There is a hundred pounds reward, remember, and so large an amount makes men keen. In Tenby there are many men who know you—or at least must have seen you often; you may be detected."

"Not through this disguise," said Leicester. [291]

"Not through that disguise; but by your voice; you cannot disguise that sufficiently. I should have known you by it. Better stay out of the way quietly a while until Job's deposition is taken."

"Very well," said Leicester, "I follow your advice to the letter. All I want is to be near those I love and protect them until that villain is under lock and key. Then it does not matter what becomes of me," he added, sadly.

"Hem!" said Mr. Thaxton, "I think I know what is the matter. I have heard of Miss Mildmay's engagement, but that may be put right."

"Not by me," said Leicester, in a low voice. "I love her still, but I will not interfere with the quiet happiness which she enjoys. Fitz is a better man than I—and—but, there, let us talk no more of it," and he jumped into the cart.

At that moment, while Mr. Thaxton was starting the horse, they heard the noise of wheels behind them, and before they were scarce aware of it a small, high gig was close beside them.

"Hello!" called out a voice, which Leicester seemed to recognize. "What, is it vegetables? no, small party enjoying themselves. Oh! what's that? A man handcuffed!" And before any one could prevent him he had dropped from his own gig and jumped into their cart.

"I know your face, my man," he said to Job, "and yours too, sir, if I'm not mistaken. You are a lawyer, Mr. Thaxton—concerned in the little affair at Penruddie; may I ask where you are taking this man—Job is his name, I think?"

Mr. Thaxton glanced at Leicester, apprehensively.

"You are quite right," he said. "The man's name is Job, and I am a lawyer. I detected him robbing this gentleman—a Spaniard—and his servant, and I am assisting them to take him to the nearest station."

"Hem!" said the stranger.

"But you have the advantage of me," continued Mr. Thaxton. "For, although I seem to know your voice, I do not recognize you. May I ask upon what ground you thus exercise your curiosity?"

"Oh," said the stranger, with a laugh, putting off a large beard which had nearly concealed his face, "I'm Detective Dockett! You know me now, I suppose." [292]

"Oh, dear me, yes," said Mr. Thaxton, shooting another glance at Leicester more apprehensive than the last. "I am glad to see you. I suppose you are going on to Tenby; you will be there before I shall—I am surprised your horse doesn't run away——"

"He won't run away," said Mr. Dockett. "He'd follow me down a coal mine, or up in a balloon. Yes, I'm going on to Tenby, sir. I've had a little smuggling job on here. Perhaps I can do something for you in Tenby? Rum case that Penruddie murder, wasn't it? I suppose nothing has ever turned up, sir?"

"You are the person to know best about that. You were engaged in the case. No, nothing more ever transpired. No doubt Mr. Leicester Dodson committed the deed, and was killed himself in the struggle. But it is a painful case—and I don't like to talk about it."

"Just so," said Mr. Dockett. "Well, I think I'll get into my trap. Good-night, gentlemen. Good-night, señor."

Leicester, who had kept his face turned away as much as possible, bowed gravely, and muttered good-night in Spanish.

As he did so Mr. Dockett, who had risen, plumped down on the side of the cart again and looked at him out of the corner of his eyes.

"Been long in England, señor?" he asked.

"The gentleman doesn't speak English," said Mr. Thaxton.

"Just ask him, will you, sir?" said Mr. Dockett, with a pleasant smile.

Mr. Thaxton jabbered something meant to imitate Spanish, and Leicester, who, notwithstanding his perilous position, could scarcely restrain his laughter, answered him.

Again, at the sound of Leicester's voice, Mr. Dockett got a little closer and eyed him.

Then he rose.

"Ah," he said, "get a bad opinion of England if he gets robbed like this; this chap tried to pick his pocket?"

"No; steal his portmanteau," said Mr. Thaxton.

"Good-night," said Mr. Dockett, and he made a step forward, but the cart seemed to jolt at that moment, for he missed his footing, staggered, and fell against Leicester, managing as he fell to drag off Leicester's hat, spectacles and false beard. [293]

Then, before any one could utter a word, he leaped to his feet, laid his hand upon Leicester's shoulder, and, with a quiet grin, said:

"Mr. Leicester Dodson, I arrest you on a charge of willful murder! Here is the warrant—I've always carried it with me. No resistance, I hope?"

"None," said Leicester, with a dread calmness. "I surrender, Mr. Dockett."

"Now that's what I call right and proper and gentlemanly," said Mr. Dockett, admiringly. "But, bless my heart and soul! who'd ever have thought that I should have dropped upon you here and at this time, and like this?"

"Did you not know it was us?" said Mr. Thaxton, sadly. "Were you not following us?"

"No," said Mr. Dockett, with a quiet chuckle. "I was on quite a different job. Not that I thought you would never turn up. I wasn't taken in by that story of your falling over the cliff. It wasn't likely a gentleman with such muscle as you, would allow yourself to be pulled over by a half-drunken, wounded man. No, I knew you'd turn up again some day, and I was waiting my time. And here you are!"

"Yes," said Leicester, "and you have earned your hundred pounds. So you think I committed the murder?"

"I think you'll be hung for it," said Mr. Dockett, after a minute's silence.

"Thank you," said Leicester with a grim smile. "It is candid of you, Mr. Dockett."

"Well, sir, no offence. I'm certain that if you didn't do the trick you knew something about it."

