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## CHAPTER VII.

### THE RAPE OF THE MATTRESS.

That Mr. Grabman slept calmly that night is probable enough, for his gin-bottle was empty the next morning; and it was with eyes more than usually heavy that he dozily followed the movements of Beck, who, according to custom, opened the shutters of the little den adjoining his sitting-room, brushed his clothes, made his fire, set on the kettle to boil, and laid his breakfast things, preparatory to his own departure to the duties of the day. Stretching himself, however, and shaking off slumber, as the remembrance of the enterprise he had undertaken glanced pleasantly across him, Grabman sat up in his bed and said, in a voice that, if not maudlin, was affectionate, and if not affectionate, was maudlin,—

"Beck, you are a good fellow. You have faults, you are human,—humanism est errare; which means that you some times scorch my muffins. But, take you all in all, you are a kind creature. Beck, I am going into the country for some days. I shall leave my key in the hole in the wall,— you know; take care of it when you come in. You were out late last night, my poor fellow. Very wrong! Look well to yourself, or who knows? You may be clutched by that blackguard resurrection-man, No. 7. Well, well, to think of that Jason's foolhardiness! But he's the worse devil of the two. Eh! what was I saying? And always give a look into my room every night before you go to roost. The place swarms with cracksmen, and one can't be too cautious. Lucky dog, you, to have nothing to be robbed of!"

Beck winced at that last remark. Grabman did not seem to notice his confusion, and proceeded, as he put on his stockings: "And, Beck, you are a good fellow, and have served me faithfully; when I come back, I will bring you something handsome,—a backey-box or—who knows?—a beautiful silver watch. Meanwhile, I think—let me see—yes, I can give you this elegant pair of small-clothes. Put out my best,—the black ones. And now, Beck, I'll not keep you any longer."

The poor sweep, with many pulls at his forelock, acknowledged the munificent donation; and having finished all his preparations, hastened first to his room, to examine at leisure, and with great admiration, the drab small-clothes. "Room," indeed, we can scarcely style the wretched enclosure

which Beck called his own. It was at the top of the house, under the roof, and hot—oh, so hot—in the summer! It had one small begrimed window, through which the light of heaven never came, for the parapet, beneath which ran the choked gutter, prevented that; but the rain and the wind came in. So sometimes, through four glassless frames, came a fugitive tom-cat. As for the rats, they held the place as their own. Accustomed to Beck, they cared nothing for him.

They were the Mayors of that Palace; he only le roi faineant. They ran over his bed at night; he often felt them on his face, and was convinced they would have eaten him, if there had been anything worth eating upon his bones; still, perhaps out of precaution rather than charity, he generally left them a potato or two, or a crust of bread, to take off the edge of their appetites. But Beck was far better off than most who occupied the various settlements in that Alsatia,—he had his room to himself. That was necessary to his sole luxury,—the inspection of his treasury, the safety of his mattress; for it he paid, without grumbling, what he thought was a very high rent. To this hole in the roof there was no lock,—for a very good reason, there was no door to it. You went up a ladder, as you would go into a loft. Now, it had often been matter of much intense cogitation to Beck whether or not he should have a door to his chamber; and the result of the cogitation was invariably the same,— he dared not! What should he want with a door,—a door with a lock to it? For one followed as a consequence to the other. Such a novel piece of grandeur would be an ostentatious advertisement that he had something to guard. He could have no pretence for it on the ground that he was intruded on by neighbours; no step but his own was ever caught by him ascending that ladder; it led to no other room. All the offices required for the lodgment he performed himself. His supposed poverty was a better safeguard than doors of iron. Besides this, a door, if dangerous, would be superfluous; the moment it was suspected that Beck had something worth guarding, that moment all the picklocks and skeleton keys in the neighbourhood would be in a jingle. And a cracksman of high repute lodged already on the ground-floor. So Beck's treasure, like the bird's nest, was deposited as much out of sight as his instinct could contrive; and the locks and bolts of civilized men were equally dispensed with by bird and Beck.

On a rusty nail the sweep suspended the drab small-clothes, stroked them down lovingly, and murmured, "They be 's too good for I; I should like to pop 'em! But would n't that be a shame? Beck, be n't you be a hungrateful beast to go for to think of nothin' but the tin, ven your 'art ought to varm with hemotion? I vill veer 'em ven I vaits on him. Ven he sees his own smalls bringing in the muffins, he will say, 'Beck, you becomes 'em!'"

Fraught with this noble resolution, the sweep caught up his broom, crept down the ladder, and with a furtive glance at the door of the room in which the cracksman lived, let himself out and shambled his way to his crossing. Grabman, in the mean while, dressed himself with more care than usual, shaved his beard from a four days' crop, and while seated at his breakfast, read attentively over the notes which Varney had left to him, pausing at times to make his own pencil memoranda. He then packed up such few articles as so moderate a worshipper of the Graces might require, deposited them in an old blue brief-bag, and this done, he opened his door, and creeping to the threshold, listened carefully. Below, a few sounds might be heard,—here, the wail of a child; there, the shrill scold of a woman in that accent above all others adapted to scold,—the Irish. Farther down still, the deep bass oath of the choleric resurrection-man; but above, all was silent. Only one floor intervened between Grabman's apartment and the ladder that led to Beck's loft. And the inmates of that room gave no sound of life. Grabman took courage, and shuffling off his shoes, ascended the stairs; he passed the closed door of the room above; he seized the ladder with a shaking hand; he mounted, step after step; he stood in Beck's room.

Now, O Nicholas Grabman! some moralists may be harsh enough to condemn thee for what thou art doing,—kneeling yonder in the dim light, by that curtainless pallet, with greedy fingers feeling here and there, and a placid, self-hugging smile upon thy pale lips. That poor vagabond whom thou art about to despoil has served thee well and faithfully, has borne with thine ill-humours, thy sarcasms, thy swearings, thy kicks, and buffets; often, when in the bestial sleep of drunkenness he has found thee stretched helpless on thy floor, with a kindly hand he has moved away the sharp fender, too near that knavish head, now bent on his ruin, or closed the open window, lest the keen air, that thy breath tainted, should visit thee with rheum and fever. Small has been his guerdon for uncomplaining sacrifice of the few hours spared to this weary drudge from his daily toil,—small, but gratefully received. And if Beck had been taught to pray, he would have prayed for thee as for a good man, O miserable sinner! And thou art going now, Nicholas Grabman, upon an enterprise which promises thee large gains, and thy purse is filled; and thou wantest nothing for thy wants or thy swinish luxuries. Why should those shaking fingers itch for the poor beggar-man's hoards?

But hadst thou been bound on an errand that would have given thee a million, thou wouldst not have left unrifled that secret store which thy prying eye had discovered, and thy hungry heart had coveted. No; since one night,—fatal, alas! to the owner of loft and treasure, when, needing Beck for some service, and fearing to call aloud (for the resurrection- man in the floor below thee, whose oaths even

now ascend to thine ear, sleeps ill, and has threatened to make thee mute forever if thou disturbest him in the few nights in which his dismal calling suffers him to sleep at all), thou didst creep up the ladder, and didst see the unconscious miser at his nightly work, and after the sight didst steal down again, smiling,—no; since that night, no schoolboy ever more rootedly and ruthlessly set his mind upon nest of linnet than thine was set upon the stores in Beck's mattress.

And yet why, O lawyer, should rigid moralists blame thee more than such of thy tribe as live, honoured and respectable, upon the frail and the poor? Who among them ever left loft or mattress while a rap could be wrung from either? Matters it to Astraea whether the spoliation be made thus nakedly and briefly, or by all the acknowledged forms in which, item on item, six-and-eightpence on six-and-eightpence, the inexorable hand closes at length on the last farthing of duped despair? Not—Heaven forbid!—that we make thee, foul Nicholas Grabman, a type for all the class called attorneys-at-law! Noble hearts, liberal minds, are there amongst that brotherhood, we know and have experienced; but a type art thou of those whom want and error and need have proved—alas! too well—the lawyers of the poor. And even while we write, and even while ye read, many a Grabman steals from helpless toil the savings of a life.

Ye poor hoards,—darling delights of your otherwise joyless owner,—how easily has his very fondness made ye the prey of the spoiler! How gleefully, when the pence swelled into a shilling, have they been exchanged into the new bright piece of silver, the newest and brightest that could be got; then the shillings into crowns, then the crowns into gold,—got slyly and at a distance, and contemplated with what rapture; so that at last the total lay manageable and light in its radiant compass. And what a total! what a surprise to Grabman! Had it been but a sixpence, he would have taken it; but to grasp sovereigns by the handful, it was too much for him; and as he rose, he positively laughed, from a sense of fun.

But amongst his booty there was found one thing that specially moved his mirth: it was a child's coral, with its little bells. Who could have given Beck such a bauble, or how Beck could have refrained from turning it into money, would have been a fit matter for speculation. But it was not that at which Grabman chuckled; he laughed, first because it was an emblem of the utter childishness and folly of the creature he was leaving penniless, and secondly, because it furnished his ready wit with a capital contrivance to shift Beck's indignation from his own shoulders to a party more liable to suspicion. He left the coral on the floor near the bed, stole down the ladder, reached his own room, took up his brief-bag, locked his door, slipped the key in the rat-hole, where the trusty, plundered Beck alone could find it, and went boldly downstairs; passing successively the doors within which still stormed the resurrection-man, still wailed the child, still shrieked the Irish shrew, he paused at the ground-floor occupied by Bill the cracksman and his long-fingered, slender, quick-eyed imps, trained already to pass through broken window-panes, on their precocious progress to the hulks.

The door was open, and gave a pleasant sight of the worthy family within. Bill himself, a stout-looking fellow with a florid, jolly countenance, and a pipe in his mouth, was sitting at his window, with his brawny legs lolling on a table covered with the remains of a very tolerable breakfast. Four small Bills were employed in certain sports which, no doubt, according to the fashionable mode of education, instilled useful lessons under the artful guise of playful amusement. Against the wall, at one corner of the room, was affixed a row of bells, from which were suspended exceedingly tempting apples by slender wires. Two of the boys were engaged in the innocent entertainment of extricating the apples without occasioning any alarm from the bells; a third was amusing himself at a table, covered with mock rings and trinkets, in a way that seemed really surprising; with the end of a finger, dipped probably in some glutinous matter, he just touched one of the gewgaws, and lo, it vanished!—vanished so magically that the quickest eye could scarcely trace whither; sometimes up a cuff, sometimes into a shoe,—here, there, anywhere, except back again upon the table. The fourth, an urchin apparently about five years old,—he might be much younger, judging from his stunted size; somewhat older, judging from the vicious acuteness of his face,—on the floor under his father's chair, was diving his little hand into the paternal pockets in search for a marble sportively hidden in those capacious recesses. On the rising geniuses around him Bill the cracksman looked, and his father's heart was proud. Pausing at the threshold, Grabman looked in and said cheerfully, "Good-day to you; good-day to you all, my little dears."

"Ah, Grabman," said Bill, rising, and making a bow,—for Bill valued himself much on his politeness,—"come to blow a cloud, eh? Bob," this to the eldest born, "manners, sir; wipe your nose, and set a chair for the gent."

"Many thanks to you, Bill, but I can't stay now; I have a long journey to take. But, bless my soul, how stupid I am! I have forgotten my clothes-brush. I knew there was some thing on my mind all the way I was coming downstairs. I was saying, 'Grabman, there is something forgotten!'"

"I know what that 'ere feelin' is," said Bill, thoughtfully; "I had it myself the night afore last; and sure enough, when I got to the ——. But that's neither here nor there. Bob, run upstairs and fetch down Mr. Grabman's clothes-brush. 'T is the least you can do for a gent who saved your father from the fate of them 'ere innocent apples. Your fist, Grabman. I have a heart in my buzzom; cut me open, and you will find there `Halibi, and Grabman!' Give Bob your key."

"The brush is not in my room," answered Grabman; "it is at the top of the house, up the ladder, in Beck's loft,—Beck, the sweeper. The stupid dog always keeps it there, and forgot to give it me. Sorry to occasion my friend Bob so much trouble."

"Bob has a soul above trouble; his father's heart beats in his buzzom. Bob, track the dancers. Up like a lark, and down like a dump."

Bob grinned, made a mow at Mr. Grabman, and scampered up the stairs.

"You never attends our free-and-easy," said Bill; "but we toasts you with three times three, and up standing. "'T is a hungrateful world! But some men has a heart; and to those who has a heart, Grabman is a trump!"

"I am sure, whenever I can do you a service, you may reckon on me. Meanwhile, if you could get that cursed bullying fellow who lives under me to be a little more civil, you would oblige me."

"Under you? No. 7? No. 7, is it? Grabman, h-am I a man? Is this a h- arm, and this a bunch of fives? I dares do all that does become a man; but No. 7 is a body-snatcher! No. 7 has bullied me, and I bore it! No. 7 might whop me, and this h-arm would let him whop! He lives with graves and churchyards and stiff 'uns, that damnable No. 7! Ask some'at else, Grabman. I dares not touch No. 7 any more than the ghostesses."

Grabman sneered as he saw that Bill, stout rogue as he was, turned pale while he spoke; but at that moment Bob reappeared with the clothes-brush, which the ex-attorney thrust into his pocket, and shaking Bill by the hand, and patting Bob on the head, he set out on his journey.

Bill reseated himself, muttering, "Bully a body-snatcher! Drot that Grabman, does he want to get rid of poor Bill?"

Meanwhile Bob exhibited slyly, to his second brother, the sight of Beck's stolen coral. The children took care not to show it to their father. They were already inspired by the laudable ambition to set up in business on their own account.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### PERCIVAL VISITS LUCRETIA.

Having once ascertained the house in which Helen lived, it was no difficult matter for St. John to learn the name of the guardian whom Beck had supposed to be her mother. No common delight mingled with Percival's amaze when in that name he recognized one borne by his own kinswoman. Very little indeed of the family history was known to him. Neither his father nor his mother ever willingly conversed of the fallen heiress,—it was a subject which the children had felt to be proscribed; but in the neighbourhood, Percival had of course heard some mention of Lucretia as the haughty and accomplished Miss Clavering, who had, to the astonishment of all, stooped to a mesalliance with her uncle's French librarian. That her loss of the St. John property, the succession of Percival's father, were unexpected by the villagers and squires around, and perhaps set down to the caprice of Sir Miles, or to an intellect impaired by apoplectic attacks, it was not likely that he should have heard. The rich have the polish of their education, and the poor that instinctive tact, so wonderful amongst the agricultural peasantry, to prevent such unmannerly disclosures or unwelcome hints; and both by rich and poor, the Vernon St. Johns were too popular and respected for wanton allusions to subjects calculated to pain them. All, therefore, that Percival knew of his relation was that she had resided from infancy with Sir Miles; that after their uncle's death she had married an inferior in rank, of the name of Dalibard, and settled abroad; that she was a person of peculiar manners, and, he had heard somewhere, of rare gifts. He had been unable to learn the name of the young lady staying with Madame Dalibard; he had learned only that she went by some other name, and was not the daughter of the lady who rented the house. Certainly it was possible that this last might not be his kinswoman, after all. The name, though strange

to English ears, and not common in France, was no sufficient warrant for Percival's high spirits at the thought that he had now won legitimate and regular access to the house; still, it allowed him to call, it furnished a fair excuse for a visit.

How long he was at his toilet that day, poor boy! How sedulously, with comb and brush, he sought to smooth into straight precision that luxuriant labyrinth of jetty curls, which had never cost him a thought before! Gil Blas says that the toilet is a pleasure to the young, though a labour to the old; Percival St. John's toilet was no pleasure to him that anxious morning.

At last he tore himself, dissatisfied and desperate, from the glass, caught his hat and his whip, threw himself on his horse, and rode, at first very fast, and at last very slowly, to the old, decayed, shabby, neglected house that lay hid, like the poverty of fallen pride, amidst the trim villas and smart cottages of fair and flourishing Brompton.

The same servant who had opened the gate to Ardworth appeared to his summons, and after eying him for some moments with a listless, stupid stare, said: "You'll be after some mistake!" and turned away.

"Stop, stop!" cried Percival, trying to intrude himself through the gate; but the servant blocked up the entrance sturdily. "It is no mistake at all, my good lady. I have come to see Madame Dalibard, my—my relation!"

"Your relation!" and again the woman stared at Percival with a look through the dull vacancy of which some distrust was dimly perceptible. "Bide a bit there, and give us your name."

Percival gave his card to the servant with his sweetest and most persuasive smile. She took it with one hand, and with the other turned the key in the gate, leaving Percival outside. It was five minutes before she returned; and she then, with the same prim, smileless expression of countenance, opened the gate and motioned him to follow.

The kind-hearted boy sighed as he cast a glance at the desolate and poverty-stricken appearance of the house, and thought within himself: "Ah, pray Heaven she may be my relation; and then I shall have the right to find her and that sweet girl a very different home!" The old woman threw open the drawing-room door, and Percival was in the presence of his deadliest foe! The armchair was turned towards the entrance, and from amidst the coverings that hid the form, the remarkable countenance of Madame Dalibard emerged, sharp and earnest, directly fronting the intruder.

