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BOOK TENTH.

INITIAL CHAPTER.

UPON THIS FACT,—THAT THE WORLD IS STILL MUCH THE SAME AS IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN.

It is observed by a very pleasant writer, read nowadays only by the brave pertinacious few who still struggle hard to rescue from the House of Pluto the souls of departed authors, jostled and chased as those souls are by the noisy footsteps of the living,—it is observed by the admirable Charron, that "judgment and wisdom is not only the best, but the happiest portion God Almighty hath distributed amongst men; for though this distribution be made with a very uneven hand, yet nobody thinks himself stinted or ill-dealt with, but he that hath never so little is contented in this respect."

And, certainly, the present narrative may serve in notable illustration of the remark so dryly made by the witty and wise preacher. For whether our friend Riccabocca deduce theories for daily life from the great folio of Machiavelli; or that promising young gentleman, Mr. Randal Leslie, interpret the power of knowledge into the art of being too knowing for dull honest folks to cope with him; or acute Dick Avenel push his way up the social ascent with a blow for those before, and a kick for those behind him, after the approved fashion of your strong New Man; or Baron Levy—that cynical impersonation of Gold—compare himself to the Magnetic Rock in the Arabian tale, to which the nails in every ship that approaches the influence of the loadstone fly from the planks, and a shipwreck per day adds its waifs to the Rock,—questionless, at least; it is, that each of those personages believes that Providence has bestowed on him an elder son's inheritance of wisdom. Nor, were we to glance towards the obscurer paths of life, should we find good Parson Dale deem himself worse off than the rest of the world in this precious commodity, —as, indeed, he has signally evinced of late in that shrewd guess of his touching Professor Moss. Even plain Squire Hazeldean takes it for granted that he could teach Audley Egerton a thing or two worth knowing in politics; Mr. Stirn thinks that there is no branch of useful lore on which he could not instruct the squire; while Sprott the tinker, with his bag full of tracts and lucifer matches, regards the whole framework of modern society, from a rick to a constitution, with the profound disdain of a revolutionary philosopher. Considering that every individual thus brings into the stock of

the world so vast a share of intelligence, it cannot but excite our wonder to find that Oxenstiern is popularly held to be right when he said, "See, my son, how little wisdom it requires to govern States,"—that is, Men! That so many millions of persons, each with a profound assurance that he is possessed of an exalted sagacity, should concur in the ascendancy of a few inferior intellects, according to a few stupid, prosy, matter-of-fact rules as old as the hills, is a phenomenon very discreditable to the spirit and energy of the aggregate human species! It creates no surprise that one sensible watch-dog should control the movements of a flock of silly grass-eating sheep; but that two or three silly grass-eating sheep should give the law to whole flocks of such mighty sensible watch-dogs—/Diavolo!/ Dr. Riecabocca, explain that, if you can! And wonderfully strange it is, that notwithstanding all the march of enlightenment, notwithstanding our progressive discoveries in the laws of Nature, our railways, steam-engines, animal magnetism, and electrobiology,—we have never made any improvement that is generally acknowledged, since men ceased to be troglodytes and nomads, in the old-fashioned gamut of flats and sharps, which attunes into irregular social jog-trot all the generations that pass from the cradle to the grave; still, "/the desire for something have have not/" impels all the energies that keep us in movement, for good or for ill, according to the checks or the directions of each favourite desire.

A friend of mine once said to a millionaire, whom he saw forever engaged in making money which he never seemed to have any pleasure in spending, "Pray, Mr —, will you answer me one question: You are said to have two millions, and you spend L600 a year. In order to rest and enjoy, what will content you?"

"A little more," answered the millionaire. That "little more" is the mainspring of civilization. Nobody ever gets it!

"Philus," saith a Latin writer, "was not so rich as Laelius; Laelius was not so rich as Scipio; Scipio was not so rich as Crassus; and Crassus was not so rich—as he wished to be!" If John Bull were once contented, Manchester might shut up its mills. It is the "little more" that makes a mere trifle of the National Debt!—Long life to it!

Still, mend our law-books as we will, one is forced to confess that knaves are often seen in fine linen, and honest men in the most shabby old rags; and still, notwithstanding the exceptions, knavery is a very hazardous game, and honesty, on the whole, by far the best policy. Still, most of the Ten Commandments remain at the core of all the Pandects and Institutes that keep our hands off our neighbours' throats, wives, and pockets; still, every year shows that the parson's maxim—"non quieta movere"—is as prudent for the health of communities as when Apollo recommended his votaries not to rake up a fever by stirring the Lake Camarina; still, people, thank Heaven, decline to reside in parallelograms, and the surest token that we live under a free government is when we are governed by persons whom we have a full right to imply, by our censure and ridicule, are blockheads compared to ourselves! Stop that delightful privilege, and, by Jove! sir, there is neither pleasure nor honour in being governed at all! You might as well be—a Frenchman!