"I did not do it, and I did not know anything about it. But there sits a man who does know something about it."

And he pointed to Job.

"Ah!" said Mr. Dockett.

"Yes," said Mr. Thaxton. And then, motioning to Leicester to be silent, he told Mr. Dockett all that had occurred and all that Job had confessed in the ruined chapel. [294]

Mr. Dockett listened most attentively to the concise and exact statement made by the lawyer, scarcely taking his eyes from Job the while, and yet taking note of every movement made by the others.

Then he said, when Mr. Thaxton had finished:

"And I suppose all this little story about the robbery was a cover. You meant to take Job here on to Tenby?"

"To make his statement and obtain a warrant for the real criminal," said Mr. Thaxton.

Mr. Dockett indulged in a quiet chuckle.

"That's good," he said. "Why, you would have played into Captain M.'s hands. Nothing would have been nicer for him."

"How so?" asked Mr. Thaxton.

"Why, thus," said Mr. Dockett. "You go, we'll say, to Tenby; you take this precious old rascal before a magistrate. What he does is to issue a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Leicester, and one for the captain. The captain surrenders, of course, and comes up for examination. He braves it out, declares the whole thing is a plant to get Mr. Leicester out of the scrape, says Job has been bribed, and defies you to produce a tittle of evidence against him. You can't, you know, not at present; the magistrate says he must discharge the captain, who leaves the court without a stain upon his honor. Meanwhile Mr. Leicester comes up, all the evidence already against him is produced, the nasty impression of the attempt to incriminate the captain is brought to bear, and Mr. Leicester is committed for trial. All the while between the examination and the trial we rake up more evidence, and the whole thing is brought to a conclusion."

"As how?" said Mr. Thaxton, who was deeply impressed by the detective's argument.

"Mr. Leicester is hung for the murder of James Starling, and Captain Murpoint—or rather Sir Howard Murpoint, M. P.—marries the wealthy Miss Mildmay, and lives happy ever afterward."

Leicester rose to his full height stern and threatening.

"One word more of such impertinence, sir, and I fling you out of the cart! How dare you make use of that lady's name, sir?" [295]

"Whew!" exclaimed Mr. Dockett. "You haven't heard the news."

"News, what news?" asked Leicester, sternly.

"That the captain is to be made a baronet, and that he is to marry his ward, Miss Mildmay."

"It is false!" said Leicester, grasping Mr. Thaxton's arm, madly.

"Very likely," said Mr. Dockett. "They say nothing's true as is in the papers. This was in all of 'em yesterday morning, and, with no offence, I'll bet there's something in it, gentlemen."

"It must not be," said Leicester, groaning. "I would rather see her in her grave. She may marry Fitz, or any honest man, so that she is happy, but not that scoundrel, not that villain! Look you, sir," he said, turning suddenly to Mr. Dockett and laying a hand upon his arm to emphasize his words, "you will gain a hundred pounds by my arrest. Now, I say nothing about my own innocence or my guilt, I say no more on that score; but I say this, and this gentleman will bear me out, I will give you one thousand pounds if you will take the trouble to investigate the statement you heard from this man. One thousand pounds! It is a fair sum! You are not to prove my innocence—let that go, but to prove his guilt; any part will do, so that it prevents this marriage."

"Agreed on," said Mr. Dockett. "I'll take the contract, on condition that everything is left in my hands."

Mr. Thaxton conferred with Leicester for a few minutes, and then Leicester answered:

"We agree to trust you; and if the reflection will have any weight in keeping you faithful and honest, unswerving in your task, I would have you remember that in trusting you I do so wholly, being tied hand and foot in jail."

"Exactly," said Mr. Dockett, with a queer twinkle of the eye. "Then, as we are agreed, I'll get you to allow me to drive."

And he took the reins from Mr. Thaxton's hands, calling to Stumpy:

"Young man, just get into my gig, will you, and follow on after."

So saying he turned the cart round and drove back toward Penruddie. [296]

When they got near the village he stopped the horse and unfastened Job's bonds.

"Now you get home, Mr. Job," he said, quietly, and fixing a significant glance upon Job's face. "You go on as usual, and keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. See, I trust you, because I know you know me. I'm Detective Dockett, of her majesty's police, Scotland Yard, and when I trust a man and find him false, I go for him, and put my hand on him if he's at the other end of the world—I've such a long arm—and when I've got him I don't let him go till he's had a taste of her majesty's jail and skilly. But there, I needn't tell you what I can do, for you know me."

Job nodded sullenly, and looked up at Leicester.

"I don't want no threats," he said. "I'll do my duty by Maester Leicester there if I swing for it."

And, with an affectionate glance, he hurried off.

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Dockett, pleasantly, "we must break up the party. I think you had better get back to town, sir; we shall want a lawyer directly."

"Very well," said Mr. Thaxton.

"As for you, sir, of course, you're under arrest; I've got your word for that."

Leicester nodded.

"Then I think, sir, you and your man will go to Sanderson's—where you were before, you know—and wait till the evening. I'll come to you. By the way, I haven't had the pleasure of your man's acquaintance."

Here Stumpy turned round and rather dolefully presented himself for inspection.

Mr. Dockett looked hard at him and turned aside.

"Ah!" he said. "I don't know him, I think, but I may some day, and very good friends we shall be."