"So," she said slowly, and, as it were, devouring him with her keen, steadfast eyes,—"so you are Percival St. John! Welcome! I did not know that we should ever meet. I have not sought you, you seek me! Strange—yes, strange—that the young and the rich should seek the suffering and the poor!"

Surprised and embarrassed by this singular greeting, Percival halted abruptly in the middle of the room; and there was something inexpressibly winning in his shy, yet graceful confusion. It seemed, with silent eloquence, to apologize and to deprecate. And when, in his silvery voice, scarcely yet tuned to the fulness of manhood, he said feelingly, "Forgive me, madam, but my mother is not in England," the excuse evinced such delicacy of idea, so exquisite a sense of high breeding, that the calm assurance of worldly ease could not have more attested the chivalry of the native gentleman.

"I have nothing to forgive, Mr. St. John," said Lucretia, with a softened manner. "Pardon me rather that my infirmities do not allow me to rise to receive you. This seat,—here,—next to me. You have a strong likeness to your father."

Percival received this last remark as a compliment, and bowed. Then, as he lifted his ingenuous brow, he took for the first time a steady view of his new-found relation. The peculiarities of Lucretia's countenance in youth had naturally deepened with middle age. The contour, always too sharp and pronounced, was now strong and bony as a man's; the line between the eyebrows was hollowed into a furrow. The eye retained its old uneasy, sinister, sidelong glance, or at rare moments (as when Percival entered), its searching penetration and assured command; but the eyelids themselves, red and injected, as with grief or vigil, gave something haggard and wild, whether to glance or gaze. Despite the paralysis of the frame, the face, though pale and thin, showed no bodily decay. A vigour surpassing the strength of woman might still be seen in the play of the bold muscles, the firmness of the contracted lips. What physicians call "vitality," and trace at once (if experienced) on the physiognomy as the prognostic of long life, undulated restlessly in every aspect of the face, every movement of those thin, nervous hands, which, contrasting the rest of that motionless form, never seemed to be at rest. The teeth were still white and regular, as in youth; and when they shone out in speaking, gave a strange, unnatural freshness to a face otherwise so worn.

As Percival gazed, and, while gazing, saw those wandering eyes bent down, and yet felt they watched

him, a thrill almost of fear shot through his heart. Nevertheless, so much more impressionable was he to charitable and trustful than to suspicious and timid emotions that when Madame Dalibard, suddenly looking up and shaking her head gently, said, "You see but a sad wreck, young kinsman," all those instincts, which Nature itself seemed to dictate for self-preservation, vanished into heavenly tenderness and pity.

"Ah!" he said, rising, and pressing one of those deadly hands in both his own, while tears rose to his eyes,— "Ah! since you call me kinsman, I have all a kinsman's privileges. You must have the best advice, the most skilful surgeons. Oh, you will recover; you must not despond."

Lucretia's lips moved uneasily. This kindness took her by surprise. She turned desperately away from the human gleam that shot across the sevenfold gloom of her soul. "Do not think of me," she said, with a forced smile; "it is my peculiarity not to like allusion to myself, though this time I provoked it. Speak to me of the old cedar-trees at Laughton,—do they stand still? You are the master of Laughton now! It is a noble heritage!"

Then St. John, thinking to please her, talked of the old manor-house, described the improvements made by his father, spoke gayly of those which he himself contemplated; and as he ran on, Lucretia's brow, a moment ruffled, grew smooth and smoother, and the gloom settled back upon her soul.

All at once she interrupted him. "How did you discover me? Was it through Mr. Varney? I bade him not mention me: yet how else could you learn?" As she spoke, there was an anxious trouble in her tone, which increased while she observed that St. John looked confused.

"Why," he began hesitatingly, and brushing his hat with his hand, "why— perhaps you may have heard from the—that is—I think there is a young ——. Ah, it is you, it is you! I see you once again!" And springing up, he was at the side of Helen, who at that instant had entered the room, and now, her eyes downcast, her cheeks blushing, her breast gently heaving, heard, but answered not that passionate burst of joy.

Startled, Madame Dalibard (her hands firmly grasping the sides of her chair) contemplated the two. She had heard nothing, guessed nothing of their former meeting. All that had passed before between them was unknown to her. Yet there was evidence unmistakable, conclusive: the son of her despoiler loved the daughter of her rival; and—if the virgin heart speaks by the outward sign—those downcast eyes, those blushing cheeks, that heaving breast, told that he did not love in vain!

Before her lurid and murderous gaze, as if to defy her, the two inheritors of a revenge unglutted by the grave stood, united mysteriously together. Up, from the vast ocean of her hate, rose that poor isle of love; there, unconscious of the horror around them, the victims found their footing! How beautiful at that hour their youth; their very ignorance of their own emotions; their innocent gladness; their sweet trouble! The fell gazer drew a long breath of fiendlike complacency and glee, and her hands opened wide, and then slowly closed, as if she felt them in her grasp.

## **CHAPTER IX.**

### **THE ROSE BENEATH THE UPAS.**

And from that day Percival had his privileged entry into Madame Dalibard's house. The little narrative of the circumstances connected with his first meeting with Helen, partly drawn from Percival, partly afterwards from Helen (with blushing and faltered excuses from the latter for not having mentioned before an incident that might, perhaps needlessly, vex or alarm her aunt in so delicate a state of health), was received by Lucretia with rare graciousness. The connection, not only between herself and Percival, but between Percival and Helen, was allowed and even dwelt upon by Madame Dalibard as a natural reason for permitting the artless intimacy which immediately sprang up between these young persons. She permitted Percival to call daily, to remain for hours, to share in their simple meals, to wander alone with Helen in the garden, assist her to bind up the ragged flowers, and sit by her in the old ivy-grown arbour when their work was done. She affected to look upon them both as children, and to leave to them that happy familiarity which childhood only sanctions, and compared to which the affection of maturer years seems at once coarse and cold.

As they grew more familiar, the differences and similarities in their characters came out, and nothing more delightful than the harmony into which even the contrasts blended ever invited the guardian

angel to pause and smile. As flowers in some trained parterre relieve each other, now softening, now heightening, each several hue, till all unite in one concord of interwoven beauty, so these two blooming natures, brought together, seemed, where varying still, to melt and fuse their affluences into one wealth of innocence and sweetness. Both had a native buoyancy and cheerfulness of spirit, a noble trustfulness in others, a singular candour and freshness of mind and feeling. But beneath the gayety of Helen there was a soft and holy under-stream of thoughtful melancholy, a high and religious sentiment, that vibrated more exquisitely to the subtle mysteries of creation, the solemn unison between the bright world without and the grave destinies of that world within (which is an imperishable soul), than the lighter and more vivid youthfulness of Percival had yet conceived. In him lay the germs of the active mortal who might win distinction in the bold career we run upon the surface of the earth. In her there was that finer and more spiritual essence which lifts the poet to the golden atmosphere of dreams, and reveals in glimpses to the saint the choral Populace of Heaven. We do not say that Helen would ever have found the utterance of the poet, that her reveries, undefined and unanalyzed, could have taken the sharp, clear form of words; for to the poet practically developed and made manifest to the world, many other gifts besides the mere poetic sense are needed,—stern study, and logical generalization of scattered truths, and patient observation of the characters of men, and the wisdom that comes from sorrow and passion, and a sage's experience of things actual, embracing the dark secrets of human infirmity and crime. But despite all that has been said in disparagement or disbelief of "mute, inglorious Miltons," we maintain that there are natures in which the divinest element of poetry exists, the purer and more delicate for escaping from bodily form and evaporating from the coarser vessels into which the poet, so called, must pour the ethereal fluid. There is a certain virtue within us, comprehending our subtlest and noblest emotions, which is poetry while untold, and grows pale and poor in proportion as we strain it into poems. Nay, it may be said of this airy property of our inmost being that, more or less, it departs from us according as we give it forth into the world, even, as only by the loss of its particles, the rose wastes its perfume on the air. So this more spiritual sensibility dwelt in Helen as the latent mesmerism in water, as the invisible fairy in an enchanted ring. It was an essence or divinity, shrined and shrouded in herself, which gave her more intimate and vital union with all the influences of the universe, a companion to her loneliness, an angel hymning low to her own listening soul. This made her enjoyment of Nature, in its merest trifles, exquisite and profound; this gave to her tenderness of heart all the delicious and sportive variety love borrows from imagination; this lifted her piety above the mere forms of conventional religion, and breathed into her prayers the ecstasy of the saint.

But Helen was not the less filled with the sweet humanities of her age and sex; her very gravity was tinged with rosy light, as a western cloud with the sun. She had sportiveness and caprice, and even whim, as the butterfly, though the emblem of the soul, still flutters wantonly over every wild-flower, and expands its glowing wings on the sides of the beaten road. And with a sense of weakness in the common world (growing out of her very strength in nobler atmospheres), she leaned the more trustfully on the strong arm of her young adorer, not fancying that the difference between them arose from superiority in her; but rather as a bird, once tamed, flies at the sight of the hawk to the breast of its owner, so from each airy flight into the loftier heaven, let but the thought of danger daunt her wing, and, as in a more powerful nature, she took refuge on that fostering heart.

The love between these children—for so, if not literally in years, in their newness to all that steals the freshness and the dew from maturer life they may be rightly called—was such as befitted those whose souls have not forfeited the Eden. It was more like the love of fairies than of human beings. They showed it to each other innocently and frankly; yet of love as we of the grosser creation call it, with its impatient pains and burning hopes, they never spoke nor dreamed. It was an unutterable, ecstatic fondness, a clinging to each other in thought, desire, and heart, a joy more than mortal in each other's presence; yet, in parting, not that idle and empty sorrow which unfits the weak for the homelier demands on time and life, and this because of the wondrous trust in themselves and in the future, which made a main part of their credulous, happy natures. Neither felt fear nor jealousy, or if jealousy came, it was the pretty, childlike jealousies which have no sting,—of the bird, if Helen listened to its note too long; of the flower, if Percival left Helen's side too quickly to tie up its drooping petals or refresh its dusty leaves. Close by the stir of the great city, with all its fret and chafe and storm of life, in the desolate garden of that sombre house, and under the withering eyes of relentless Crime, revived the Arcady of old,—the scene vocal to the reeds of idyllist and shepherd; and in the midst of the iron Tragedy, harmlessly and unconsciously arose the strain of the Pastoral Music.

It would be a vain effort to describe the state of Lucretia's mind while she watched the progress of the affection she had favoured, and gazed on the spectacle of the fearless happiness she had promoted. The image of a felicity at once so great and so holy wore to her gloomy sight the aspect of a mocking Fury. It rose in contrast to her own ghastly and crime-stained life; it did not upbraid her conscience with guilt so loudly as it scoffed at her intellect for folly. These children, playing on the verge of life, how much more of life's true secret did they already know than she, with all her vast native powers and wasted realms of blackened and charred experience! For what had she studied, and schemed, and

calculated, and toiled, and sinned? As a conqueror stricken unto death would render up all the regions vanquished by his sword for one drop of water to his burning lips, how gladly would she have given all the knowledge bought with blood and fire, to feel one moment as those children felt! Then, from out her silent and grim despair, stood forth, fierce and prominent, the great fiend, Revenge.

By a monomania not uncommon to those who have made self the centre of being, Lucretia referred to her own sullen history of wrong and passion all that bore analogy to it, however distant. She had never been enabled, without an intolerable pang of hate and envy, to contemplate courtship and love in others. From the rudest shape to the most refined, that master-passion in the existence, at least of woman,—reminding her of her own brief episode of human tenderness and devotion,—opened every wound and wrung every fibre of a heart that, while crime had indurated it to most emotions, memory still left morbidly sensitive to one. But if tortured by the sight of love in those who had had no connection with her fate, who stood apart from her lurid orbit and were gazed upon only afar (as a lost soul, from the abyss, sees the gleam of angels' wings within some planet it never has explored), how ineffably more fierce and intolerable was the wrath that seized her when, in her haunted imagination, she saw all Susan's rapture at the vows of Mainwaring mantling in Helen's face! All that might have disarmed a heart as hard, but less diseased, less preoccupied by revenge, only irritated more the consuming hate of that inexorable spirit. Helen's seraphic purity, her exquisite, overflowing kindness, ever forgetting self, her airy cheerfulness, even her very moods of melancholy, calm and seemingly causeless as they were, perpetually galled and blistered that writhing, preternatural susceptibility which is formed by the consciousness of infamy, the dreary egotism of one cut off from the charities of the world, with whom all mirth is sardonic convulsion, all sadness rayless and unresigned despair.

Of the two, Percival inspired her with feelings the most akin to humanity. For him, despite her bitter memories of his father, she felt something of compassion, and shrank from the touch of his frank hand in remorse. She had often need to whisper to herself that his life was an obstacle to the heritage of the son of whom, as we have seen, she was in search, and whom, indeed, she believed she had already found in John Ardworth; that it was not in wrath and in vengeance that this victim was to be swept into the grave, but as an indispensable sacrifice to a cherished object, a determined policy. As, in the studies of her youth, she had adopted the Machiavelism of ancient State-craft as a rule admissible in private life, so she seemed scarcely to admit as a crime that which was but the removal of a barrier between her aim and her end. Before she had become personally acquainted with Percival she had rejected all occasion to know him. She had suffered Varney to call upon him as the old protegee of Sir Miles, and to wind into his intimacy, meaning to leave to her accomplice, when the hour should arrive, the dread task of destruction. This not from cowardice, for Gabriel had once rightly described her when he said that if she lived with shadows she could quell them, but simply because, more intellectually unsparing than constitutionally cruel (save where the old vindictive memories thoroughly unsexed her), this was a victim whose pangs she desired not to witness, over whose fate it was no luxury to gloat and revel. She wished not to see nor to know him living, only to learn that he was no more, and that Helen alone stood between Laughton and her son. Now that he had himself, as if with predestined feet, crossed her threshold, that he, like Helen, had delivered himself into her toils, the hideous guilt, before removed from her hands, became haunting, fronted her face to face, and filled her with a superstitious awe.

Meanwhile, her outward manner to both her meditated victims, if moody and fitful at times, was not such as would have provoked suspicion even in less credulous hearts. From the first entry of Helen under her roof she had been formal and measured in her welcome,—kept her, as it were, aloof, and affected no prodigal superfluity of dissimulation; but she had never been positively harsh or unkind in word or in deed, and had coldly excused herself for the repulsiveness of her manner.

"I am irritable," she said, "from long suffering, I am unsocial from habitual solitude; do not expect from me the fondness and warmth that should belong to our relationship. Do not harass yourself with vain solicitude for one whom all seeming attention but reminds more painfully of infirmity, and who, even thus stricken down, would be independent of all cares not bought and paid for. Be satisfied to live here in all reasonable liberty, to follow your own habits and caprices uncontrolled. Regard me but as a piece of necessary furniture. You can never displease me but when you notice that I live and suffer."

If Helen wept bitterly at these hard words when first spoken, it was not with anger that her loving heart was so thrown back upon herself. On the contrary, she became inspired with a compassion so great that it took the character of reverence. She regarded this very coldness as a mournful dignity. She felt grateful that one who could thus dispense with, should yet have sought her. She had heard her mother say that she had been under great obligations to Lucretia; and now, when she was forbidden to repay them even by a kiss on those weary eyelids, a daughter's hand to that sleepless pillow; when she saw that the barrier first imposed was irremovable, that no time diminished the distance her aunt set between them, that the least approach to the tenderness of service beyond the most casual offices really seemed but to fret those excitable nerves, and fever the hand that she ventured timorously to



clasp,—she retreated into herself with a sad amaze that increased her pity and heightened her respect. To her, love seemed so necessary a thing in the helplessness of human life, even when blessed with health and youth, that this rejection of all love in one so bowed and crippled, struck her imagination as something sublime in its dreary grandeur and stoic pride of independence. She regarded it as of old a tender and pious nun would have regarded the asceticism of some sanctified recluse,—as Theresa (had she lived in the same age) might have regarded Saint Simeon Stylites existing aloft from human sympathy on the roofless summit of his column of stone; and with this feeling she sought to inspire Percival. He had the heart to enter into her compassion, but not the imagination to sympathize with her reverence. Even the repugnant awe that he had first conceived for Madame Dalibard, so bold was he by temperament, he had long since cast off; he recognized only the moroseness and petulance of an habitual invalid, and shook playfully his glossy curls when Helen, with her sweet seriousness, insisted on his recognizing more.

To this house few, indeed, were the visitors admitted. The Miverses, whom the benevolent officiousness of Mr. Fielden had originally sent thither to see their young kinswoman, now and then came to press Helen to join some party to the theatre or Vauxhall, or a picnic in Richmond Park; but when they found their overtures, which had at first been politely accepted by Madame Dalibard, were rejected, they gradually ceased their visits, wounded and indignant.