CHAPTER II.

The Italian and his friend are closeted together.

"And why have you left your home in ——shire, and why this new change of name?"

"Peschiera is in England."

"I know it."

"And bent on discovering me; and, it is said, of stealing from me my child."

"He has had the assurance to lay wagers that he will win the hand of your heiress. I know that too; and therefore I have come to England,—first to baffle his design—for I do not think your fears altogether exaggerated,—and next to learn from you how to follow up a clew which, unless I am too sanguine, may lead to his ruin, and your unconditional restoration. Listen to me. You are aware that, after the skirmish with Peschiera's armed hirelings sent in search of you, I received a polite message from the Austrian government, requesting me to leave its Italian domains. Now, as I hold it the obvious duty of any foreigner admitted to the hospitality of a State, to refrain from all participation in its civil disturbances, so I thought my honour assailed at this intimation, and went at once to Vienna, to explain to the minister there (to whom I was personally known), that though I had, as became man to man,

aided to protect a refugee, who had taken shelter under my roof, from the infuriated soldiers at the command of his private foe, I had not only not shared in any attempt at revolt, but dissuaded, as far as I could, my Italian friends from their enterprise; and that because, without discussing its merits, I believed, as a military man and a cool spectator, the enterprise could only terminate in fruitless bloodshed. I was enabled to establish my explanation by satisfactory proof; and my acquaintance with the minister assumed something of the character of friendship. I was then in a position to advocate your cause, and to state your original reluctance to enter into the plots of the insurgents. I admitted freely that you had such natural desire for the independence of your native land, that, had the standard of Italy been boldly hoisted by its legitimate chiefs, or at the common uprising of its whole people, you would have been found in the van, amidst the ranks of your countrymen; but I maintained that you would never have shared in a conspiracy frantic in itself, and defiled by the lawless schemes and sordid ambition of its main projectors, had you not been betrayed and decoyed into it by the misrepresentations and domestic treachery of your kinsman,—the very man who denounced you. Unfortunately, of this statement I had no proof but your own word. I made, however, so far an impression in your favour, and, it may be, against the traitor, that your property was not confiscated to the State, nor handed over, upon the plea of your civil death, to your kinsman."

"How!—I do not understand. Peschiera has the property?" "He holds the revenues but of one half upon pleasure, and they would be withdrawn, could I succeed in establishing the case that exists against him. I was forbidden before to mention this to you; the minister, not inexcusably, submitted you to the probation of unconditional exile. Your grace might depend upon your own forbearance from further conspiracies—forgive the word. I need not say I was permitted to return to Lombardy. I found, on my arrival, that—that your unhappy wife had been to my house, and exhibited great despair at hearing of my departure."

Riccabocca knit his dark brows, and breathed hard.

"I did not judge it necessary to acquaint you with this circumstance, nor did it much affect me. I believed in her guilt—and what could now avail her remorse, if remorse she felt? Shortly afterwards, I heard that she was no more."

"Yes," muttered Riccabocca, "she died in the same year that I left Italy. It must be a strong reason that can excuse a friend for reminding me even that she once lived!"

"I come at once to that reason," said L'Estrange, gently. "This autumn I was roaming through Switzerland, and, in one of my pedestrian excursions amidst the mountains, I met with an accident, which confined me for some days to a sofa at a little inn in an obscure village. My hostess was an Italian; and as I had left my servant at a town at some distance, I required her attention till I could write to him to come to me. I was thankful for her cares, and amused by her Italian babble. We became very good friends. She told me she had been servant to a lady of great rank, who had died in Switzerland; and that, being enriched by the generosity of her mistress, she had married a Swiss innkeeper, and his people had become hers. My servant arrived, and my hostess learned my name, which she did not know before. She came into my room greatly agitated. In brief, this woman had been servant to your wife. She had accompanied her to my villa, and known of her anxiety to see me, as your friend. The Government had assigned to your wife your palace at Milan, with a competent income. She had refused to accept of either. Failing to see me, she had set off towards England, resolved upon seeing yourself; for the journals had stated that to England you had escaped."

"She dared! shameless! And see, but a moment before, I had forgotten all but her grave in a foreign soil,—and these tears had forgiven her," murmured the Italian.

"Let them forgive her still," said Harley, with all his exquisite sweetness of look and tone. "I resume. On entering Switzerland your wife's health, which you know was always delicate, gave way. To fatigue and anxiety succeeded fever, and delirium ensued. She had taken with her but this one female attendant—the sole one she could trust—on leaving home. She suspected Peschiera to have bribed her household. In the presence of this woman she raved of her innocence, in accents of terror and aversion denounced your kinsman, and called on you to vindicate her name and your own."