Stumpy suppressed a groan, then suddenly tore off his wig and with a desperate recklessness exclaimed:

"'Tain't no use, I know it ain't! You'd find it out some day, sooner or later! Here I am, sir!"

"Eh?" said Mr. Dockett, with genuine astonishment. "Why, hang me, if this isn't a regular pantomime! You're the man who was split upon by the general and got it for life?" [297]

Stumpy nodded his head desperately.

"Right you are," he said. "Put 'em on," and he held out his hands for the handcuffs.

Mr. Dockett, however, seemed to enjoy the joke so much as to be incapable of doing his duty.

"Well, if this isn't a pantomime," he chuckled. "No, no; I don't want you yet, go with that gentleman, if he'll have you——"

"That I will!" said Leicester, laying his hand upon Stumpy's hand. "He has been faithful and honest to me, let the rest of the world say what it will."

"Go there with him then, sir," said Mr. Dockett, and he turned, with a cheerful nod, to the village.

Stumpy, however, ran after him and, laying one hand upon the side of the cart, whispered a few words in the detective's ear.

"Eh?" said Mr. Dockett. "The general's not dead! Is it true? Come!" and his eyes sparkled. "Where is he?"

But Stumpy, having succeeded in exciting the hitherto calm officer into something like eagerness, ran back and joined Leicester, leaving Mr. Dockett driving toward the village and muttering:

"Not dead! Is it true, I wonder? Heaven! if he isn't how I should like to have the collaring of him. So the general's not dead! It's too good to be true!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

CLOSING IN.

From the moment Mr. Dockett, the detective, discovered our hero things took a clearer and more promising aspect.

While Leicester and Stumpy were left at Penruddie Mr. Dockett repaired to London and set about his task with a zeal and cunning highly commendable.

In the first place he appeared one morning in the city, dressed after the fashion of a simple and wealthy country squire.

He made his way to the offices of one of the companies over which Howard Murpoint was [298] director, and inquired for that gentleman.

The clerk told him that Mr. Murpoint was not in the city at that early hour, and would probably not arrive until one o'clock.

Mr. Dockett waited patiently, and at last the great man arrived.

Mr. Dockett was shown into the great man's parlor and announced his business.

"I am," he said, "in search of a good investment. My name is Squirrel, and I've had a large sum of money left me, which I don't quite know what to do with. My lawyers tell me I must put it in the three-per-cents, but I thought that you, being a great city man, would be able to show me a better investment than that. So I made bold to come and ask you."

The captain had often been applied to for advice as to investments, and, after the first slight surprise, saw nothing suspicious in the country squire, and in his pleasant way informed him that he certainly could assist him.

Then he told Mr. Dockett that he could not do better than put his money in this and that company, and concluded by mentioning all the financial schemes in which he was interested.

Mr. Dockett listened attentively and jotted down the names of the companies in which the captain was concerned, and then, thanking him gratefully, took his leave.

From the offices he repaired to a small room in Scotland Yard and rang a little hand-bell.

It was answered by another detective, very much like Mr. Dockett, but with more of the city air about him.

Mr. Dockett and he shook hands, then Mr. Dockett said:

"Giles, I've got a city job on. Look here, do you know anything of that gentleman?" and he passed a slip of paper upon which Mr. Howard Murpoint's name was written.

Mr. Giles smiled.

"Everybody knows him, Mr. Dockett," he said.

"Ah, but do you know anything of him in the way I mean?"

"Well," hesitated Mr. Giles, "perhaps I may have my suspicions." [299]

"Exactly; and perhaps I have mine. He's got too much business; too many wires a-pulling; when I see one chap with so many concerns all running on I begin to think that it's shaky."

"Exactly," said Mr. Giles. "I don't know anything against Mr. H. M.; he's a great and powerful man, but I dare say I can find out if you set me to it."

"That's just what I want," said Mr. Dockett. "You get at it at once; I'll take him at the West End, you watch him at the city, and directly you find anything that even looks wrong let me know. You needn't spare the money; this is a job that will afford a thou or two."

"I understand," said Mr. Giles, and almost without another word he took his departure.

From that hour there was a bloodhound upon Howard Murpoint's track, a ferret ever worming and prying and nosing into his business. There was always a thin, quiet-looking man mixing with his clerks, getting hold of his private letters, holding open his carriage door, catching his visitors as they entered his office, and dogging him through every hour he spent at office or at chambers.

Mr. Giles was at work, and no bloodhound could be thirstier and more eager, no ferret more restless, and no lynx more watchful.

At home at the West End another bloodhound was watching him there.

When the great man came home to his palatial residence that bloodhound would watch him enter, and then in the guise of a porter or a policeman, drop into his kitchen and chatter with his servants. If Mr. Howard Murpoint walked the room all night the bloodhound learned it from the chambermaid.

Every scrap of paper which fell into his waste-paper basket found its way into the hands of Mr. Dockett, and Mr. Howard Murpoint never gave a party or attended one without Mr. Dockett's knowing it, and sometimes being present.

Gentle, noble-hearted Violet came in for a portion of this lynx-bloodhound's consideration.

Often when he was leaning against the rail of the Row, exquisitely dressed, and the Mildmay [300] carriage passed him with its claret liveries and high-stepping horses, with Mrs. Mildmay, Violet and Howard Murpoint inside, Mr. Dockett would slightly scratch his head and mutter:

"I can't make that young lady out! What on earth made her promise to marry him? I'm sure she was in love with that unlucky young gentleman with the false beard. Perhaps she's got a wrong idea of duty; and there's no doubt that Mr. H. M. is a wonderful, smooth-tongued gentleman!"