Certain it was that Lucretia had at one time eagerly caught at their well-meant civilities to Helen,—now she as abruptly declined them. Why? It would be hard to plumb into all the black secrets of that heart. It would have been but natural to her, who shrank from dooming Helen to no worse calamity than a virgin's grave, to have designed to throw her into such uncongenial guidance, amidst all the manifold temptations of the corrupt city,—to have suffered her to be seen and to be ensnared by those gallants ever on the watch for defenceless beauty; and to contrast with their elegance of mien and fatal flatteries the grossness of the companions selected for her, and the unloving discomfort of the home into which she had been thrown. But now that St. John had appeared, that Helen's heart and fancy were steeled alike against more dangerous temptation, the object to be obtained from the pressing courtesy of Mrs. Mivers existed no more. The vengeance flowed into other channels.

The only other visitors at the house were John Ardworth and Gabriel Varney.

Madame Dalibard watched vigilantly the countenance and manner of Ardworth when, after presenting him to Percival, she whispered: "I am glad you assured me as to your sentiments for Helen. She had found there the lover you wished for her,—'gay and handsome as herself.'"

And in the sudden paleness that overspread Ardworth's face, in his compressed lips and convulsive start, she read with unspeakable rage the untold secret of his heart, till the rage gave way to complacency at the thought that the last insult to her wrongs was spared her,—that her son (as son she believed he was) could not now, at least, be the successful suitor of her loathed sister's loathed child. Her discovery, perhaps, confirmed her in her countenance to Percival's progressive wooing, and half reconciled her to the pangs it inflicted on herself.

At the first introduction Ardworth had scarcely glanced at Percival. He regarded him but as the sleek flutterer in the sunshine of fortune. And for the idle, the gay, the fair, the well-dressed and wealthy, the sturdy workman of his own rough way felt something of the uncharitable disdain which the laborious have-nots too usually entertain for the prosperous haves. But the moment the unwelcome intelligence of Madame Dalibard was conveyed to him, the smooth-faced boy swelled into dignity and importance.

Yet it was not merely as a rival that that strong, manly heart, after the first natural agony, regarded Percival. No, he looked upon him less with anger than with interest,—as the one in whom Helen's happiness was henceforth to be invested. And to Madame Dalibard's astonishment,—for this nature was wholly new to her experience,—she saw him, even in that first interview, composing his rough face to smiles, smoothing his bluff, imperious accents into courtesy, listening patiently, watching benignly, and at last thrusting his large hand frankly forth, griping Percival's slender fingers in his own; and then, with an indistinct chuckle that seemed half laugh and half groan, as if he did not dare to trust himself further, he made his wonted unceremonious nod, and strode hurriedly from the room.

But he came again and again, almost daily, for about a fortnight. Sometimes, without entering the house, he would join the young people in the garden, assist them with awkward hands in their playful work on the garden, or sit with them in the ivied bower; and warming more and more each time he came, talk at last with the cordial frankness of an elder brother. There was no disguise in this; he began to love Percival,—what would seem more strange to the superficial, to admire him. Genius has a quick perception of the moral qualities; genius, which, differing thus from mere talent, is more allied to the heart than to the head, sympathizes genially with goodness. Ardworth respected that young, ingenuous, unpolluted mind; he himself felt better and purer in its atmosphere. Much of the affection

he cherished for Helen passed thus beautifully and nobly into his sentiments for the one whom Helen not unworthily preferred. And they grew so fond of him,—as the young and gentle ever will grow fond of genius, however rough, once admitted to its companionship!

Percival by this time had recalled to his mind where he had first seen that strong-featured, dark-browed countenance, and he gayly reminded Ardworth of his discourtesy, on the brow of the hill which commanded the view of London. That reminiscence made his new friend writhe; for then, amidst all his ambitious visions of the future, he had seen Helen in the distance,—the reward of every labour, the fairest star in his horizon. But he strove stoutly against the regret of the illusion lost; the *vivendi causae* were left him still, and for the nymph that had glided from his clasp, he clung at least to the laurel that was left in her place. In the folds of his robust fortitude Ardworth thus wrapped his secret. Neither of his young playmates suspected it. He would have disdained himself if he had so poisoned their pleasure. That he suffered when alone, much and bitterly, is not to be denied; but in that masculine and complete being, Love took but its legitimate rank amidst the passions and cares of man. It soured no existence, it broke no heart; the wind swept some blossoms from the bough, and tossed wildly the agitated branches from root to summit, but the trunk stood firm.

In some of these visits to Madame Dalibard's, Ardworth renewed with her the more private conversation which had so unsettled his past convictions as to his birth, and so disturbed the calm, strong currents of his mind. He was chiefly anxious to learn what conjectures Madame Dalibard had formed as to his parentage, and what ground there was for belief that he was near in blood to herself, or that he was born to a station less dependent on continuous exertion; but on these points the dark sibyl preserved an obstinate silence. She was satisfied with the hints she had already thrown out, and absolutely refused to say more till better authorized by the inquiries she had set on foot. Artfully she turned from these topics of closer and more household interest to those on which she had previously insisted, connected with the general knowledge of mankind, and the complicated science of practical life. To fire his genius, wing his energies, inflame his ambition above that slow, laborious drudgery to which he had linked the chances of his career, and which her fiery and rapid intellect was wholly unable to comprehend—save as a waste of life for uncertain and distant objects—became her task. And she saw with delight that Ardworth listened to her more assentingly than he had done at first. In truth, the pain shut within his heart, the conflict waged keenly between his reason and his passion, unfitted him for the time for mere mechanical employment, in which his genius could afford him no consolation. Now, genius is given to man, not only to enlighten others, but to comfort as well as to elevate himself. Thus, in all the sorrows of actual existence, the man is doubly inclined to turn to his genius for distraction. Harassed in this world of action, he knocks at the gate of that world of idea or fancy which he is privileged to enter; he escapes from the clay to the spirit. And rarely, till some great grief comes, does the man in whom the celestial fire is lodged know all the gift of which he is possessed. At last Ardworth's visits ceased abruptly. He shut himself up once more in his chambers; but the law books were laid aside.

Varney, who generally contrived to call when Ardworth was not there, seldom interrupted the lovers in their little paradise of the garden; but he took occasion to ripen and cement his intimacy with Percival. Sometimes he walked or (if St. John had his cabriolet) drove home and dined with him, *tete-a-tete*, in Curzon Street; and as he made Helen his chief subject of conversation, Percival could not but esteem him amongst the most agreeable of men. With Helen, when Percival was not there, Varney held some secret conferences,—secret even from Percival. Two or three times, before the hour in which Percival was accustomed to come, they had been out together; and Helen's face looked more cheerful than usual on their return. It was not surprising that Gabriel Varney, so displeasing to a man like Ardworth, should have won little less favour with Helen than with Percival; for, to say nothing of an ease and suavity of manner which stole into the confidence of those in whom to confide was a natural propensity, his various acquisitions and talents, imposing from the surface over which they spread, and the glitter which they made, had an inevitable effect upon a mind so susceptible as Helen's to admiration for art and respect for knowledge. But what chiefly conciliated her to Varney, whom she regarded, moreover, as her aunt's most intimate friend, was that she was persuaded he was unhappy, and wronged by the world of fortune. Varney had a habit of so representing himself,—of dwelling with a bitter eloquence, which his natural malignity made forcible, on the injustice of the world to superior intellect. He was a great accuser of Fate. It is the illogical weakness of some evil natures to lay all their crimes, and the consequences of crime, upon Destiny. There was a heat, a vigour, a rush of words, and a readiness of strong, if trite, imagery in what Varney said that deceived the young into the monstrous error that he was an enthusiast,—misanthropical, perhaps, but only so from enthusiasm. How could Helen, whose slightest thought, when a star broke forth from the cloud, or a bird sung suddenly from the copse, had more of wisdom and of poetry than all Varney's gaudy and painted seemings ever could even mimic,—how could she be so deceived? Yet so it was. Here stood a man whose youth she supposed had been devoted to refined and elevating pursuits, gifted, neglected, disappointed, solitary, and unhappy. She saw little beyond. You had but to touch her pity to win her interest and to excite her

trust. Of anything further, even had Percival never existed, she could not have dreamed. It was because a secret and undefinable repugnance, in the midst of pity, trust, and friendship, put Varney altogether out of the light of a possible lover, that all those sentiments were so easily kindled. This repugnance arose not from the disparity between their years; it was rather that nameless uncongeniality which does not forbid friendship, but is irreconcilable with love. To do Varney justice, he never offered to reconcile the two. Not for love did he secretly confer with Helen; not for love did his heart beat against the hand which reposed so carelessly on his murderous arm.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE RATTLE OF THE SNAKE.

The progress of affection between natures like those of Percival and Helen, favoured by free and constant intercourse, was naturally rapid. It was scarcely five weeks from the day he had first seen Helen, and he already regarded her as his plighted bride. During the earlier days of his courtship, Percival, enamoured and absorbed for the first time in his life, did not hasten to make his mother the confidante of his happiness. He had written but twice; and though he said briefly, in the second letter, that he had discovered two relations, both interesting and one charming, he had deferred naming them or entering into detail. This not alone from that indescribable coyness which all have experienced in addressing even those with whom they are most intimate, in the early, half-unrevealed, and mystic emotions of first love, but because Lady Diary's letters had been so full of her sister's declining health, of her own anxieties and fears, that he had shrunk from giving her a new subject of anxiety; and a confidence full of hope and joy seemed to him unfeeling and unseasonable. He knew how necessarily uneasy and restless an avowal that his heart was seriously engaged to one she had never seen, would make that tender mother, and that his confession would rather add to her cares than produce sympathy with his transports. But now, feeling impatient for his mother's assent to the formal proposals which had become due to Madame Dalibard and Helen, and taking advantage of the letter last received from her, which gave more cheering accounts of her sister, and expressed curiosity for further explanation as to his half disclosure, he wrote at length, and cleared his breast of all its secrets. It was the same day in which he wrote this confession and pleaded his cause that we accompany him to the house of his sweet mistress, and leave him by her side, in the accustomed garden. Within, Madame Dalibard, whose chair was set by the window, bent over certain letters, which she took, one by one, from her desk and read slowly, lifting her eyes from time to time and glancing towards the young people as they walked, hand in hand, round the small demesnes, now hid by the fading foliage, now emerging into view. Those letters were the early love-epistles of William Mainwaring. She had not recurred to them for years. Perhaps she now felt that food necessary to the sustainment of her fiendish designs. It was a strange spectacle to see this being, so full of vital energy, mobile and restless as a serpent, condemned to that helpless decrepitude, chained to the uneasy seat, not as in the resigned and passive imbecility of extreme age, but rather as one whom in the prime of life the rack has broken, leaving the limbs inert, the mind active, the form as one dead, the heart with superabundant vigour,—a cripple's impotence and a Titan's will! What, in that dreary imprisonment and amidst the silence she habitually preserved, passed through the caverns of that breast, one can no more conjecture than one can count the blasts that sweep and rage through the hollows of impenetrable rock, or the elements that conflict in the bosom of the volcano, everlastingly at work. She had read and replaced the letters, and leaning her cheek on her hand, was gazing vacantly on the wall, when Varney intruded on that dismal solitude.

He closed the door after him with more than usual care; and drawing a seat close to Lucretia, said, "Belle-mere, the time has arrived for you to act; my part is wellnigh closed."

"Ay," said Lucretia, wearily, "what is the news you bring?"

"First," replied Varney, and as he spoke, he shut the window, as if his whisper could possibly be heard without,—"first, all this business connected with Helen is at length arranged. You know when, agreeably to your permission, I first suggested to her, as it were casually, that you were so reduced in fortune that I trembled to regard your future; that you had years ago sacrificed nearly half your pecuniary resources to maintain her parents,—she of herself reminded me that she was entitled, when of age, to a sum far exceeding all her wants, and—"

"That I might be a pensioner on the child of William Mainwaring and Susan Mivers," interrupted Lucretia. "I know that, and thank her not. Pass on."

"And you know, too, that in the course of my conversation with the girl I let out also incidentally that, even so, you were dependent on the chances of her life; that if she died (and youth itself is mortal) before she was of age, the sum left her by her grandfather would revert to her father's family; and so, by hints, I drew her on to ask if there was no mode by which, in case of her death, she might insure subsistence to you. So that you see the whole scheme was made at her own prompting. I did but, as a man of business, suggest the means,—an insurance on her life."

"Varney, these details are hateful. I do not doubt that you have done all to forestall inquiry and elude risk. The girl has insured her life to the amount of her fortune?"

"To that amount only? Pooh! Her death will buy more than that. As no one single office will insure for more than 5,000 pounds, and as it was easy to persuade her that such offices were liable to failure, and that it was usual to insure in several, and for a larger amount than the sum desired, I got her to enter herself at three of the principal offices. The amount paid to us on her death will be 15,000 pounds. It will be paid (and here I have followed the best legal advice) in trust to me for your benefit. Hence, therefore, even if our researches fail us, if no son of yours can be found, with sufficient evidence to prove, against the keen interests and bought advocates of heirs-at-law, the right to Laughton, this girl will repay us well, will replace what I have taken, at the risk of my neck, perhaps,—certainly at the risk of the hulks,— from the capital of my uncle's legacy, will refund what we have spent on the inquiry; and the residue will secure to you an independence sufficing for your wants almost for life, and to me what will purchase with economy," and Varney smiled, "a year or so of a gentleman's idle pleasures. Are you satisfied thus far?"

"She will die happy and innocent," muttered Lucretia, with the growl of demoniac disappointment.

"Will you wait, then, till my forgery is detected, and I have no power to buy the silence of the trustees,—wait till I am in prison, and on a trial for life and death? Reflect, every day, every hour, of delay is fraught with peril. But if my safety is nothing compared to the refinement of your revenge, will you wait till Helen marries Percival St. John? You start! But can you suppose that this innocent love-play will not pass rapidly to its denouement? It is but yesterday that Percival confided to me that he should write this very day to his mother, and communicate all his feelings and his hopes; that he waited but her assent to propose formally for Helen. Now one of two things must happen. Either this mother, haughty and vain as lady-mothers mostly are, may refuse consent to her son's marriage with the daughter of a disgraced banker and the niece of that Lucretia Dalibard whom her husband would not admit beneath his roof—"

"Hold, sir!" exclaimed Lucretia, haughtily; and amidst all the passions that darkened her countenance and degraded her soul, some flash of her ancestral spirit shot across her brow. But it passed quickly, and she added, with fierce composure, "You are right; go on!"

"Either-and pardon me for an insult that comes not from me—either this will be the case: Lady Mary St. John will hasten back in alarm to London; she exercises extraordinary control over her son; she may withdraw him from us altogether, from me as well as you, and the occasion now presented to us may be lost (who knows?) forever,—or she may be a weak and fond woman; may be detained in Italy by her sister's illness; may be anxious that the last lineal descendant of the St. Johns should marry betimes, and, moved by her darling's prayers, may consent at once to the union. Or a third course, which Percival thinks the most probable, and which, though most unwelcome to us of all, I had wellnigh forgotten, may be adopted. She may come to England, and in order to judge her son's choice with her own eyes, may withdraw Helen from your roof to hers. At all events, delays are dangerous,—dangerous, putting aside my personal interest, and regarding only your own object,—may bring to our acts new and searching eyes; may cut us off from the habitual presence either of Percival or Helen, or both; or surround them, at the first breath of illness, with prying friends and formidable precautions. The birds now are in our hands. Why then open the cage and bid them fly, in order to spread the net? This morning all the final documents with the Insurance Companies are completed. It remains for me but to pay the first quarterly premiums. For that I think I am prepared, without drawing further on your hoards or my own scanty resources, which Grabman will take care to drain fast enough."

"And Percival St. John?" said Madame Dalibard. "We want no idle sacrifices. If my son be not found, we need not that boy's ghost amongst those who haunt us."

"Surely not," said Varney; "and for my part, he may be more useful to me alive than dead. There is no insurance on his life, and a rich friend (credulous greenhorn that he is!) is scarcely of that flock of geese which it were wise to slay from the mere hope of a golden egg. Percival St. John is your victim, not mine; not till you give the order would I lift a finger to harm him."

"Yes, let him live, unless my son be found to me," said Madame Dalibard, almost exultingly,— "let him live to forget yon fair-faced fool, leaning now, see you, so delightedly on his arm, and fancying eternity

in the hollow vows of love; let him live to wrong and abandon her by forgetfulness, though even in the grave; to laugh at his boyish dreams,— to sully her memory in the arms of harlots! Oh, if the dead can suffer, let him live, that she may feel beyond the grave his inconstancy and his fall. Methinks that that thought will comfort me if Vincent be no more, and I stand childless in the world!"

"It is so settled, then," said Varney, ever ready to clinch the business that promised gold, and relieve his apprehensions of the detection of his fraud. "And now to your noiseless hands, as soon as may be, I consign the girl; she has lived long enough!"

## CHAPTER XI.

### LOVE AND INNOCENCE.

During this conference between these execrable and ravening birds of night and prey, Helen and her boy-lover were thus conversing in the garden; while the autumn sun—for it was in the second week of October— broke pleasantly through the yellowing leaves of the tranquil shrubs, and the flowers, which should have died with the gone summer, still fresh by tender care, despite the lateness of the season, smiled gratefully as their light footsteps passed.