Then he'd leave the Row and return to his watch on the Murpoint mansion and in quite another costume gather all he could from the servants and tradespeople. But what he learned was not much in itself.

Howard Murpoint was no foolhardy villain.

All he did was done with circumspection and care, and he baffled Mr. Dockett. That gentleman ran down with his usual suddenness to Penruddie.

He went to Sanderson's cottage, and found Jamie, the lame boy, seated at the door with a book in his hand, with his large, melancholy eyes fixed upon the sea.

"Well, my lad," said Mr. Dockett, stealing upon him quietly. "How are you?"

Jamie started, flushed and answered, in his nervous way:

"I'm very well, sir. Do you want Willie?"

"No; I want the Spanish gentleman who lodges here!"

"He's on the cliffs," said Jamie.

Mr. Dockett stayed a few minutes, then repaired to the cliffs.

He found Leicester walking up and down moodily with his hands locked behind him and his head bent upon his breast.

"Ah!" said Leicester, with a sullen and feverish eagerness. "You have just come in time. I was about to take the train for London. I am tired out beyond endurance of stopping here inactive and idle. I cannot endure the suspense, and I am determined to push everything to an issue now—at once!"

"Hem!" said Mr. Dockett. "In a hurry to get to Newgate, sir, I suppose."

"I care not," said Leicester. "I have considered the pain of such a position, and I do not think it [301] would be more terrible than that which suspense and uncertainty now produce. Newgate, if it must be so. I cannot stay here longer."

Mr. Dockett nodded.

"You don't trust me then?"

"I do. But I cannot wait longer. It is impossible. I shall go mad! What have you been doing? What have you discovered?"

"Very little as yet," said the detective, cautiously. "But you excite yourself unnecessarily. Why don't you stay indoors quietly and rest? That lad tells me you are always here, pacing up and down and fretting."

"I am," said Leicester. "I cannot tear myself away from this spot. It was here that the murder was done—just here, where I stand. From here I can see my old home and the spot where I first saw her. You cannot understand what a fascination this place has for me."

"Perhaps I can't; perhaps I can," said the detective. "And so you won't stay here?"

"No," said Leicester. "There is danger in it if there was no other reason. That lad has sharp eyes, and some day he will recognize me."

"Hem!" said Mr. Dockett. "That's the lad who behaves so strangely. I suppose——"

Then he paused as if an idea had struck him.

"Will you come back with me?" he said. "I don't mind confessing that I have as good as failed in London myself. Whether a mate of mine finds anything or not I can't say. He's at work, and he's a sharp fellow. I'm inclined, however, seeing the state of mind you are in, to push matters on, and I've hit on an idea."

"I'll come," said Leicester, and together they returned to the cottage.

On the way Mr. Dockett said:

"Where is your friend, Stewart—rather, Mr. Stumpy?"

"Down on the beach," said Leicester. "The faithful fellow thought it best to keep a watch on Job, and I don't think he lets him out of his sight night or day."

"Quite right," said Mr. Dockett. "He'd make a good detective. Ah, here's the lad. Now I want you to sit beside me inside the cottage, and when I give the signal take off that beard and wig." [302]

Leicester nodded wearily.

"What plan have you?"

"Never mind," said Mr. Dockett.

They entered the cottage, and sat down in the little parlor.

Then Mr. Dockett called to Jamie, and asked him if he could bring a glass of water.

The lad rose and hobbled in with it.

"Sit down," said Mr. Dockett. "Sit down, my lad. What are you reading?" and he took a book out of Jamie's hand. "Ah! the 'Lives of Celebrated Assassins.' That's a strange book for a young lad!"

Jamie turned pale.

"Is it, sir?" he said. "I—I—like it."

"Don't much look like a murderer yourself," said Mr. Dockett. "Never saw one done, eh?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Jamie.

"Heard of one though," said the detective, "that murder on the cliffs, I suppose? You knew Mr. Leicester, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir," faltered the lad.

"Liked him too?" asked the detective.

"He was a good friend to me, sir," said Jamie. "A very good, kind friend."

"Ah!" said Mr. Dockett. "Do you think if he was to come to life now that you would know him again?"

"Know him!" said the lad. "Ah, in a moment."

"Of course you would," said the detective. Then he rose and wishing Leicester, "good day," left the room.

He paused outside, and looking in at the window made a signal to Leicester. Leicester looked over at Jamie Sanderson and prepared him.

"Jamie," he said. "Don't be startled. Do you know me?"

The lad, at the sound of Leicester's natural voice, turned pale and trembled, but said nothing.

"Don't be frightened, Jamie," said Leicester, and very slowly be removed the wig and beard.

Jamie uttered a cry of joy, which rapidly changed to fear.

"Maester Leicester!" he cried, stretching out his thin hand in an agony of terror, "put them on again, and fly! Fly, this moment! You are in danger! All is known, all know it beside me! Oh, fly, for Heaven's sake!" [303]

"Jamie," said Leicester, "be calm! What is known, my lad?"

"That you did the—the—murder! Oh, I know you didn't mean it, but they'll hang you, they'll hang you! And they'll make me witness against you! Oh, oh!" And he wrung his hands. "Why didn't I throw it away? Why didn't I bury it?"

"Bury it? What?" asked Leicester, puzzled.

The lad hobbled near him and laid a trembling hand upon his arm.

"Maester Leicester! I've got it. I found it on the cliff, among the bushes, and—oh! go away, sir, fly, for Heaven's sake!"

"Hush, my poor lad!" said Leicester, who was getting excited himself. "What did you find?"

The poor lad shuddered and put his lips to Leicester's ear.

"The knife! The knife you stabbed him with."

Leicester stared and the hot blood rushed up into his face.

There was a moment's pause, then, in a low, constrained voice, which trembled a little, he said:

"You found the knife, did you, Jamie? and you kept it?"

The lad nodded.

"Yes, forgive me, Maester Leicester. I tried to throw it away, I tried to bury it; but I couldn't. I thought the police would be sure to find it and that—that—it would tell against you!"

"I see," said Leicester. "You are a good lad, Jamie, a faithful lad. And where is the knife?"

"Upstairs," whispered the lad. "Upstairs, in a box in my little room."

"Ah!" said Leicester, as the words made the strange conduct of the lad quite clear. "Go and fetch it."

Jamie walked out of the room, and as he did so Mr. Dockett crept in.

"Hist!" said Leicester, and his eyes were all on fire.

"Have you heard anything?" said Mr. Dockett. "He has gone for the knife. I'll hide here," and he hid himself behind the curtain. [304]

In a few minutes the lame boy's step could be heard upon the stairs, and he entered the room and cautiously locked the door.

"It's up my sleeve," he whispered. "Shut your eyes, Maester Leicester. You needn't look at the horrid thing, shut your eyes, and hide it away in your sleeve, then throw it out to sea! Oh! it is a horrid, horrid thing!"

"Give it to me," said Leicester, hoarsely; and to please the lad he shut his eyes. Jamie slipped the knife in his hands and instantly the detective slid from behind the curtain and grasped Leicester's hand.

Leicester offered no resistance, and hushed Jamie's cry of alarm.

"All right, Jamie, don't be frightened. This is a friend."

"Is it your knife?" said Mr. Dockett, quite coolly.

"Let me see," said Leicester, then as he looked at it he sprang to his feet. "By Heaven!" he exclaimed, with a shout of frenzy, "his sin has come home to him! Nemesis is on his track!"

"Whose knife is it, I ask you?" exclaimed the detective, almost excited.

"Howard Murpoint's," replied Leicester.

At that moment the door opened, and Stumpy entered.

He had heard every word, and as he paused on the threshold he muttered to himself: "Jerusalem! things are working round bad for the general!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE PLOT FAILS.

Captain Howard Murpoint was working fast toward a completion of his plans; but others were working faster, and Mr. Giles, the city detective, had made his report to Mr. Dockett. That report contained enough of information to surprise one more up in the wiles of the wicked than Mr. Dockett, but as he read the story of Howard Murpoint's money dodges he merely raised his [305] eyebrows and muttered:

"He's a rare, clever one—a rare, clever one; it's almost a pity to interfere with him."

So it came to pass that time slipped by, and Howard Murpoint quite unconscious of the Nemesis upon his track, pressed Violet to name an early day for the wedding, for though preparations had for some time been in course, no actual day had been fixed.

Violet shrank a little, but she, in her gentle, dreamy way, agreed that the day should be postponed no longer, and, accordingly, the 24th of August was set down, and the lawyers and the dressmakers bidden to hasten.

August the 20th came, and Violet, still dreamy and quietly calm, was seated in the drawing-room; some trifling piece of lady's work was in her hand, but the needle was still, and her hands were idle.

Mrs. Mildmay was seated at the open window, busily engaged in writing out a list of invitations for the wedding breakfast.

From time to time she glanced over at Violet and put some questions, which Violet always answered in her quiet, preoccupied way, and Mrs. Mildmay wrote on.

"Shall we have the candles, my dear?" she said, at last, as the twilight fell and compelled her to pause.

"If you like, auntie," said Violet. "Why do you not rest a while? I wish you would let me help you," and she crossed the room, bent over her aunt, and kissed her.

Mrs. Mildmay looked at her and drew her down to a footstool beside her.

"Violet," she said, "you do not seem much excited by—by the great event coming."

"No," said Violet, with a smile and a sigh, her face gradually growing abstracted and her eyes more fixed. "Aunt, am I wrong to take things so quietly? Sometimes I think it is wicked. Sometimes I fear that I am cold, indifferent, ungrateful for all Captain Murpoint's kindness."

"No," said Mrs. Mildmay. "I am sure you are not that; but——"

"I know," said Violet, "I know what you would say. But I cannot help it, auntie. I feel sometimes as if I were not myself—as if Violet Mildmay were dead and I were her shadow and wraith. Do you [306] know what I mean? As if this were all a dream, and that I should in the end find myself dead! I am not dead, aunt, I know, and I strive to rouse myself. I do rouse sometimes, but only for a little while," she sighed. "The strange, numbed, unreal feeling comes over me again very soon, and this wedding seems to be that of some one else; but it is mine—mine—mine!"

She started suddenly, and looked up at her aunt with a look of horror.

"There, aunt, I am roused, and, see! I am shuddering. I feel as if this were some dreadful crime I was about to commit. I hear Leicester's voice warning me! I feel his hand drawing me back! No—no, I will not be Howard Murpoint's wife!"