"Yes, Helen," said Percival,— "yes, you will love my mother, for she is one of those people who seem to attract love, as if it were a property belonging to them. Even my dog Beau (you know how fond Beau is of me!) always nestles at her feet when we are at home. I own she has pride, but it is a pride that never offended any one. You know there are some flowers that we call proud. The pride of the flower is not more harmless than my mother's. But perhaps pride is not the right word,—it is rather the aversion to anything low or mean, the admiration for everything pure and high. Ah, how that very pride—if pride it be—will make her love you, my Helen!"

"You need not tell me," said Helen, smiling seriously, "that I shall love your mother,—I love her already; nay, from the first moment you said you had a mother, my heart leaped to her. Your mother,— if ever you are really jealous, it must be of her! But that she should love me,—that is what I doubt and fear. For if you were my brother, Percival, I should be so ambitious for you. A nymph must rise from the stream, a sylphid from the rose, before I could allow another to steal you from my side. And if I think I should feel this only as your sister, what can be precious enough to satisfy a mother?"

"You, and you only," answered Percival, with his blithesome laugh,— "you, my sweet Helen, much better than nymph or sylphid, about whom, between ourselves, I never cared three straws, even in a poem. How pleased you will be with Laughton! Do you know, I was lying awake all last night to consider what room you would like best for your own? And at last I have decided. Come, listen,—it opens from the music-gallery that overhangs the hall. From the window you overlook the southern side of the park, and catch a view of the lake beyond. There are two niches in the wall,— one for your piano, one for your favourite books. It is just large enough to hold four persons with ease,—our mother and myself, your aunt, whom by that time we shall have petted into good humour; and if we can coax Ardworth there,—the best good fellow that ever lived,—I think our party will be complete. By the way, I am uneasy about Ardworth, it is so long since we have seen him; I have called three times,—nay, five,— but his odd-looking clerk always swears he is not at home. Tell me, Helen, now you know him so well,— tell me how I can serve him? You know, I am so terribly rich (at least, I shall be in a month or two), I can never get through my money, unless my friends will help me. And is it not shocking that that noble fellow should be so poor, and yet suffer me to call him 'friend,' as if in friendship one man should want everything, and the other nothing? Still, I don't know how to venture to propose. Come, you understand me, Helen; let us lay our wise heads together and make him well off, in spite of himself."

It was in this loose boyish talk of Percival that he had found the way, not only to Helen's heart, but to her soul. For in this she (grand, undeveloped poetess!) recognized a nobler poetry than we chain to rhythm,—the poetry of generous deeds. She yearned to kiss the warm hand she held, and drew nearer to his side as she answered: "And sometimes, dear, dear Percival, you wonder why I would rather listen to you than to all Mr. Varney's bitter eloquence, or even to my dear cousin's aspiring ambition. They talk well, but it is of themselves; while you—"

Percival blushed, and checked her.

"Well," she said,— "well, to your question. Alas! you know little of my cousin if you think all our arts could decoy him out of his rugged independence; and much as I love him, I could not wish it. But do not

fear for him; he is one of those who are born to succeed, and without help."

"How do you know that, pretty prophetess?" said Percival, with the superior air of manhood. "I have seen more of the world than you have, and I cannot see why Ardworth should succeed, as you call it; or, if so, why he should succeed less if he swung his hammock in a better berth than that hole in Gray's Inn, and would just let me keep him a cab and groom."

Had Percival talked of keeping John Ardworth an elephant and a palaquin, Helen could not have been more amused. She clapped her little hands in a delight that provoked Percival, and laughed out loud. Then, seeing her boy-lover's lip pouted petulantly, and his brow was overcast, she said, more seriously, —

"Do you not know what it is to feel convinced of something which you cannot explain? Well, I feel this as to my cousin's fame and fortunes. Surely, too, you must feel it, you scarce know why, when he speaks of that future which seems so dim and so far to me, as of something that belonged to him."

"Very true, Helen," said Percival; "he lays it out like the map of his estate. One can't laugh when he says so carelessly: 'At such an age I shall lead my circuit; at such an age I shall be rich; at such an age I shall enter parliament; and beyond that I shall look as yet—no farther.' And, poor fellow, then he will be forty-three! And in the mean while to suffer such privations!"

"There are no privations to one who lives in the future," said Helen, with that noble intuition into lofty natures which at times flashed from her childish simplicity, foreshadowing what, if Heaven spare her life, her maturer intellect may develop; "for Ardworth there is no such thing as poverty. He is as rich in his hopes as we are in—" She stopped short, blushed, and continued, with downcast looks: "As well might you pity me in these walks, so dreary without you. I do not live in them, I live in my thoughts of you."

Her voice trembled with emotion in those last words. She slid from Percival's arm, and timidly sat down (and he beside her) on a little mound under the single chestnut-tree, that threw its shade over the garden.

Both were silent for some moments,—Percival, with grateful ecstasy; Helen, with one of those sudden fits of mysterious melancholy to which her nature was so subjected.

He was the first to speak. "Helen," he said gravely, "since I have known you, I feel as if life were a more solemn thing than I ever regarded it before. It seems to me as if a new and more arduous duty were added to those for which I was prepared,—a duty, Helen, to become worthy of you! Will you smile? No, you will not smile if I say I have had my brief moments of ambition. Sometimes as a boy, with Plutarch in my hand, stretched idly under the old cedar-trees at Laughton; sometimes as a sailor, when, becalmed on the Atlantic, and my ears freshly filled with tales of Collingwood and Nelson, I stole from my comrades and leaned musingly over the boundless sea. But when this ample heritage passed to me, when I had no more my own fortunes to make, my own rank to build up, such dreams became less and less frequent. Is it not true that wealth makes us contented to be obscure? Yes; I understand, while I speak, why poverty itself befriends, not cripples, Ardworth's energies. But since I have known you, dearest Helen, those dreams return more vividly than ever. He who claims you should be—must be—something nobler than the crowd. Helen,"—and he rose by an irresistible and restless impulse,—"I shall not be contented till you are as proud of your choice as I of mine!"

It seemed, as Percival spoke and looked, as if boyhood were cast from him forever. The unusual weight and gravity of his words, to which his tone gave even eloquence; the steady flash of his dark eyes; his erect, elastic form,—all had the dignity of man. Helen gazed on him silently, and with a heart so full that words would not come, and tears overflowed instead.

That sight sobered him at once; he knelt down beside her, threw his arms around her,—it was his first embrace,—and kissed the tears away.

"How have I distressed you? Why do you weep?"

"Let me weep on, Percival, dear Percival! These tears are like prayers,—they speak to Heaven—and of you!"

A step came noiselessly over the grass, and between the lovers and the sunlight stood Gabriel Varney.

## CHAPTER XII.

### SUDDEN CELEBRITY AND PATIENT HOPE.

Percival was unusually gloomy and abstracted in his way to town that day, though Varney was his companion, and in the full play of those animal spirits which he owed to his unrivalled physical organization and the obtuseness of his conscience. Seeing, at length, that his gayety did not communicate itself to Percival, he paused, and looked at him suspiciously. A falling leaf startles the steed, and a shadow the guilty man.

"You are sad, Percival," he said inquiringly. "What has disturbed you?"

"It is nothing,—or, at least, would seem nothing to you," answered Percival, with an effort to smile, for I have heard you laugh at the doctrine of presentiments. We sailors are more superstitious."

"What presentiment can you possibly entertain?" asked Varney, more anxiously than Percival could have anticipated.

"Presentiments are not so easily defined, Varney. But, in truth, poor Helen has infected me. Have you not remarked that, gay as she habitually is, some shadow comes over her so suddenly that one cannot trace the cause?"

"My dear Percival," said Varney, after a short pause, "what you say does not surprise me. It would be false kindness to conceal from you that I have heard Madame Dalibard say that her mother was, when about her age, threatened with consumptive symptoms; but she lived many years afterwards. Nay, nay, rally yourself; Helen's appearance, despite the extreme purity of her complexion, is not that of one threatened by the terrible malady of our climate. The young are often haunted with the idea of early death. As we grow older, that thought is less cherished; in youth it is a sort of luxury. To this mournful idea (which you see you have remarked as well as I) we must attribute not only Helen's occasional melancholy, but a generosity of forethought which I cannot deny myself the pleasure of communicating to you, though her delicacy would be shocked at my indiscretion. You know how helpless her aunt is. Well, Helen, who is entitled, when of age, to a moderate competence, has persuaded me to insure her life and accept a trust to hold the moneys (if ever unhappily due) for the benefit of my mother-in-law, so that Madame Dalibard may not be left destitute if her niece die before she is twenty- one. How like Helen, is it not?"

Percival was too overcome to answer.

Varney resumed: "I entreat you not to mention this to Helen; it would offend her modesty to have the secret of her good deeds thus betrayed by one to whom alone she confided them. I could not resist her entreaties, though, *entre nous*, it cripples me not a little to advance for her the necessary sums for the premiums. Apropos, this brings me to a point on which I feel, as the vulgar idiom goes, 'very awkward,'—as I always do in these confounded money-matters. But you were good enough to ask me to paint you a couple of pictures for Laughton. Now, if you could let me have some portion of the sum, whatever it be (for I don't price my paintings to you), it would very much oblige me."

Percival turned away his face as he wrung Varney's hand, and muttered, with a choked voice: "Let me have my share in Helen's divine forethought. Good Heavens! she, so young, to look thus beyond the grave, always for others—for others!"

Callous as the wretch was, Percival's emotion and his proposal struck Varney with a sentiment like compunction. He had designed to appropriate the lover's gold as it was now offered; but that Percival himself should propose it, blind to the grave to which that gold paved the way, was a horror not counted in those to which his fell cupidity and his goading apprehensions had familiarized his conscience.

"No," he said, with one of those wayward scruples to which the blackest criminals are sometimes susceptible,—"no. I have promised Helen to regard this as a loan to her, which she is to repay me when of age. What you may advance me is for the pictures. I have a right to do as I please with what is bought by my own labour. And the subjects of the pictures, what shall they be?"

"For one picture try and recall Helen's aspect and attitude when you came to us in the garden, and entitle your subject: 'The Foreboding.'"

"Hem!" said Varney, hesitatingly. "And the other subject?"

"Wait for that till the joy-bells at Laughton have welcomed a bride, and then—and then, Varney,"

added Percival, with something of his natural joyous smile, "you must take the expression as you find it. Once under my care, and, please Heaven, the one picture shall laughingly upbraid the other!"

As this was said, the cabriolet stopped at Percival's door. Varney dined with him that day; and if the conversation flagged, it did not revert to the subject which had so darkened the bright spirits of the host, and so tried the hypocrisy of the guest. When Varney left, which he did as soon as the dinner was concluded, Percival silently put a check into his hands, to a greater amount than Varney had anticipated even from his generosity.

"This is for four pictures, not two," he said, shaking his head; and then, with his characteristic conceit, he added: "Well, some years hence the world shall not call them overpaid. Adieu, my Medici; a dozen such men, and Art would revive in England."

When he was left alone, Percival sat down, and leaning his face on both hands, gave way to the gloom which his native manliness and the delicacy that belongs to true affection had made him struggle not to indulge in the presence of another. Never had he so loved Helen as in that hour; never had he so intimately and intensely felt her matchless worth. The image of her unselfish, quiet, melancholy consideration for that austere, uncaressing, unsympathizing relation, under whose shade her young heart must have withered, seemed to him filled with a celestial pathos. And he almost hated Varney that the cynic painter could have talked of it with that business-like phlegm. The evening deepened; the tranquil street grew still; the air seemed close; the solitude oppressed him; he rose abruptly, seized his hat, and went forth slowly, and still with a heavy heart.

As he entered Piccadilly, on the broad step of that house successively inhabited by the Duke of Queensberry and Lord Hertford,—on the step of that mansion up which so many footsteps light with wanton pleasure have gayly trod, Percival's eye fell upon a wretched, squalid, ragged object, doubled up, as it were, in that last despondency which has ceased to beg, that has no care to steal, that has no wish to live. Percival halted, and touched the outcast.

"What is the matter, my poor fellow? Take care; the policeman will not suffer you to rest here. Come, cheer up, I say! There is something to find you a better lodging!"

The silver fell unheeded on the stones. The thing of rags did not even raise its head, but a low, broken voice muttered,—

"It be too late now; let 'em take me to prison, let 'em send me 'cross the sea to Buttany, let 'em hang me, if they please. I be 's good for nothin' now,—nothin'!"

Altered as the voice was, it struck Percival as familiar. He looked down and caught a view of the drooping face. "Up, man, up!" he said cheerily. "See, Providence sends you an old friend in need, to teach you never to despair again."

The hearty accent, more than the words, touched and aroused the poor creature. He rose mechanically, and a sickly, grateful smile passed over his wasted features as he recognized St. John.

"Come! how is this? I have always understood that to keep a crossing was a flourishing trade nowadays."

"I 'as no crossin'. I 'as sold her!" groaned Beck. "I be's good for nothin' now but to cadge about the streets, and steal, and filch, and hang like the rest on us! Thank you kindly, sir," and Beck pulled his forelock, "but, please your honour, I would rather make an ind on it!"

"Pooh, pooh! didn't I tell you when you wanted a friend to come to me? Why did you doubt me, foolish fellow? Pick up those shillings; get a bed and a supper. Come and see me to-morrow at nine o'clock; you know where,—the same house in Curzon Street; you shall tell me then your whole story, and it shall go hard but I'll buy you another crossing, or get you something just as good."

Poor Beck swayed a moment or two on his slender legs like a drunken man, and then, suddenly falling on his knees, he kissed the hem of his benefactor's garment, and fairly wept. Those tears relieved him; they seemed to wash the drought of despair from his heart.

"Hush, hush! or we shall have a crowd round us. You'll not forget, my poor friend, No.— Curzon Street,—nine to-morrow. Make haste now, and get food and rest; you look, indeed, as if you wanted them. Ah, would to Heaven all the poverty in this huge city stood here in thy person, and we could aid it as easily as I can thee!"

Percival had moved on as he said those last words, and looking back, he had the satisfaction to see that Beck was slowly crawling after him, and had escaped the grim question of a very portly policeman,



who had no doubt expressed a natural indignation at the audacity of so ragged a skeleton not keeping itself respectably at home in its churchyard.

Entering one of the clubs in St. James's Street, Percival found a small knot of politicians in eager conversation respecting a new book which had been published but a day or two before, but which had already seized the public attention with that strong grasp which constitutes always an era in an author's life, sometimes an epoch in a nation's literature. The newspapers were full of extracts from the work,—the gossips, of conjecture as to the authorship. We need scarcely say that a book which makes this kind of sensation must hit some popular feeling of the hour, supply some popular want. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, therefore, its character is political; it was so in the present instance. It may be remembered that that year parliament sat during great part of the month of October, that it was the year in which the Reform Bill was rejected by the House of Lords, and that public feeling in our time had never been so keenly excited. This work appeared during the short interval between the rejection of the Bill and the prorogation of parliament [Parliament was prorogued October 20th; the bill rejected by the Lords, October 8th]. And what made it more remarkable was, that while stamped with the passion of the time, there was a weight of calm and stern reasoning embodied in its vigorous periods, which gave to the arguments of the advocate something of the impartiality of the judge. Unusually abstracted and unsocial,—for, despite his youth and that peculiar bashfulness before noticed, he was generally alive enough to all that passed around him,—Percival paid little attention to the comments that circulated round the easy-chairs in his vicinity, till a subordinate in the administration, with whom he was slightly acquainted, pushed a small volume towards him and said,—"You have seen this, of course, St. John? Ten to one you do not guess the author. It is certainly not B—m, though the Lord Chancellor has energy enough for anything. R— says it has a touch of S—r."

"Could M—y have written it?" asked a young member of parliament, timidly.

"M—y! Very like his matchless style, to be sure! You can have read very little of M—y, I should think," said the subordinate, with the true sneer of an official and a critic.

The young member could have slunk into a nutshell. Percival, with very languid interest, glanced over the volume. But despite his mood, and his moderate affection for political writings, the passage he opened upon struck and seized him unawares. Though the sneer of the official was just, and the style was not comparable to M—y's (whose is?), still, the steady rush of strong words, strong with strong thoughts, heaped massively together, showed the ease of genius and the gravity of thought. The absence of all effeminate glitter, the iron grapple with the pith and substance of the argument opposed, seemed familiar to Percival. He thought he heard the deep bass of John Ardworth's earnest voice when some truth roused his advocacy, or some falsehood provoked his wrath. He put down the book, bewildered. Could it be the obscure, briefless lawyer in Gray's Inn (that very morning the object of his young pity) who was thus lifted into fame? He smiled at his own credulity. But he listened with more attention to the enthusiastic praises that circled round, and the various guesses which accompanied them. Soon, however, his former gloom returned,—the Babel began to chafe and weary him. He rose, and went forth again into the air. He strolled on without purpose, but mechanically, into the street where he had first seen Helen. He paused a few moments under the colonnade which faced Beck's old deserted crossing. His pause attracted the notice of one of the unhappy beings whom we suffer to pollute our streets and rot in our hospitals. She approached and spoke to him,—to him whose heart was so full of Helen! He shuddered, and strode on. At length he paused before the twin towers of Westminster Abbey, on which the moon rested in solemn splendour; and in that space one man only shared his solitude. A figure with folded arms leaned against the iron rails near the statue of Canning, and his gaze comprehended in one view the walls of the Parliament, in which all passions wage their war, and the glorious abbey, which gives a Walhalla to the great. The utter stillness of the figure, so in unison with the stillness of the scene, had upon Percival more effect than would have been produced by the most clamorous crowd. He looked round curiously as he passed, and uttered an exclamation as he recognized John Ardworth.