Mrs. Mildmay rose with alarm.

"Violet!"

"Hush, aunt!" said Violet. "It has gone! I am wicked and silly. It has gone, that dreadful horror and dread. I am dreaming again and numbed. Do not let us talk any more about it. Sit still, dear auntie, and talk of something else."

Mrs. Mildmay resumed her seat, and looked at her darling with a troubled heart.

"My dear Violet, you must struggle against such feelings, especially to-night. Howard is coming, you know, and Mr. and Mrs. Dodson. We are all to talk over your wedding trip."

"To-night are they coming?" said Violet.

"Yes. Captain Murpoint has to take a journey to Penruddie"—Violet shuddered—"to-morrow, and may be away for all the time before the 24th. Think, my dear! You will be the wife of a great and good man. Perhaps—for they are all talking of it—you will be Lady Murpoint."

At that time a servant knocked at the door.

"A gentleman wishes to see Miss Violet, madam."

"It is very late," said Mrs. Mildmay. "What is his name?"

"He has given no name. He wishes to see her on business, I believe, madam."

"Will you see him here, Violet?" added Mrs. Mildmay. "I do not like to send him away." [307]

"No; why should you?" said Violet, rising and taking her former seat. "I will see him here, John."

The footman returned and ushered in an ordinary-looking gentleman in black. There was another one with him, who came forward with outstretched hand.

"Mr. Thaxton!" said Violet. "Why did you not say it was you?"

"I feared," said Mr. Thaxton, "that you might think I had come on business, and would refuse to see me."

"You wrong me," said Violet.

"This," said Mr. Thaxton, "is a very greatly respected friend of mine. I have brought him to assist me in making a statement which it is necessary you should hear."

Violet bowed to Mr. Dockett—for the gentleman in black was he—and, with a vague look of expectation, sat down.

Mrs. Mildmay had shaken hands with Mr. Thaxton, and invited them to be seated.

"Miss Mildmay," said Mr. Thaxton, "did I not feel sure that you are as strong of heart as you are true, I should approach the task before me with dread. As it is, I do so with reluctance."

"Stay!" said Violet, growing pale. "Answer me one question, and answer it truly. Is the business you have come about in any way connected with my marriage?"

"It is," said Mr. Thaxton, "and with something which I know weighs heavily on you, though the reality has passed long since."

Violet grew paler still.

"Mr. Thaxton," she said, "I am no weak-minded schoolgirl. I have suffered much, and still live, and can bear more than you think. Be plain with me, I entreat you. You have come to speak to me of that dreadful time long past but ever present in my mind."

"I have come to speak to you of Penruddie," said Mr. Thaxton.

Violet repressed a shudder, and closed her eyes for a moment.

The three watchers knew that she was putting up a prayer for strength.

"You have come to tell me that you have discovered something in connection with that terrible, cruel time. Have you found the—the——" [308]

"We have found the man who was guilty of that crime," said Mr. Thaxton.

Violet shuddered, but sighed.

"It is dreadful," she said, faintly. "And I had hoped—forgive me——"

"Speak plainly on your part," said the lawyer.

"I had hoped that you might have found some trace of him who was wrongfully, cruelly accused of that crime. The noble soul whom I loved and helped to slay!"

And she clasped her hands.

"I have found more than that," said Mr. Thaxton.

Violet rose with wild eyes.

"Tell me!" she cried. "You have found him?"

"Hush!" said Mr. Thaxton. "You promised to be strong!"

Violet sank back and covered her face with her hands.

Mr. Thaxton bent over to her and took her hand.

"A great part of my task is done," he said. "I come to prepare you for a great and terrible trial, perhaps of sorrow, perhaps of joy. Tell me, are you strong enough to bear it? Are you strong enough to see the guilty punished, though that guilty were one whom you held dear? Are you strong enough to witness what in your eyes, unprepared, might seem a miracle? Are you strong enough for a great and fearful, a sudden and tremendous joy?"

There was a moment's pause.

"I am!" said Violet, and once more she looked up with her deep, beautiful eyes.

"Then," said Mr. Thaxton, pulling out his watch, "your trial is near at hand. To-night and within ten minutes you expect Mr. and Mrs. Dodson and Mr. Howard Murpoint?"

Violet inclined her head.

"You may also expect Mr. and Mrs. Lennox Fairfax."

"Bertie and Ethel?" said Violet.

Mr. Thaxton nodded.

"They have returned at my wish and suddenly," he said.

At that moment there was a loud knock at the door.

"There are some of the guests," he said, rising. "My friend and I will conceal ourselves behind that curtained recess. You trust all to me; and you promise to be strong?" [309]

"I trust all to you, and I will be strong!" said Violet.

The two men quickly drew the curtain aside and concealed themselves in the recess.

Scarcely had they done so when Howard Murpoint and the Dodsons entered.

He came up to Violet and kissed her hand with his subtle courtliness and murmured some soft greeting, then, as he shook hands with Mrs. Mildmay, he said:

"I met our dear friends and managed that we should all come together."

Mrs. Mildmay was about to touch the bell, when at a gesture from Violet she paused and said:

"Shall we have a cup of tea by moonlight? See, it is rising rapidly."

"Delightful!" said the captain. "A charming idea. I can unfold our delicious plans in a congenial light. My dear Violet, I think I have sketched out a really agreeable tour. We shall run through Italy, see everything of any importance, and then come back by——"

At that moment, and as he rose to cross over to Violet, who sat pale and silent, nerving herself for she knew not what catastrophe, the curtain drew aside and Mr. Dockett stepped out.

Howard Murpoint turned, with his teacup in his hand, and frowned. The sudden entrance had startled him.

Mr. Dockett came across the room softly and, with a slight bow to the rest, touched the captain on the shoulder.

"Captain Howard Murpoint, I arrest you upon a charge of conspiracy."

The captain turned pale for a moment, then looked round with a rather displeased laugh.

"Is this a piece of premeditated fun?" he said. "If so, don't let me spoil it. What shall I say? Make a confession?"

"Ay, make a confession," said Mr. Dockett. "Here's a man who will help you."

And as he said the words Mr. Giles stepped from behind the curtain.

"Don't move, please," said Mr. Dockett to the company in general and to the captain in particular. "There are half a dozen men downstairs, and every outlet from the house is watched. Now, Mr. Giles, what do you know of the charge?" [310]

"I hold a warrant here," said Mr. Giles, "for the arrest of Captain Howard Murpoint on several charges, involving conspiracy and forgery. It is no use, captain, the game has been a good one, but it is up. To-morrow the bubble will burst, and all your little dodges will be known. To-morrow the city would tear you to pieces if they had you——"

"Stop!" said the consummate villain. "Something has gone wrong in the city, no doubt. There is some mistake, my good fellow. You only do your duty, no doubt. I had better come with you, I suppose? Is that all?"

"No," said Mr. Dockett, "not all—not nearly, Captain Murpoint. There is a charge of forging a codicil to the will of the late John Mildmay, whereby you having fraudulently gained the guardianship of Miss Mildmay and possession of the estate and the moneys of the same."

The captain's face twitched and worked, and he sank into a seat.

"Let us hear this farce through," he said. "I know who is at the bottom of it. Forgery indeed! Because Lord Lackland is beggared and ruined and I have helped him toward it he must trump up this ridiculous charge. It is preposterous! My dear Violet——"

He was about to continue, but Violet rose and shrank toward the curtain, and Mr. Dockett stepped in between her and the scoundrel.

"You cannot believe this—this idiot!" he exclaimed.

"Silence!" said Mr. Dockett. "I put a question to you, Captain Murpoint. Will you give in, and make a clear confession of all, or shall I carry the matter through? For, mark me, this young lady shall know all, whether I tell her or you do!"

"Tell her what you like!" said the captain, pleasantly. "I have nothing to confess! Now, what is the next charge?"

"The murder of James Starling, whom you are accused of stabbing and throwing over the cliff at Penruddie!"

The captain rose, white and desperate. [311]

"You cannot prove it!" he said. "Where is your witness?"

"Here," said Mr. Dockett, and he beckoned toward the recess.

Out stepped Job, very pale, but very determined.

"I am a witness, captain," he said. "I see you in the master's room, and I see you going up the cliffs. It's all over, captain, for Jamie Sanderson found the knife—your knife—and this gentleman has got it clear and straight."

"It's a false, vile, concocted plot!" hissed the captain. "James Starling died by the hand of Leicester Dodson! I saw him do it! If he didn't do the murder, where is he? Why doesn't he come back like a man and prove his innocence? Not he! He's snug away somewhere, and he doesn't come back!"

"He does, and he is here!" said a voice, and the curtain was swept away by a strong hand—Leicester's own—as he stepped into the room and caught Violet in his arms.

"Leicester!" she cried, with a voice, whose tones baffle all description. "Leicester! I have been asleep—dreaming. Oh, horrible dreams! Wake me, Leicester, my darling, wake me!"

There was a rush and confusion as she fainted. The door opened, and Ethel and Bertie ran in.

Then there was such a handshaking and kissing, and such terrible excitement, that for the moment the cause of all the terrible crimes and trouble was forgotten.

He saw the moment, and slipped something small and composed of glass from his pocket.

Scarcely had he done so when Mr. Dockett and Giles had seized his arms.

He struggled for a moment, then, as the group round Leicester and Violet, sobbing and crying and laughing and talking, turned to confront him, he suddenly stood still, and the old daring smile flitted across his livid face.

"You are mad, all of you!" he said. "You think because your idiot is back and the secret is out that you have done for me forever. But you are wrong. I know something of law. I am rich, and I will [312] set you at defiance! You talk of robberies, of smuggling, of forgery, of murder! Bah! where is the motive for it all? Convict me of forgery upon the evidence of one man? You cannot! Convict me of murder upon such evidence as you hold? Impossible! I laugh at you! I am Captain Howard Murpoint, a respectable officer in her majesty's service! Why should I kill my servant, James Starling? Beware! Lay me by the heels, and I can and will give evidence sufficiently strong to hang that idiot!"

And he pointed to Leicester, from whom all sense but that of gratitude for the possession of his darling seemed to have passed.

"I can hang him, and I will, for I dare you to show why I should murder my servant, James Starling!"

At that moment the door opened and a short, little man in a costermonger's cap entered.

It was Stumpy.

Very quickly he pushed his way through the throng until he was close beside the captain, then he grasped his arm suddenly, and, ripping up the sleeve with a knife, pointed with a grin to a red mark.

The thing had been done so suddenly that the detectives even were taken by surprise.