"You, Percival!" said Ardworth. "A strange meeting-place at this hour! What can bring you hither?"

"Only whim, I fear; and you?" as Percival linked his arm into Ardworth's.

"Twenty years hence I will tell you what brought me hither!" answered Ardworth, moving slowly back towards Whitehall.

"If we are alive then!"

"We live till our destinies below are fulfilled; till our uses have passed from us in this sphere, and rise to benefit another. For the soul is as a sun, but with this noble distinction,—the sun is confined in its career; day after day it visits the same lands, gilds the same planets or rather, as the astronomers hold,

stands, the motionless centre of moving worlds. But the soul, when it sinks into seeming darkness and the deep, rises to new destinies, fresh regions unvisited before. What we call Eternity, may be but an endless series of those transitions which men call 'deaths,' abandonments of home after home, ever to fairer scenes and loftier heights. Age after age, the spirit, that glorious Nomad, may shift its tent, fated not to rest in the dull Elysium of the Heathen, but carrying with it evermore its elements,—Activity and Desire. Why should the soul ever repose? God, its Principle, reposes never. While we speak, new worlds are sparkling forth, suns are throwing off their nebulae, nebulae are hardening into worlds. The Almighty proves his existence by creating. Think you that Plato is at rest, and Shakspeare only basking on a sun-cloud? Labour is the very essence of spirit, as of divinity; labour is the purgatory of the erring; it may become the hell of the wicked, but labour is not less the heaven of the good!"

Ardworth spoke with unusual earnestness and passion, and his idea of the future was emblematic of his own active nature; for each of us is wisely left to shape out, amidst the impenetrable mists, his own ideal of the Hereafter. The warrior child of the biting North placed his Hela amid snows, and his Himmel in the banquets of victorious war; the son of the East, parched by relentless summer,—his hell amidst fire, and his elysium by cooling streams; the weary peasant sighs through life for rest, and rest awaits his vision beyond the grave; the workman of genius,—ever ardent, ever young,—honours toil as the glorious development of being, and springs refreshed over the abyss of the grave, to follow, from star to star, the progress that seems to him at once the supreme felicity and the necessary law. So be it with the fantasy of each! Wisdom that is infallible, and love that never sleeps, watch over the darkness, and bid darkness be, that we may dream!

"Alas!" said the young listener, "what reproof do you not convey to those, like me, who, devoid of the power which gives results to every toil, have little left to them in life, but to idle life away. All have not the gift to write, or harangue, or speculate, or—"

"Friend," interrupted Ardworth, bluntly, "do not belie yourself. There lives not a man on earth—out of a lunatic asylum—who has not in him the power to do good. What can writers, haranguers, or speculators do more than that? Have you ever entered a cottage, ever travelled in a coach, ever talked with a peasant in the field, or loitered with a mechanic at the loom, and not found that each of those men had a talent you had not, knew some things you knew not? The most useless creature that ever yawned at a club, or counted the vermin on his rags under the suns of Calabria, has no excuse for want of intellect. What men want is not talent, it is purpose,—in other words, not the power to achieve, but the will to labour. You, Percival St. John,—you affect to despond, lest you should not have your uses; you, with that fresh, warm heart; you, with that pure enthusiasm for what is fresh and good; you, who can even admire a thing like Varney, because, through the tawdry man, you recognize art and skill, even though wasted in spoiling canvas; you, who have only to live as you feel, in order to diffuse blessings all around you,—fie, foolish boy! you will own your error when I tell you why I come from my rooms at Gray's Inn to see the walls in which Hampden, a plain country squire like you, shook with plain words the tyranny of eight hundred years."

"Ardworth, I will not wait your time to tell me what took you yonder. I have penetrated a secret that you, not kindly, kept from me. This morning you rose and found yourself famous; this evening you have come to gaze upon the scene of the career to which that fame will more rapidly conduct you—"

"And upon the tomb which the proudest ambition I can form on earth must content itself to win! A poor conclusion, if all ended here!"

"I am right, however," said Percival, with boyish pleasure. "It is you whose praises have just filled my ears. You, dear, dear Ardworth! How rejoiced I am!"

Ardworth pressed heartily the hand extended to him: "I should have trusted you with my secret tomorrow, Percival; as it is, keep it for the present. A craving of my nature has been satisfied, a grief has found distraction. As for the rest, any child that throws a stone into the water with all his force can make a splash; but he would be a fool indeed if he supposed that the splash was a sign that he had turned a stream."

Here Ardworth ceased abruptly; and Percival, engrossed by a bright idea, which had suddenly occurred to him, exclaimed,—

"Ardworth, your desire, your ambition, is to enter parliament; there must be a dissolution shortly,—the success of your book will render you acceptable to many a popular constituency. All you can want is a sum for the necessary expenses. Borrow that sum from me; repay me when you are in the Cabinet, or attorney-general. It shall be so!"

A look so bright that even by that dull lamplight the glow of the cheek, the brilliancy of the eye were visible, flashed over Ardworth's face. He felt at that moment what ambitious man must feel when the

object he has seen dimly and afar is placed within his grasp; but his reason was proof even against that strong temptation.

He passed his arm round the boy's slender waist, and drew him to his heart with grateful affection as he replied,—“And what, if now in parliament, giving up my career,—with no regular means of subsistence,— what could I be but a venal adventurer? Place would become so vitally necessary to me that I should feed but a dangerous war between my conscience and my wants. In chasing Fame, the shadow, I should lose the substance, Independence. Why, that very thought would paralyze my tongue. No, no, my generous friend. As labour is the arch elevator of man, so patience is the essence of labour. First let me build the foundation; I may then calculate the height of my tower. First let me be independent of the great; I will then be the champion of the lowly. Hold! Tempt me no more; do not lure me to the loss of self-esteem. And now, Percival,” resumed Ardworth, in the tone of one who wishes to plunge into some utterly new current of thought, “let us forget for awhile these solemn aspirations, and be frolicsome and human. ‘Nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit.’ ‘Neque semper arcum tendit Apollo.’ What say you to a cigar?”

Percival stared. He was not yet familiarized to the eccentric whims of his friend.

“Hot negus and a cigar!” repeated Ardworth, while a smile, full of drollery, played round the corners of his lips and twinkled in his deep-set eyes.

“Are you serious?”

“Not serious; I have been serious enough,” and Ardworth sighed, “for the last three weeks. Who goes ‘to Corinth to be sage,’ or to the Cider Cellar to be serious?”

“I subscribe, then, to the negus and cigar,” said Percival, smiling; and he had no cause to repent his compliance as he accompanied Ardworth to one of the resorts favoured by that strange person in his rare hours of relaxation.

For, seated at his favourite table, which happened, luckily, to be vacant, with his head thrown carelessly back, and his negus steaming before him, John Ardworth continued to pour forth, till the clock struck three, jest upon jest, pun upon pun, broad drollery upon broad drollery, without flagging, without intermission, so varied, so copious, so ready, so irresistible that Percival was transported out of all his melancholy in enjoying, for the first time in his life, the exuberant gayety of a grave mind once set free,—all its intellect sparkling into wit, all its passion rushing into humour. And this was the man he had pitied, supposed to have no sunny side to his life! How much greater had been his compassion and his wonder if he could have known all that had passed, within the last few weeks, through that gloomy, yet silent breast, which, by the very breadth of its mirth, showed what must be the depth of its sadness!

## **CHAPTER XIII.**

### **THE LOSS OF THE CROSSING.**

Despite the lateness of the hour before he got to rest, Percival had already breakfasted, when his valet informed him, with raised, supercilious eyebrows, that an uncommon ragged sort of a person insisted that he had been told to call. Though Beck had been at the house before, and the valet had admitted him, so much thinner, so much more ragged was he now, that the trim servant—no close observer of such folk—did not recognize him. However, at Percival's order, too well-bred to show surprise, he ushered Beck up with much civility; and St. John was painfully struck with the ravages a few weeks had made upon the sweeper's countenance. The lines were so deeply ploughed, the dry hair looked so thin, and was so sown with gray that Beck might have beat all Farren's skill in the part of an old man.

The poor sweeper's tale, extricated from its peculiar phraseology, was simple enough, and soon told. He had returned home at night to find his hoards stolen, and the labour of his life overthrown. How he passed that night he did not very well remember. We may well suppose that the little reason he possessed was wellnigh bereft from him. No suspicion of the exact thief crossed his perturbed mind. Bad as Grabman's character might be, he held a respectable position compared with the other lodgers in the house. Bill the cracksman, naturally and by vocation, suggested the hand that had despoiled him: how hope for redress or extort surrender from such a quarter? Mechanically, however, when the hour

arrived to return to his day's task, he stole down the stairs, and lo, at the very door of the house Bill's children were at play, and in the hand of the eldest he recognized what he called his "curril."

"Your curril!" interrupted St. John.

"Yes, curril,—vot the little 'uns bite afore they gets their teethin'."

St. John smiled, and supposing that Beck had some time or other been puerile enough to purchase such a bauble, nodded to him to continue. To seize upon the urchin, and, in spite of kicks, bites, shrieks, or scratches, repossess himself of his treasure, was the feat of a moment. The brat's clamour drew out the father; and to him Beck (pocketing the coral, that its golden bells might not attract the more experienced eye and influence the more formidable greediness of the paternal thief) loudly, and at first fearlessly, appealed. Him he charged and accused and threatened with all vengeance, human and divine. Then, changing his tone, he implored, he wept, he knelt. As soon as the startled cracksman recovered his astonishment at such audacity, and comprehended the nature of the charge against himself and his family, he felt the more indignant from a strange and unfamiliar consciousness of innocence. Seizing Beck by the nape of the neck, with a dexterous application of hand and foot he sent him spinning into the kennel.

"Go to Jericho, mud-scraper!" cried Bill, in a voice of thunder; "and if ever thou sayst such a vopper agin,—'sparing the characters of them 'ere motherless babes,—I'll seal thee up in a 'tato-sack, and sell thee for fiv'pence to No. 7, the great body-snatcher. Take care how I ever sets eyes agin on thy ugly mug!"

With that Bill clapped to the door, and Beck, frightened out of his wits, crawled from the kennel and, bruised and smarting, crept to his crossing. But he was unable to discharge his duties that day; his ill-fed, miserable frame was too weak for the stroke he had received. Long before dusk he sneaked away, and dreading to return to his lodging, lest, since nothing now was left worth robbing but his carcass, Bill might keep his word and sell that to the body-snatcher, he took refuge under the only roof where he felt he could sleep in safety.

And here we must pause to explain. In our first introduction of Beck we contented ourselves with implying to the ingenious and practised reader that his heart might still be large enough to hold something besides his crossing. Now, in one of the small alleys that have their vent in the great stream of Fleet Street there dwelt an old widow-woman who eked out her existence by charing,—an industrious, drudging creature, whose sole occupation, since her husband, the journeyman bricklayer, fell from a scaffold, and, breaking his neck, left her happily childless as well as penniless, had been scrubbing stone floors and cleaning out dingy houses when about to be let,—charing, in a word. And in this vocation had she kept body and soul together till a bad rheumatism and old age had put an end to her utilities and entitled her to the receipt of two shillings weekly from parochial munificence. Between this old woman and Beck there was a mysterious tie, so mysterious that he did not well comprehend it himself. Sometimes he called her "mammy," sometimes "the h-old crittur." But certain it is that to her he was indebted for that name which he bore, to the puzzlement of St. Giles's. Becky Carruthers was the name of the old woman; but Becky was one of those good creatures who are always called by their Christian names, and never rise into the importance of the surname and the dignity of "Mistress;" lopping off the last syllable of the familiar appellation, the outcast christened himself "Beck."

"And," said St. John, who in the course of question and answer had got thus far into the marrow of the sweeper's narrative, "is not this good woman really your mother?"

"Mother!" echoed Beck, with disdain; "no, I 'as a gritter mother nor she. Sint Poll's is my mother. But the h-old crittur tuk care on me."

"I really don't understand you. St. Paul's is your mother? How?"

Beck shook his head mysteriously, and without answering the question, resumed the tale, which we must thus paraphrastically continue to deliver.

When he was a little more than six years old, Beck began to earn his own livelihood, by running errands, holding horses, scraping together pence and halfpence. Betimes, his passion for saving began; at first with a good and unselfish motive,—that of surprising "mammy" at the week's end. But when "mammy," who then gained enough for herself, patted his head and called him "good boy," and bade him save for his own uses, and told him what a great thing it would be if he could lay by a pretty penny against he was a man, he turned miser on his own account; and the miserable luxury grew upon him. At last, by the permission of the police inspector, strengthened by that of the owner of the contiguous house, he made his great step in life, and succeeded a deceased negro in the dignity and emoluments of the memorable crossing. From that hour he felt himself fulfilling his proper destiny. But poor Becky,

alas! had already fallen into the sere and yellow leaf; with her decline, her good qualities were impaired. She took to drinking,—not to positive intoxication, but to making herself "comfortable;" and, to satisfy her craving, Beck, waking betimes one morning, saw her emptying his pockets. Then he resolved, quietly and without upbraiding her, to remove to a safer lodging. To save had become the imperative necessity of his existence. But to do him justice, Beck had a glimmering sense of what was due to the "h-old crittur." Every Saturday evening he called at her house and deposited with her a certain sum, not large even in proportion to his earnings, but which seemed to the poor ignorant miser, who grudged every farthing to himself, an enormous deduction from his total, and a sum sufficient for every possible want of humankind, even to satiety. And now, in returning, despoiled of all save the few pence he had collected that day, it is but fair to him to add that not his least bitter pang was in the remembrance that this was the only Saturday on which, for the first time, the weekly stipend would fail.

But so ill and so wretched did he look when he reached her little room that "mammy" forgot all thought of herself; and when he had told his tale, so kind was her comforting, so unselfish her sympathy, that his heart smote him for his old parsimony, for his hard resentment at her single act of peculation. Had not she the right to all he made? But remorse and grief alike soon vanished in the fever that now seized him; for several days he was insensible; and when he recovered sufficiently to be made aware of what was around him, he saw the widow seated beside him, within four bare walls. Everything, except the bed he slept on, had been sold to support him in his illness. As soon as he could totter forth, Beck hastened to his crossing. Alas! it was preoccupied. His absence had led to ambitious usurpation. A one-legged, sturdy sailor had mounted his throne, and wielded his sceptre. The decorum of the street forbade altercation to the contending parties; but the sailor referred discussion to a meeting at a flash house in the Rookery that evening. There a jury was appointed, and the case opened. By the conventional laws that regulate this useful community, Beck was still in his rights; his reappearance sufficed to restore his claims, and an appeal to the policeman would no doubt re-establish his authority. But Beck was still so ill and so feeble that he had a melancholy persuasion that he could not suitably perform the duties of his office; and when the sailor, not a bad fellow on the whole, offered to pay down on the nail what really seemed a very liberal sum for Beck's peaceful surrender of his rights, the poor wretch thought of the bare walls at his "mammy's," of the long, dreary interval that must elapse, even if able to work, before the furniture pawned could be redeemed by the daily profits of his post, and with a groan he held out his hand and concluded the bargain.

Creeping home to his "h-old crittur," he threw the purchase money into her lap; then, broken-hearted and in despair, he slunk forth again in a sort of vague, dreamy hope that the law, which abhors vagabonds, would seize and finish him.

When this tale was done, Percival did not neglect the gentle task of admonition, which the poor sweeper's softened heart and dull remorse made easier. He pointed out, in soft tones, how the avarice he had indulged had been perhaps mercifully chastised, and drew no ineloquent picture of the vicious miseries of the confirmed miser. Beck listened humbly and respectfully; though so little did he understand of mercy and Providence and vice that the diviner part of the homily was quite lost on him. However, he confessed penitently that "the mattress had made him vorse nor a beast to the h-old crittur;" and that "he was cured of saving to the end of his days."

"And now," said Percival, "as you really seem not strong enough to bear this out-of-door work (the winter coming on, too), what say you to entering into my service? I want some help in my stables. The work is easy enough, and you are used to horses, you know, in a sort of a way."

Beck hesitated, and looked a moment undecided. At last he said, "Please your honour, if I bean't strong enough for the crossin', I 'se afeared I'm too h-ailing to sarve you. And voud n't I be vorse nor a wiper to take your vages and not vork for 'em h-as I h-ought?"

"Pooh! we'll soon make you strong, my man. Take my advice; don't let your head run on the crossing. That kind of industry exposes you to bad company and bad thoughts."