But the captain understood it, and his face underwent a fearful change.

"Who are you?" he breathed, hoarsely.

Then, as he recognized his companion in crime, he shrieked:

"Hold him! hold him! He's an escaped convict! I know him! I can swear to him! I've worked in the same gang! Hah! hah! I've tricked you all at last!"

And, as Mr. Dockett suddenly released his arm, he dashed something in his mouth and fell upon the floor.

There was a slight noise of breaking glass, the blood trickled from some small cuts at his lips, then a cry arose from Mr. Dockett, who had knelt beside him and was staring at his arm.

"It's the general! Stumpy was right! Here's the mark upon his arm! No. 108! He's done us after all! Stand back! Give him air! Ah! he's dead—poisoned!"

And as he spoke he wiped the remains of the broken phial from the bleeding lips. [313]

Winter has passed and summer has come again.

Winter has passed and taken with it forever and ever the last traces of that wicked spirit which plotted so much harm for Violet Mildmay and worked so much for those she loved.

All the winter through, each week, each month, justice, which will have nothing hidden or put away, went through the deeds of that dark life and made things clear.

The world soon learned how deeply it had been deceived, soon learned that Leicester Dodson was a martyr to circumstances, and that he almost deserved the reward which Violet, beautiful Violet, was going to bestow on him. Almost, we say, for no one could quite deserve that sweet boon, for that boon was herself. It soon found that the great man whom the world had delighted to honor had delighted to swindle it! That he was a murderer, rogue, a forger, and the plunderer of widows and orphans. For months curses followed him to that bourne whence none return, and Mr. Dockett has often been heard to regret that he did not stop the villain's hand when it carried the phial to his lips.

"I knew what he was going to do," Mr. Dockett would say, with a sigh; "and I thought I'd let him, because, you see, it was much quieter than having him hung! But I didn't know it was the general until Stumpy ran in and ripped up his sleeve. When I saw the 108 stamped on his arm it quite gave me a turn. For there was a reward of five hundred pounds, to say nothing of the honor of catching an 'escaped,' who was thought to be at the bottom of the sea. However, I'm very well satisfied, for Mr. Leicester's a perfect gentleman, and as for the young lady, all I say is may Heaven bless her and make her happy."

Mr. Dockett is often asked how much he pocketed by the affair, but he always declines to state. He says he does not wish to make the rest of his professional brethren dissatisfied and envious.

The winter brought trouble down to Penruddie, for the smuggling secret was out, and many a [314] fisherman had to fly.

Job stayed and gave evidence on the inquest of the captain, but Leicester paid the fine which was inflicted, and Job is comfortable and happy.

One by one his old companions are creeping back, and, strange to say, the coastguards don't recognize them. Stumpy has turned queen's evidence and obtained a pardon, and is to be found the heart and soul of the "Blue Lion", which is still in the hands of Martha, who has abandoned smuggling and finds her temper is much improved.

Polly is Mrs. Willie Sanderson, and keeps her husband in very good order.

So Penruddie is very much as it was, and the Cedars and the Park are being done up. Some one is expected to occupy them, but at present the somebodies are elsewhere.

For it is now summer, and the evening sun is turning the rippled sea to gold.

A yacht comes dancing across the golden light into the sunset.

It is a very beautiful little vessel, and, light-hearted, from its deck come ever and anon ripples of laughter that rival the ripples of the sea.

Let us hover, like Puck, upon the sail, and look down.

There, on the deck, is a little party.

First Mr. and Mrs. Dodson and Mrs. Mildmay and Mr. Thaxton, seated in comfortable armchairs conveniently near a small table, upon which stand champagne and fruit.

Scattered near them on rugs and furs are some more friends.

It is from them that the laughter most heartily proceeds; near them are Violet and Leicester, she seated, and leaning against the mast, he lying full length and cutting the portrait of Mr. Thaxton out of orange peel.

Near him recline Bertie and Ethel—Bertie puffing a cigar with mild enjoyment, and Ethel teasing him with the end of a rope.

Swinging in a hammock up above their heads is Fitz, looking as happy as the day is long, and not at all the disappointed man. He loves Violet still, and she calls him Fitz; but it is a brotherly [315] affection between them, and Fitz is satisfied. He will never marry, he says, but he insists upon it that if there should ever be any children round Violet's knee, that they should call him "Uncle."

Near them sits Jamie Sanderson—near, but far away, for he has a book in his hand, and he is in dreamland. He will never leave Leicester while they both live.

Mr. Thaxton, smoking his cigar, drops comfortably off to sleep, lulled by the heat and the soft laughter.

The other elderly parties are about to follow his example, when Fitz sings out:

"Pass that champagne up, will you, ladies and gentlemen? Because I'm up here, it doesn't follow that I'm above the weaknesses of other mortals. George! How happy I am! You all of you look that way inclined; and so you ought to be. Ladies and gentlemen, if there's any one of you unhappy on this happy vessel, you shouldn't be here; it isn't the place for you, and, by George! if you'll have the honesty to admit it, I'll pitch you overboard."

There is no answer, save a peal of laughter—and a piece of orange peel, thrown by Leicester, and alighting on Fitz's nose—and as that must mean that they are perfectly happy there and now we will leave them.

Long may they glide through life as they glide now, this summer's eve, doing good, loving much,

and trusting to the beneficence of that Heaven whence all happiness and good things flow!

THE END.

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