"That's vot it is, sir," said Beck, assentingly, laying his dexter forefinger on his sinister palm.

"Well! you are in my service, then. Go downstairs now and get your breakfast; by and by you shall show me your 'mammy's' house, and we'll see what can be done for her."

Beck pressed his hands to his eyes, trying hard not to cry; but it was too much for him; and as the valet, who appeared to Percival's summons, led him down the stairs, his sobs were heard from attic to basement.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### NEWS FROM GRABMAN.

That day, opening thus auspiciously to Beck, was memorable also to other and more prominent persons in this history.

Early in the forenoon a parcel was brought to Madame Dalibard which contained Ardworth's already famous book, a goodly assortment of extracts from the newspapers thereon, and the following letter from the young author:—

You will see, by the accompanying packet, that your counsels have had weight with me. I have turned aside in my slow, legitimate career. I have, as you desired, made "men talk of me." What solid benefit I may reap from this I know not. I shall not openly avow the book. Such notoriety cannot help meat the Bar. But liberavi animam meam,—excuse my pedantry,—I have let my soul free for a moment; I am now catching it back to put bit and saddle on again. I will not tell you how you have disturbed me, how you have stung me into this premature rush amidst the crowd, how, after robbing me of name and father, you have driven me to this experiment with my own mind, to see if I was deceived when I groaned to myself, "The Public shall give you a name, and Fame shall be your mother." I am satisfied with the experiment. I know better now what is in me, and I have regained my peace of mind. If in the success of this hasty work there be that which will gratify the interest you so kindly take in me, deem that success your own; I owe it to you,—to your revelations, to your admonitions. I wait patiently your own time for further disclosures; till then, the wheel must work on, and the grist be ground. Kind and generous friend, till now I would not wound you by returning the sum you sent me,—nay, more, I knew I should please you by devoting part of it to the risk of giving this essay to the world, and so making its good fortune doubly your own work. Now, when the publisher smiles, and the shopmen bow, and I am acknowledged to have a bank in my brains,—now, you cannot be offended to receive it back. Adieu. When my mind is in train again, and I feel my step firm on the old dull road, I will come to see you. Till then, yours—by what name? Open the Biographical Dictionary at hazard, and send me one. GRAY'S INN.

Not at the noble thoughts and the deep sympathy with mankind that glowed through that work, over which Lucretia now tremulously hurried, did she feel delight. All that she recognized, or desired to recognize, were those evidences of that kind of intellect which wins its way through the world, and which, strong and unmistakable, rose up in every page of that vigorous logic and commanding style. The book was soon dropped, thus read; the newspaper extracts pleased even more.

"This," she said audibly, in the freedom of her solitude, "this is the son I asked for,—a son in whom I can rise; in whom I can exchange the sense of crushing infamy for the old delicious ecstasy of pride! For this son can I do too much? No; in what I may do for him methinks there will be no remorse. And he calls his success mine,—mine!" Her nostrils dilated, and her front rose erect.

In the midst of this exultation Varney found her; and before he could communicate the business which had brought him, he had to listen, which he did with the secret, gnawing envy that every other man's success occasioned him, to her haughty self-felicitations.

He could not resist saying, with a sneer, when she paused, as if to ask his sympathy,—

"All this is very fine, belle-mere; and yet I should hardly have thought that coarse-featured, uncouth limb of the law, who seldom moves without upsetting a chair, never laughs but the panes rattle in the window,—I should hardly have thought him the precise person to gratify your pride, or answer the family ideal of a gentleman and a St. John."

"Gabriel," said Lucretia, sternly, "you have a biting tongue, and it is folly in me to resent those privileges which our fearful connection gives you. But this raillery—"

"Come, come, I was wrong; forgive it!" interrupted Varney, who, dreading nothing else, dreaded much the rebuke of his grim stepmother.

"It is forgiven," said Lucretia, coldly, and with a slight wave of her hand; then she added, with composure,—

"Long since—even while heiress of Laughton—I parted with mere pride in the hollow seemings of distinction. Had I not, should I have stooped to William Mainwaring? What I then respected, amidst all the degradations I have known, I respect still,—talent, ambition, intellect, and will. Do you think I would exchange these in a son of mine for the mere graces which a dancing-master can sell him? Fear

not. Let us give but wealth to that intellect, and the world will see no clumsiness in the movements that march to its high places, and hear no discord in the laugh that triumphs over fools. But you have some news to communicate, or some proposal to suggest."

"I have both," said Varney. "In the first place, I have a letter from Grabman!"

Lucretia's eyes sparkled, and she snatched eagerly at the letter her son-in-law drew forth.

LIVERPOOL, October, 1831.

JASON,—I think I am on the road to success. Having first possessed myself of the fact, commemorated in the parish register, of the birth and baptism of Alfred Braddell's son,—for we must proceed regularly in these matters,—I next set my wits to work to trace that son's exodus from the paternal mansion. I have hunted up an old woman-servant, Jane Prior, who lived with the Braddells. She now thrives as a laundress; she is a rank Puritan, and starches for the godly. She was at first very wary and reserved in her communications; but by siding with her prejudices and humours, and by the intercession of the Rev. Mr. Graves (of her own persuasion), I have got her to open her lips. It seems that these Braddells lived very unhappily; the husband, a pious dissenter, had married a lady who turned out of a very different practice and belief. Jane Prior pitied her master, and detested her mistress. Some circumstances in the conduct of Mrs. Braddell made the husband, who was then in his last illness, resolve, from a point of conscience, to save his child from what he deemed the contamination of her precepts and example. Mrs. Braddell was absent from Liverpool on a visit, which was thought very unfeeling by the husband's friends; during this time Braddell was visited constantly by a gentleman (Mr. Ardworth), who differed from him greatly in some things, and seemed one of the carnal, but with whom agreement in politics (for they were both great politicians and republicans) seems to have established a link. One evening, when Mr. Ardworth was in the house, Jane Prior, who was the only maidservant (for they kept but two, and one had been just discharged), had been sent out to the apothecary's. On her return, Jane Prior, going into the nursery, missed the infant: she thought it was with her master; but coming into his room, Mr. Braddell told her to shut the door, informed her that he had intrusted the boy to Mr. Ardworth, to be brought up in a righteous and pious manner, and implored and commanded her to keep this a secret from his wife, whom he was resolved, indeed, if he lived, not to receive back into his house. Braddell, however, did not survive more than two days this event. On his death, Mrs. Braddell returned; but circumstances connected with the symptoms of his malady, and a strong impression which haunted himself, and with which he had infected Jane Prior, that he had been poisoned, led to a posthumous examination of his remains. No trace of poison was, however, discovered, and suspicions that had been directed against his wife could not be substantiated by law; still, she was regarded in so unfavourable a light by all who had known them both, she met with such little kindness or sympathy in her widowhood, and had been so openly denounced by Jane Prior, that it is not to be wondered at that she left the place as soon as possible. The house, indeed, was taken from her; for Braddell's affairs were found in such confusion, and his embarrassments so great, that everything was seized and sold off,—nothing left for the widow nor for the child (if the last were ever discovered.)

As may be supposed, Mrs. Braddell was at first very clamorous for the lost child; but Jane Prior kept her promise and withheld all clew to it, and Mrs. Braddell was forced to quit the place, in ignorance of what had become of it. Since then no one had heard of her; but Jane Prior says that she is sure she has come to no good. Now, though much of this may be, no doubt, familiar to you, dear Jason, it is right, when I put the evidence before you, that you should know and guard against what to expect; and in any trial at law to prove the identity of Vincent Braddell, Jane Prior must be a principal witness, and will certainly not spare poor Mrs. Braddell. For the main point, however,—namely, the suspicion of poisoning her husband,—the inquest and verdict may set aside all alarm.

My next researches have been directed on the track of Walter Ardworth, after leaving Liverpool, which (I find by the books at the inn where he lodged and was known) he did in debt to the innkeeper, the very night he received the charge of the child. Here, as yet, I am in fault; but I have ascertained that a woman, one of the sect, of the name of Joplin, living in a village fifteen miles from the town, had the care of some infant, to replace her own, which she had lost. I am going to this village to-morrow. But I cannot expect much in that quarter, since it would seem at variance with your more probable belief that Walter Ardworth took the child at once to Mr. Fielden's. However, you see I have already gone very far in the evidence,—the birth of the child, the delivery of the child to Ardworth. I see a very pretty case already before us, and I do not now doubt for a moment of ultimate success. Yours, N. GRABMAN.

Lucretia read steadily, and with no change of countenance, to the last line of the letter. Then, as she put it down on the table before her, she repeated, with a tone of deep exultation: "No doubt of ultimate

success!"

"You do not fear to brave all which the spite of this woman, Jane Prior, may prompt her to say against you?" asked Varney.

Lucretia's brow fell. "It is another torture," she said, "even to own my marriage with a low-born hypocrite. But I can endure it for the cause," she added, more haughtily. "Nothing can really hurt me in these obsolete aspersions and this vague scandal. The inquest acquitted me, and the world will be charitable to the mother of him who has wealth and rank and that vigorous genius which, if proved in obscurity, shall command opinion in renown."

"You are now, then, disposed at once to proceed to action. For Helen all is prepared,—the insurances are settled, the trust for which I hold them on your behalf is signed and completed. But for Percival St. John I await your directions. Will it be best first to prove your son's identity, or when morally satisfied that that proof is forthcoming, to remove betimes both the barriers to his inheritance? If we tarry for the last, the removal of St. John becomes more suspicious than it does at a time when you have no visible interest in his death. Besides, now we have the occasion, or can make it, can we tell how long it will last? Again, it will seem more natural that the lover should break his heart in the first shock of—"

"Ay," interrupted Lucretia, "I would have all thought and contemplation of crime at an end when, clasping my boy to my heart, I can say, 'Your mother's inheritance is yours.' I would not have a murder before my eyes when they should look only on the fair prospects beyond. I would cast back all the hideous images of horror into the rear of memory, so that hope may for once visit me again undisturbed. No, Gabriel, were I to speak forever, you would comprehend not what I grasp at in a son. It is at a future! Rolling a stone over the sepulchre of the past, it is a resurrection into a fresh world; it is to know again one emotion not impure, one scheme not criminal,—it is, in a word, to cease to be as myself, to think in another soul, to hear my heart beat in another form. All this I covet in a son. And when all this should smile before me in his image, shall I be plucked back again into my hell by the consciousness that a new crime is to be done? No; wade quickly through the passage of blood, that we may dry our garments and breathe the air upon the bank where sun shines and flowers bloom!"

"So be it, then," said Varney. "Before the week is out, I must be under the same roof as St. John. Before the week is out, why not all meet in the old halls of Laughton?"

"Ay, in the halls of Laughton. On the hearth of our ancestors the deeds done for our descendants look less dark."

"And first, to prepare the way, Helen should sicken in these fogs of London, and want change of air."

"Place before me that desk. I will read William Mainwaring's letters again and again, till from every shadow in the past a voice comes forth, 'The child of your rival, your betrayer, your undoer, stands between the daylight and your son!'"

## **CHAPTER XV.**

### **VARIETIES.**

Leaving the guilty pair to concert their schemes and indulge their atrocious hopes, we accompany Percival to the hovel occupied by Becky Carruthers.

On following Beck into the room she rented, Percival was greatly surprised to find, seated comfortably on the only chair to be seen, no less a person than the worthy Mrs. Mivers. This good lady in her spinster days had earned her own bread by hard work. She had captivated Mr. Mivers when but a simple housemaid in the service of one of his relations. And while this humble condition in her earlier life may account for much in her language and manners which is nowadays inconsonant with the breeding and education that characterize the wives of opulent tradesmen, so perhaps the remembrance of it made her unusually susceptible to the duties of charity. For there is no class of society more prone to pity and relieve the poor than females in domestic service; and this virtue Mrs. Mivers had not laid aside, as many do, as soon as she was in a condition to practise it with effect. Mrs. Mivers blushed scarlet on being detected in her visit of kindness, and hastened to excuse herself by the information that she belonged to a society of ladies for "The Bettering the Condition of the Poor," and that having



just been informed of Mrs. Becky's destitute state, she had looked in to recommend her—a ventilator!

"It is quite shocking to see how little the poor attends to the proper ventilating their houses. No wonder there's so much typhus about!" said Mrs. Mivers. "And for one-and-sixpence we can introduce a stream of h- air that goes up the chimblly, and carries away all that it finds!"

"I 'umbly thank you, marm," said the poor bundle of rags that went by the name of "Becky," as with some difficulty she contrived to stand in the presence of the benevolent visitor; "but I am much afeard that the h-air will make the rheumatiz very rumpatious!"

"On the contrary, on the contrary," said Mrs. Mivers, triumphantly; and she proceeded philosophically to explain that all the fevers, aches, pains, and physical ills that harass the poor arise from the want of an air-trap in the chimney and a perforated network in the window-pane. Becky listened patiently; for Mrs. Mivers was only a philosopher in her talk, and she had proved herself anything but a philosopher in her actions, by the spontaneous present of five shillings, and the promise of a basket of victuals and some good wine to keep the cold wind she invited to the apartment out of the stomach.

Percival imitated the silence of Becky, whose spirit was so bowed down by an existence of drudgery that not even the sight of her foster-son could draw her attention from the respect due to a superior.

"And is this poor cranky-looking cretur your son, Mrs. Becky?" said the visitor, struck at last by the appearance of the ex-sweeper as he stood at the threshold, hat in hand.

"No, indeed, marm," answered Becky; "I often says, says I: 'Child, you be the son of Sint Poll's.'"

Beck smiled proudly.

"It was agin the grit church, marm ——— But it's a long story. My poor good man had not a long been dead,—as good a man as hever lived, marm," and Becky dropped a courtesy; "he fell off a scaffold, and pitched right on his 'ead, or I should not have come on the parish, marm,—and that's the truth on it!"

"Very well, I shall call and hear all about it; a sad case, I dare say. You see, your husband should have subscribed to our Loan Society, and then they'd have found him a 'andsome coffin, and given three pounds to his widder. But the poor are so benighted in these parts. I'm sure, sir, I can't guess what brought you here; but that's no business of mine. And how are all at Old Brompton?" Here Mrs. Mivers bridled indignantly. "There was a time when Miss Mainwaring was very glad to come and chat with Mr. M. and myself; but now 'rum has riz,' as the saying is,—not but what I dare say it's not her fault, poor thing! That stiff aunt of hers,—she need not look so high; pride and poverty, forsooth!"

While delivering these conciliatory sentences, Mrs. Mivers had gathered up her gown, and was evidently in the bustle of departure. As she now nodded to Becky, Percival stepped up, and, with his irresistible smile, offered her his arm. Much surprised and much flattered, Mrs. Mivers accepted it. As she did so, he gently detained her while he said to Becky,—"My good friend, I have brought you the poor lad to whom you have been a mother, to tell you that good deeds find their reward sooner or later. As for him, make yourself easy; he will inform you of the new step he has taken, and for you, good, kind-hearted creature, thank the boy you brought up if your old age shall be made easy and cheerful. Now, Beck, silly lad, go and tell all to your nurse! Take care of this step, Mrs. Mivers."

As soon as he was in the street, Percival, who, if amused at the ventilator, had seen the five shillings gleam on Becky's palm, and felt that he had found under the puce-coloured gown a good woman's heart to understand him, gave Mrs. Mivers a short sketch of poor Becky's history and misfortunes, and so contrived to interest her in behalf of the nurse that she willingly promised to become Percival's almoner, to execute his commission, to improve the interior of Becky's abode, and distribute weekly the liberal stipend he proposed to settle on the old widow. They had grown, indeed, quite friendly and intimate by the time he reached the smart plate-glazed mahogany-coloured facade within which the flourishing business of Mr. Mivers was carried on; and when, knocking at the private door, promptly opened by a lemon-coloured page, she invited him upstairs, it so chanced that the conversation had slid off to Helen, and Percival was sufficiently interested to bow assent and to enter.

Though all the way up the stairs Mrs. Mivers, turning back at every other step, did her best to impress upon her young visitor's mind the important fact that they kept their household establishment at their "willer," and that their apartments in Fleet Street were only a "convenience," the store set by the worthy housewife upon her goods and chattels was sufficiently visible in the drugget that threaded its narrow way up the gay Brussels stair-carpet, and in certain layers of paper which protected from the profanation of immediate touch the mahogany hand-rail. And nothing could exceed the fostering care exhibited in the drawing-room, when the door thrown open admitted a view of its damask moreen curtains, pinned back from such impertinent sunbeams as could force their way through the foggy air

of the east into the windows, and the ells of yellow muslin that guarded the frames, at least, of a collection of coloured prints and two kit-kat portraitures of Mr. Mivers and his lady from the perambulations of the flies.

But Percival's view of this interior was somewhat impeded by his portly guide, who, uttering a little exclamation of surprise, stood motionless on the threshold as she perceived Mr. Mivers seated by the hearth in close conference with a gentleman whom she had never seen before. At that hour it was so rare an event in the life of Mr. Mivers to be found in the drawing-room, and that he should have an acquaintance unknown to his helpmate was a circumstance so much rarer still, that Mrs. Mivers may well be forgiven for keeping St. John standing at the door till she had recovered her amaze.

Meanwhile Mr. Mivers rose in some confusion, and was apparently about to introduce his guest, when that gentleman coughed, and pinched the host's arm significantly. Mr. Mivers coughed also, and stammered out: "A gentleman, Mrs. M.,—a friend; stay with us a day or two. Much honoured, hum!"

Mrs. Mivers stared and courtesied, and stared again. But there was an open, good-humoured smile in the face of the visitor, as he advanced and took her hand, that attracted a heart very easily conciliated. Seeing that that was no moment for further explanation, she plumped herself into a seat and said,—

"But bless us and save us, I am keeping you standing, Mr. St. John!"

"St. John!" repeated the visitor, with a vehemence that startled Mrs. Mivers. "Your name is St. John, sir,—related to the St. Johns of Laughton?"

"Yes, indeed," answered Percival, with his shy, arch smile. "Laughton at present has no worthier owner than myself."

The gentleman made two strides to Percival and shook him heartily by the hand.

"This is pleasant indeed!" he exclaimed. "You must excuse my freedom; but I knew well poor old Sir Miles, and my heart warms at the sight of his representative."

Percival glanced at his new acquaintance, and on the whole was prepossessed in his favour. He seemed somewhere on the sunnier side of fifty, with that superb yellow bronze of complexion which betokens long residence under Eastern skies. Deep wrinkles near the eyes, and a dark circle round them, spoke of cares and fatigue, and perhaps dissipation. But he had evidently a vigour of constitution that had borne him passably through all; his frame was wiry and nervous; his eye bright and full of life; and there was that abrupt, unsteady, mercurial restlessness in his movements and manner which usually accompanies the man whose sanguine temperament prompts him to concede to the impulse, and who is blessed or cursed with a superabundance of energy, according as circumstance may favour or judgment correct that equivocal gift of constitution.

Percival said something appropriate in reply to so much cordiality paid to the account of the Sir Miles whom he had never seen, and seated himself, colouring slightly under the influence of the fixed, pleased, and earnest look still bent upon him.

Searching for something else to say, Percival asked Mrs. Mivers if she had lately seen John Ardworth.

The guest, who had just reseated himself, turned his chair round at that question with such vivacity that Mrs. Mivers heard it crack. Her chairs were not meant for such usage. A shade fell over her rosy countenance as she replied,—

"No, indeed (please, sir, them chairs is brittle)! No, he is like Madame at Brompton, and seldom condescends to favour us now. It was but last Sunday we asked him to dinner. I am sure he need not turn up his nose at our roast beef and pudding!"

Here Mr. Mivers was taken with a violent fit of coughing, which drew off his wife's attention. She was afraid he had taken cold.

The stranger took out a large snuff-box, inhaled a long pinch of snuff, and said to St. John,—

"This Mr. John Ardworth, a pert enough jackanapes, I suppose,—a limb of the law, eh?"

"Sir," said Percival, gravely, "John Ardworth is my particular friend. It is clear that you know very little of him."

"That's true," said the stranger,—"'pon my life, that's very true. But I suppose he's like all lawyers,—cunning and tricky, conceited and supercilious, full of prejudice and cant, and a red-hot Tory into the

bargain. I know them, sir; I know them!"

"Well," answered St. John, half gayly, half angrily, "your general experience serves you very little here; for Ardworth is exactly the opposite of all you have described."

"Even in politics?"

"Why, I fear he is half a Radical,—certainly more than a Whig," answered St. John, rather mournfully; for his own theories were all the other way, notwithstanding his unpatriotic forgetfulness of them in his offer to assist Ardworth's entrance into parliament.

"I am very glad to hear it," cried the stranger, again taking snuff. "And this Madame at Brompton—perhaps I know her a little better than I do young Mr. Ardworth—Mrs. Brad—I mean Madame Dalibard!" and the stranger glanced at Mr. Mivers, who was slowly recovering from some vigorous slaps on the back administered to him by his wife as a counter-irritant to the cough. "Is it true that she has lost the use of her limbs?"

Percival shook his head.

"And takes care of poor Helen Mainwaring the orphan? Well, well, that looks amiable enough. I must see; I must see!"

"Who shall I say inquired after her, when I see Madame Dalibard?" asked Percival, with some curiosity.

"Who? Oh, Mr. Tomkins. She will not recollect him, though,"—and the stranger laughed, and Mr. Mivers laughed too; and Mrs. Mivers, who, indeed, always laughed when other people laughed, laughed also. So Percival thought he ought to laugh for the sake of good company, and all laughed together as he arose and took leave.

He had not, however, got far from the house, on his way to his cabriolet, which he had left by Temple Bar, when, somewhat to his surprise, he found Mr. Tomkins at his elbow.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. St. John, but I have only just returned to England, and on such occasions a man is apt to seem curious. This young lawyer — You see the elder Ardworth, a good-for-nothing scamp, was a sort of friend of mine,—not exactly friend, indeed, for, by Jove, I think he was a worse friend to me than he was to anybody else; still I had a foolish interest for him, and should be glad to hear something more about any one bearing his name than I can coax out of that droll little linen draper. You are really intimate with young Ardworth, eh?"

"Intimate! poor fellow, he will not let any one be that; he works too hard to be social. But I love him sincerely, and I admire him beyond measure."

"The dog has industry, then;—that's good. And does he make debts, like that rascal, Ardworth senior?"

"Really, sir, I must say this tone with respect to Mr. Ardworth's father- -"

"What the devil, sir! Do you take the father's part as well as the son's?"

"I don't know anything about Mr. Ardworth senior," said Percival, pouting; "but I do know that my friend would not allow any one to speak ill of his father in his presence; and I beg you, sir, to consider that whatever would offend him must offend me."

"Gad's my life! He's the luckiest young rogue to have such a friend. Sir, I wish you a very good-day."

Mr. Tomkins took off his hat, bowed, and passing St. John with a rapid step, was soon lost to his eye amongst the crowd hurrying westward.

But our business being now rather with him than Percival, we leave the latter to mount his cabriolet, and we proceed with Mr. Mivers's mercurial guest on his eccentric way through the throng. There was an odd mixture of thoughtful abstraction and quick observation in the soliloquy in which this gentleman indulged, as he walked briskly on.

"A pretty young spark that St. John! A look of his father, but handsomer, and less affected. I like him. Fine shop that, very! London wonderfully improved. A hookah in that window,—God bless me!—a real hookah! This is all very good news about that poor boy, very. After all, he is not to blame if his mother was such a damnable—I must contrive to see and judge of him myself as soon as possible. Can't trust to others; too sharp for that. What an ugly dog that is, looking after me! It is certainly a bailiff. Hang it,

what do I care for bailiffs? Hem, hem!" And the gentleman thrust his hands into his pockets, and laughed, as the jingle of coin reached his ear through the din without. "Well, I must make haste to decide; for really there is a very troublesome piece of business before me. Plague take her, what can have become of the woman? I shall have to hunt out a sharp lawyer. But John's a lawyer himself. No, attorneys, I suppose, are the men. Gad! they were sharp enough when they had to hunt me. What's that great bill on the wall about? 'Down with the Lords!' Pooh, pooh! Master John Bull, you love lords a great deal too much for that. A prettyish girl! English women are very good-looking, certainly. That Lucretia, what shall I do, if — Ah, time enough to think of her when I have got over that mighty stiff if!"

In such cogitations and mental remarks our traveller whiled away the time till he found himself in Piccadilly. There, a publisher's shop (and he had that keen eye for shops which betrays the stranger in London), with its new publications exposed at the window, attracted his notice. Conspicuous amongst the rest was the open title-page of a book, at the foot of which was placed a placard with the enticing words, "FOURTH EDITION; JUST OUT," in red capitals. The title of the work struck his irritable, curious fancy; he walked into the shop, asked for the volume, and while looking over the contents with muttered ejaculations, "Good! capital! Why, this reminds one of Horne Tooke! What's the price? Very dear; must have it though,—must. Ha, ha! home-thrust there!"—while thus turning over the leaves, and rending them asunder with his forefinger, regardless of the paper cutter extended to him by the shopman, a gentleman, pushing by him, asked if the publisher was at home; and as the shopman, bowing very low, answered "Yes," the new-comer darted into a little recess behind the shop. Mr. Tomkins, who had looked up very angrily on being jostled so unceremoniously, started and changed colour when he saw the face of the offender. "Saints in heaven!" he murmured almost audibly, "what a look of that woman; and yet—no—it is gone!"

"Who is that gentleman?" he asked abruptly, as he paid for his book.

The shopman smiled, but answered, "I don't know, sir."

"That's a lie! You would never bow so low to a man you did not know!"

The shopman smiled again. "Why, sir, there are many who come to this house who don't wish us to know them."

"Ah, I understand; you are political publishers,—afraid of libels, I dare say. Always the same thing in this cursed country; and then they tell us we are 'free!' So I suppose that gentleman has written something William Pitt does not like. But William Pitt—ha—he's dead! Very true, so he is! Sir, this little book seems most excellent; but in my time, a man would have been sent to Newgate for printing it." While thus running on, Mr. Tomkins had edged himself pretty close to the recess within which the last-comer had disappeared; and there, seated on a high stool, he contrived to read and to talk at the same time, but his eye and his ear were both turned every instant towards the recess.

The shopman, little suspecting that in so very eccentric, garrulous a person he was permitting a spy to encroach upon the secrets of the house, continued to make up sundry parcels of the new publication which had so enchanted his customer, while he expatiated on the prodigious sensation the book had created, and while the customer himself had already caught enough of the low conversation within the recess to be aware that the author of the book was the very person who had so roused his curiosity.

Not till that gentleman, followed to the door by the polite publisher, had quitted the shop, did Mr. Tomkins put this volume in his pocket, and, with a familiar nod at the shopman, take himself off.

He was scarcely in the street when he saw Percival St. John leaning out of his cabriolet and conversing with the author he had discovered. He halted a moment irresolute; but the young man, in whom our reader recognizes John Ardworth, declining St. John's invitation to accompany him to Brompton, resumed his way through the throng; the cabriolet drove on; and Mr. Tomkins, though with a graver mien and a steadier step, continued his desultory rambles. Meanwhile, John Ardworth strode gloomily back to his lonely chamber.

There, throwing himself on the well-worn chair before the crowded desk, he buried his face in his hands, and for some minutes he felt all that profound despondency peculiar to those who have won fame, to add to the dark volume of experience the conviction of fame's nothingness. For some minutes he felt an illiberal and ungrateful envy of St. John, so fair, so light-hearted, so favoured by fortune, so rich in friends,—in a mother's love, and in Helen's half-plighted troth. And he, from his very birth, cut off from the social ties of blood; no mother's kiss to reward the toils or gladden the sports of childhood; no father's cheering word up the steep hill of man! And Helen, for whose sake he had so often, when his heart grew weary, nerved himself again to labour, saying, "Let me be rich, let me be great, and then I will dare to tell Helen that I love her!"—Helen smiling upon another, unconscious of his pangs! What

could fame bestow in compensation? What matter that strangers praised, and the babble of the world's running stream lingered its brief moment round the pebble in its way. In the bitterness of his mood, he was unjust to his rival. All that exquisite but half-concealed treasure of imagination and thought which lay beneath the surface of Helen's childlike smile he believed that he alone—he, soul of power and son of genius—was worthy to discover and to prize. In the pride not unfrequent with that kingliest of all aristocracies, the Chiefs of Intellect, he forgot the grandeur which invests the attributes of the heart; forgot that, in the lists of love, the heart is at least the equal of the mind. In the reaction that follows great excitement, Ardworth had morbidly felt, that day, his utter solitude,—felt it in the streets through which he had passed; in the home to which he had returned; the burning tears, shed for the first time since childhood, forced themselves through his clasped fingers. At length he rose, with a strong effort at self-mastery, some contempt of his weakness, and much remorse at his ungrateful envy. He gathered together the soiled manuscript and dingy proofs of his book, and thrust them through the grimy bars of his grate; then, opening his desk, he drew out a small packet, with tremulous fingers unfolding paper after paper, and gazed, with eyes still moistened, on the relics kept till then in the devotion of the only sentiment inspired by Eros that had ever, perhaps, softened his iron nature. These were two notes from Helen, some violets she had once given him, and a little purse she had knitted for him (with a playful prophecy of future fortunes) when he had last left the vicarage. Nor blame him, ye who, with more habitual romance of temper, and richer fertility of imagination, can reconcile the tenderest memories with the sternest duties, if he, with all his strength, felt that the associations connected with those tokens would but enervate his resolves and embitter his resignation. You can guess not the extent of the sacrifice, the bitterness of the pang, when, averting his head, he dropped those relics on the hearth. The evidence of the desultory ambition, the tokens of the visionary love,—the same flame leaped up to devour both! It was as the funeral pyre of his youth!

"So," he said to himself, "let all that can divert me from the true ends of my life consume! Labour, take back your son."

An hour afterwards, and his clerk, returning home, found Ardworth employed as calmly as usual on his Law Reports.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE INVITATION TO LAUGHTON.

That day, when he called at Brompton, Percival reported to Madame Dalibard his interview with the eccentric Mr. Tomkins. Lucretia seemed chafed and disconcerted by the inquiries with which that gentleman had honoured her, and as soon as Percival had gone, she sent for Varney. He did not come till late; she repeated to him what St. John had said of the stranger. Varney participated in her uneasy alarm. The name, indeed, was unknown to them, nor could they conjecture the bearer of so ordinary a patronymic; but there had been secrets enough in Lucretia's life to render her apprehensive of encountering those who had known her in earlier years; and Varney feared lest any rumour reported to St. John might create his mistrust, or lessen the hold obtained upon a victim heretofore so unsuspecting. They both agreed in the expediency of withdrawing themselves and St. John as soon as possible from London, and frustrating Percival's chance of closer intercourse with the stranger, who had evidently aroused his curiosity.

The next day Helen was much indisposed; and the symptoms grew so grave towards the evening that Madame Dalibard expressed alarm, and willingly suffered Percival (who had only been permitted to see Helen for a few minutes, when her lassitude was so extreme that she was obliged to retire to her room) to go in search of a physician. He returned with one of the most eminent of the faculty. On the way to Brompton, in reply to the questions of Dr. — , Percival spoke of the dejection to which Helen was occasionally subject, and this circumstance confirmed Dr. — , after he had seen his patient, in his view of the case. In addition to some feverish and inflammatory symptoms which he trusted his prescriptions would speedily remove, he found great nervous debility, and willingly fell in with the casual suggestion of Varney, who was present, that a change of air would greatly improve Miss Mainwaring's general health, as soon as the temporary acute attack had subsided. He did not regard the present complaint very seriously, and reassured poor Percival by his cheerful mien and sanguine predictions. Percival remained at the house the whole day, and had the satisfaction, before he left, of hearing that the remedies had already abated the fever, and that Helen had fallen into a profound sleep. Walking back to town with Varney, the last said hesitatingly,—

"You were saying to me the other day that you feared you should have to go for a few days both to Vernon Grange and to Laughton, as your steward wished to point out to you some extensive alterations in the management of your woods to commence this autumn. As you were so soon coming of age, Lady Mary desired that her directions should yield to your own. Now, since Helen is recommended change of air, why not invite Madame Dalibard to visit you at one of these places? I would suggest Laughton. My poor mother-in-law I know longs to revisit the scenes of her youth, and you could not compliment or conciliate her more than by such an invitation."

"Oh," said Percival, joyfully, "it would realize the fondest dream of my heart to see Helen under the old roof-tree of Laughton; but as my mother is abroad, and there is therefore no lady to receive them, perhaps—"

"Why," interrupted Varney, "Madame Dalibard herself is almost the very person whom *les bienséances* might induce you to select to do the honours of your house in Lady Mary's absence, not only as kinswoman to yourself, but as the nearest surviving relative of Sir Miles,—the most immediate descendant of the St. Johns; her mature years and decorum of life, her joint kindred to Helen and yourself, surely remove every appearance of impropriety."

"If she thinks so, certainly; I am no accurate judge of such formalities. You could not oblige me more, Varney, than in pre-obtaining her consent to the proposal. Helen at Laughton! Oh, blissful thought!"

"And in what air would she be so likely to revive?" said Varney; but his voice was thick and husky.

The ideas thus presented to him almost banished anxiety from Percival's breast. In a thousand delightful shapes they haunted him during the sleepless night; and when, the next morning, he found that Helen was surprisingly better, he pressed his invitation upon Madame Dalibard with a warmth that made her cheek yet more pale, and the hand, which the boy grasped as he pleaded, as cold as the dead. But she briefly consented, and Percival, allowed a brief interview with Helen, had the rapture to see her smile in a delight as childlike as his own at the news he communicated, and listen with swimming eye when he dwelt on the walks they should take together amidst haunts to become henceforth dear to her as to himself. Fairyland dawned before them.

The visit of the physician justified Percival's heightened spirits. All the acuter symptoms had vanished already. He sanctioned his patient's departure from town as soon as Madame Dalibard's convenience would permit, and recommended only a course of restorative medicines to strengthen the nervous system, which was to commence with the following morning, and he persisted in for some weeks. He dwelt much on the effect to be derived from taking these medicines the first thing in the day, as soon as Helen woke. Varney and Madame Dalibard exchanged a rapid glance. Charmed with the success that in this instance had attended the skill of the great physician, Percival, in his usual zealous benevolence, now eagerly pressed upon Madame Dalibard the wisdom of consulting Dr. — for her own malady; and the doctor, putting on his spectacles and drawing his chair nearer to the frowning cripple, began to question her of her state. But Madame Dalibard abruptly and discourteously put a stop to all interrogatories: she had already exhausted all remedies art could suggest; she had become reconciled to her deplorable infirmity, and lost all faith in physicians. Some day or other she might try the baths at Egra, but till then she must be permitted to suffer undisturbed.

The doctor, by no means wishing to undertake a case of chronic paralysis, rose smilingly, and with a liberal confession that the German baths were sometimes extremely efficacious in such complaints, pressed Percival's outstretched hand, then slipped his own into his pocket, and bowed his way out of the room.

Relieved from all apprehension, Percival very good-humouredly received the hint of Madame Dalibard that the excitement through which she had gone for the last twenty-four hours rendered her unfit for his society, and went home to write to Laughton and prepare all things for the reception of his guests. Varney accompanied him. Percival found Beck in the hall, already much altered, and embellished, by a new suit of livery. The ex-sweeper stared hard at Varney, who, without recognizing, in so smart a shape, the squalid tatterdemalion who had lighted him up the stairs to Mr. Grabman's apartments, passed him by into Percival's little study, on the ground-floor.

"Well, Beck," said Percival, ever mindful of others, and attributing his groom's astonished gaze at Varney to his admiration of that gentleman's showy exterior, "I shall send you down to the country to-morrow with two of the horses; so you may have to-day to yourself to take leave of your nurse. I flatter myself you will find her rooms a little more comfortable than they were yesterday."

Beck heard with a bursting heart; and his master, giving him a cheering tap on the shoulder, left him to find his way into the streets and to Becky's abode.

He found, indeed, that the last had already undergone the magic transformation which is ever at the command of godlike wealth. Mrs. Mivers, who was naturally prompt and active, had had pleasure in executing Percival's commission. Early in the morning, floors had been scrubbed, the windows cleaned, the ventilator fixed; then followed porters with chairs and tables, and a wonderful Dutch clock, and new bedding, and a bright piece of carpet; and then came two servants belonging to Mrs. Mivers to arrange the chattels; and finally, when all was nearly completed, the Avatar of Mrs. Mivers herself, to give the last finish with her own mittened hands and in her own housewifely apron.

The good lady was still employed in ranging a set of teacups on the shelves of the dresser when Beck entered; and his old nurse, in the overflow of her gratitude, hobbled up to her foundling and threw her arms round his neck.

"That's right!" said Mrs. Mivers, good-humouredly, turning round, and wiping the tear from her eye. "You ought to make much of him, poor lad,- he has turned out a godsend indeed; and, upon my word, he looks very respectable in his new clothes. But what is this,—a child's coral?" as, opening a drawer in the dresser, she discovered Beck's treasure. "Dear me, it is a very handsome one; why, these bells look like gold!" and suspicion of her protege's honesty for a moment contracted her thoughtful brow. "However on earth did you come by this, Mrs. Becky?"

"Sure and sartin," answered Becky, dropping her mutilated courtesy, "I be's glad it be found now, instead of sum days afore, or I might have been vicked enough to let it go with the rest to the pop-shop; and I'm sure the times out of mind ven that 'ere boy was a h-urchin that I've risted the timtashung and said, 'No, Becky Carruthers, that maun't go to my h-uncle's!'"

"And why not, my good woman?"

"Lor' love you, marm, if that curril could speak, who knows vot it might say,—eh, lad, who knows? You sees, marm, my good man had not a long been dead; I could not a get no vork no vays. 'Becky Carruthers,' says I, 'you must go out in the streets a begging!' I niver thought I should a come to that. But my poor husband, you sees, marm, fell from a scaffold',—as good a man as hever—"

"Yes, yes, you told me all that before," said Mrs. Mivers, growing impatient, and already diverted from her interest in the coral by a new cargo, all bright from the tinman, which, indeed, no less instantaneously, absorbed the admiration both of Beck and his nurse. And what with the inspection of these articles, and the comments each provoked, the coral rested in peace on the dresser till Mrs. Mivers, when just about to renew her inquiries, was startled by the sound of the Dutch clock striking four,—a voice which reminded her of the lapse of time and her own dinner-hour. So, with many promises to call again and have a good chat with her humble friend, she took her departure, amidst the blessings of Becky, and the less noisy, but not less grateful, salutations of Beck.

Very happy was the evening these poor creatures passed together over their first cup of tea from the new bright copper kettle and the almost forgotten luxury of crumpets, in which their altered circumstances permitted them without extravagance to indulge. In the course of conversation Beck communicated how much he had been astonished by recognizing the visitor of Grabman, the provoker of the irritable grave-stealer, in the familiar companion of his master; and when Becky told him how often, in the domestic experience her vocation of charing had accumulated, she had heard of the ruin brought on rich young men by gamblers and sharpers, Beck promised to himself to keep a sharp eye on Grabman's showy acquaintance. "For master is but a babe, like," said he, majestically; "and I'd be cut into mincemeat afore I'd let an 'air on his 'ead come to 'arm, if so be's h-as 'ow I could perwent it."

We need not say that his nurse confirmed him in these good resolutions.

"And now," said Beck, when the time came for parting, "you'll keep from the gin-shop, old 'oman, and not shame the young master?"

"Sartin sure," answered Becky; "it is only ven vun is down in the vorld that vun goes to the Ticker-shop. Now, h-indeed,"—and she looked round very proudly,—"I 'as a 'spectable stashion, and I vould n't go for to lower it, and let 'em say that Becky Carruthers does not know how to conduct herself. The curril will be safe enuff now; but p'r'aps you had best take it yourself, lad."

"Vot should I do vith it? I've had enuff of the 'sponsibility. Put it up in a 'ankerchiff, and p'r'aps ven master gets married, and 'as a babby vots teethin', he vil say, 'Thank ye, Beck, for your curril.' Vould not that make us proud, mammy?"

Chuckling heartily at that vision, Beck kissed his nurse, and trying hard to keep himself upright, and do credit to the dignity of his cloth, returned to his new room over the stables.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE WAKING OF THE SERPENT.

And how, O Poet of the sad belief, and eloquence "like ebony, at once dark and splendid [It was said of Tertullian that "his style was like ebony, dark and splendid]," how couldst thou, august Lucretius, deem it but sweet to behold from the steep the strife of the great sea, or, safe from the peril, gaze on the wrath of the battle, or, serene in the temples of the wise, look afar on the wanderings of human error? Is it so sweet to survey the ills from which thou art delivered? Shall not the strong law of SYMPATHY find thee out, and thy heart rebuke thy philosophy? Not sweet, indeed, can be man's shelter in self when he says to the storm, "I have no bark on the sea;" or to the gods of the battle, "I have no son in the slaughter;" when he smiles unmoved upon Woe, and murmurs, "Weep on, for these eyes know no tears;" when, unappalled, he beholdeth the black deeds of crime, and cries to his conscience, "Thou art calm." Yet solemn is the sight to him who lives in all life,—seeks for Nature in the storm, and Providence in the battle; loses self in the woe; probes his heart in the crime; and owns no philosophy that sets him free from the fetters of man. Not in vain do we scan all the contrasts in the large framework of civilized earth if we note "when the dust groweth into hardness, and the clods cleave fast together." Range, O Art, through all space, clasp together in extremes, shake idle wealth from its lethargy, and bid States look in hovels where the teacher is dumb, and Reason unweeded runs to rot! Bid haughty Intellect pause in its triumph, and doubt if intellect alone can deliver the soul from its tempters! Only that lives uncorrupt which preserves in all seasons the human affections in which the breath of God breathes and is. Go forth to the world, O Art, go forth to the innocent, the guilty, the wise, and the dull; go forth as the still voice of Fate! Speak of the insecurity even of goodness below; carry on the rapt vision of suffering Virtue through "the doors of the shadows of death;" show the dim revelation symbolled forth in the Tragedy of old,—how incomplete is man's destiny, how undeveloped is the justice divine, if Antigone sleep eternally in the ribs of the rock, and Oedipus vanish forever in the Grove of the Furies. Here below, "the waters are hid with a stone, and the face of the deep is frozen;" but above liveth He "who can bind the sweet influence of the Pleiades, and loose the bands of Orion." Go with Fate over the bridge, and she vanishes in the land beyond the gulf! Behold where the Eternal demands Eternity for the progress of His creatures and the vindication of His justice!

It was past midnight, and Lucretia sat alone in her dreary room; her head buried on her bosom, her eyes fixed on the ground, her hands resting on her knees,—it was an image of inanimate prostration and decrepitude that might have moved compassion to its depth. The door opened, and Martha entered, to assist Madame Dalibard, as usual, to retire to rest. Her mistress slowly raised her eyes at the noise of the opening door, and those eyes took their searching, penetrating acuteness as they fixed upon the florid nor uncomely countenance of the waiting-woman.

In her starched cap, her sober-coloured stuff gown, in her prim, quiet manner and a certain sanctified demureness of aspect, there was something in the first appearance of this woman that impressed you with the notion of respectability, and inspired confidence in those steady good qualities which we seek in a trusty servant. But more closely examined, an habitual observer might have found much to qualify, perhaps to disturb, his first prepossessions. The exceeding lowness of the forehead, over which that stiff, harsh hair was so puritanically parted; the severe hardness of those thin, small lips, so pursed up and constrained; even a certain dull cruelty in those light, cold blue eyes,—might have caused an uneasy sentiment, almost approaching to fear. The fat grocer's spoilt child instinctively recoiled from her when she entered the shop to make her household purchases; the old, gray-whiskered terrier dog at the public-house slunk into the tap when she crossed the threshold.

Madame Dalibard silently suffered herself to be wheeled into the adjoining bedroom, and the process of disrobing was nearly completed before she said abruptly,—

"So you attended Mr. Varney's uncle in his last illness. Did he suffer much?"

"He was a poor creature at best," answered Martha; "but he gave me a deal of trouble afore he went. He was a scranny corpse when I strecked him out."

Madame Dalibard shrank from the hands at that moment employed upon herself, and said,—

"It was not, then, the first corpse you have laid out for the grave?"

"Not by many."

"And did any of those you so prepared die of the same complaint?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," returned Martha. "I never inquires how folks die; my bizness was to nurse 'em



till all was over, and then to sit up. As they say in my country, 'Riving Pike wears a hood when the weather bodes ill.'" [If Riving Pike do wear a hood, The day, be sure, will ne'er be good. A Lancashire Distich.]

"And when you sat up with Mr. Varney's uncle, did you feel no fear in the dead of the night,—that corpse before you, no fear?"

"Young Mr. Varney said I should come to no harm. Oh, he's a clever man! What should I fear, ma'am?" answered Martha, with a horrid simplicity.

"You have belonged to a very religious sect, I think I have heard you say,—a sect not unfamiliar to me; a sect to which great crime is very rarely known?"

"Yes, ma'am, some of 'em be tame enough, but others be weel [whirlpool] deep!"

"You do not believe what they taught you?"

"I did when I was young and silly."

"And what disturbed your belief?"

"Ma'am, the man what taught me, and my mother afore me, was the first I ever kep' company with," answered Martha, without a change in her florid hue, which seemed fixed in her cheek, as the red in an autumn leaf. "After he had ruined me, as the girls say, he told me as how it was all sham!"

"You loved him, then?"

"The man was well enough, ma'am, and he behaved handsome and got me a husband. I've known better days."

"You sleep well at night?"

"Yes, ma'am, thank you; I loves my bed."

"I have done with you," said Madame Dalibard, stifling a groan, as now, placed in her bed, she turned to the wall. Martha extinguished the candle, leaving it on the table by the bed, with a book and a box of matches, for Madame Dalibard was a bad sleeper, and often read in the night. She then drew the curtains and went her way.

It might be an hour after Martha had retired to rest that a hand was stretched from the bed, that the candle was lighted, and Lucretia Dalibard rose; with a sudden movement she threw aside the coverings, and stood in her long night-gear on the floor. Yes, the helpless, paralyzed cripple rose, was on her feet,—tall, elastic, erect! It was as a resuscitation from the grave. Never was change more startling than that simple action effected,—not in the form alone, but the whole character of the face. The solitary light streamed upward on a countenance on every line of which spoke sinister power and strong resolve. If you had ever seen her before in her false, crippled state, prostrate and helpless, and could have seen her then,—those eyes, if haggard still, now full of life and vigour; that frame, if spare, towering aloft in commanding stature, perfect in its proportions as a Grecian image of Nemesis,—your amaze would have merged into terror, so preternatural did the transformation appear, so did aspect and bearing contradict the very character of her sex, uniting the two elements most formidable in man or in fiend,—wickedness and power.

She stood a moment motionless, breathing loud, as if it were a joy to breathe free from restraint; and then, lifting the light, and gliding to the adjoining room, she unlocked a bureau in the corner, and bent over a small casket, which she opened with a secret spring.

Reader, cast back your eye to that passage in this history when Lucretia Clavering took down the volume from the niche in the tapestried chamber at Laughton, and numbered, in thought, the hours left to her uncle's life. Look back on the ungrateful thought; behold how it has swelled and ripened into the guilty deed! There, in that box, Death guards his treasure crypt. There, all the science of Hades numbers its murderous inventions. As she searched for the ingredients her design had pre-selected, something heavier than those small packets she deranged fell to the bottom of the box with a low and hollow sound. She started at the noise, and then smiled, in scorn of her momentary fear, as she took up the ring that had occasioned the sound,—a ring plain and solid, like those used as signets in the Middle Ages, with a large dull opal in the centre. What secret could that bauble have in common with its ghastly companions in Death's crypt? This had been found amongst Olivier's papers; a note in that precious manuscript, which had given to the hands of his successors the keys of the grave, had discovered the mystery of its uses. By the pressure of the hand, at the touch of a concealed spring, a barbed point flew forth steeped in venom more deadly than the Indian extracts from the bag of the

cobar de capello,—a venom to which no antidote is known, which no test can detect. It corrupts the whole mass of the blood; it mounts in frenzy and fire to the brain; it rends the soul from the body in spasm and convulsion. But examine the dead, and how divine the effect of the cause! How go back to the records of the Borgias, and amidst all the scepticisms of times in which, happily, such arts are unknown, unsuspected, learn from the hero of Machiavel how a clasp of the hand can get rid of a foe! Easier and more natural to point to the living puncture in the skin, and the swollen flesh round it, and dilate on the danger a rusty nail—nay, a pin—can engender when the humours are peccant and the blood is impure! The fabrication of that bauble, the discovery of Borgia's device, was the masterpiece in the science of Dalibard,—a curious and philosophical triumph of research, hitherto unused by its inventor and his heirs; for that casket is rich in the choice of more gentle materials: but the use yet may come. As she gazed on the ring, there was a complacent and proud expression on Lucretia's face.

"Dumb token of Caesar Borgia," she murmured,—"him of the wisest head and the boldest hand that ever grasped at empire, whom Machiavel, the virtuous, rightly praised as the model of accomplished ambition! Why should I falter in the paths which he trod with his royal step, only because my goal is not a throne? Every circle is as complete in itself, whether rounding a globule or a star. Why groan in the belief that the mind defiles itself by the darkness through which it glides on its object, or the mire through which it ascends to the hill? Murderer as he was, poisoner, and fratricide, did blood clog his intellect, or crime impoverish the luxury of his genius? Was his verse less melodious [It is well known that Caesar Borgia was both a munificent patron and an exquisite appreciator of art; well known also are his powers of persuasion but the general reader may not, perhaps, be acquainted with the fact that this terrible criminal was also a poet], or his love of art less intense, or his eloquence less persuasive, because he sought to remove every barrier, revenge every wrong, crush every foe?"

In the wondrous corruption to which her mind had descended, thus murmured Lucretia. Intellect had been so long made her sole god that the very monster of history was lifted to her reverence by his ruthless intellect alone,—lifted in that mood of feverish excitement when conscience, often less silenced, lay crushed, under the load of the deed to come, into an example and a guide.

Though at times, when looking back, oppressed by the blackest despair, no remorse of the past ever weakened those nerves when the Hour called up its demon, and the Will ruled the rest of the human being as a machine.

She replaced the ring, she reclosed the casket, relocked its depository; then passed again into the adjoining chamber.

A few minutes afterwards, and the dim light that stole from the heavens (in which the moon was partially overcast) through the casement on the staircase rested on a shapeless figure robed in black from head to foot, - a figure so obscure and undefinable in outline, so suited to the gloom in its hue, so stealthy and rapid in its movements, that had you started from sleep and seen it on your floor, you would perforce have deemed that your fancy had befooled you!

Thus darkly, through the darkness, went the Poisoner to her prey.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LUCRETIA — VOLUME 05 \*\*\*

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