"Ravings indeed! Poor Paulina!" groaned Riccabocca, covering his face with both hands.

"But in her delirium there were lucid intervals. In one of these she rose, in spite of all her servants could do to restrain her, took from her desk several letters, and reading them over, exclaimed piteously, 'But how to get them to him; whom to trust? And his friend is gone!' Then an idea seemed suddenly to flash upon her, for she uttered a joyous exclamation, sat down, and wrote long and rapidly, enclosed what she wrote with all the letters, in one packet, which she sealed carefully, and bade her servant carry to the post, with many injunctions to take it with her own hand, and pay the charge on it. 'For oh!' said she (I repeat the words as my informant told them to me),—'for oh! this is my sole chance

to prove to my husband that, though I have erred, I am not the guilty thing he believes me; the sole chance, too, to redeem my error, and restore, perhaps, to my husband his country, to my child her heritage.' The servant took the letter to the post; and when she returned, her lady was asleep, with a smile upon her face. But from that sleep she woke again delirious, and before the next morning her soul had fled." Here Riccabocca lifted one hand from his face and grasped Harley's arm, as if mutely beseeching him to pause. The heart of the man struggled hard with his pride and his philosophy; and it was long before Harley could lead him to regard the worldly prospects which this last communication from his wife might open to his ruined fortunes,—not, indeed, till Riccabocca had persuaded himself, and half persuaded Harley (for strong, indeed, was all presumption of guilt against the dead), that his wife's protestations of innocence from all but error had been but ravings.

"Be this as it may," said Harley, "there seems every reason to suppose that the letters enclosed were Peschiera's correspondence, and that, if so, these would establish the proof of his influence over your wife, and of his perfidious machinations against yourself. I resolved, before coming hither, to go round by Vienna. There I heard, with dismay, that Peschiera had not only obtained the imperial sanction to demand your daughter's hand, but had boasted to his profligate circle that he should succeed; and he was actually on his road to England. I saw at once that could this design, by any fraud or artifice, be successful with Violante (for of your consent, I need not say, I did not dream), the discovery of the packet, whatever its contents, would be useless; Peschiera's end would be secured. I saw also that his success would suffice forever to clear his name; for his success must imply your consent (it would be to disgrace your daughter, to assert that she had married without it), and your consent would be his acquittal. I saw, too, with alarm, that to all means for the accomplishment of his project he would be urged by despair; for his debts are great, and his character nothing but new wealth can support. I knew that he was able, bold, determined, and that he had taken with him a large supply of money borrowed upon usury,—in a word, I trembled for you both. I have now seen your daughter, and I tremble no more. Accomplished seducer as Peschiera boasts himself, the first look upon her face so sweet, yet so noble, convinced me that she is proof against a legion of Peschieras. Now, then, return we to this all-important subject,—to this packet. It never reached you. Long years have passed since then.

"Does it exist still? Into whose hands would it have fallen?"

"Try to summon up all your recollections. The servant could not remember the name of the person to whom it was addressed; she only insisted that the name began with a B, that it was directed to England, and that to England she accordingly paid the postage. Whom then, with a name that begins with B, or (in case the servant's memory here mislead her) whom did you or your wife know, during your visit to England, with sufficient intimacy to make it probable that she would select such a person for her confidant?"

"I cannot conceive," said Riccabocca, shaking his head. "We came to England shortly after our marriage. Paulina was affected by the climate. She spoke not a word of English, and indeed not even French, as might have been expected from her birth, for her father was poor, and thoroughly Italian. She refused all society. I went, it is true, somewhat into the London world,—enough to induce me to shrink from the contrast that my second visit as a beggared refugee would have made to the reception I met with on my first; but I formed no intimate friendships. I recall no one whom she could have written to as intimate with me."

"But," persisted Harley, "think again. Was there no lady well acquainted with Italian, and with whom, perhaps, for that very reason, your wife became familiar?"

"Ah, it is true. There was one old lady of retired habits, but who had been much in Italy. Lady—Lady—I remember—Lady Jane Horton."

"Horton—Lady Jane!" exclaimed Harley; "again; thrice in one day!— is this wound never to scar over?" Then, noting Riccabocca's look of surprise, he said, "Excuse me, my friend; I listen to you with renewed interest. Lady Jane was a distant relation of my own; she judged me, perhaps, harshly—and I have some painful associations with her name; but she was a woman of many virtues. Your wife knew her?"

"Not, however, intimately; still, better than any one else in London. But Paulina would not have written to her; she knew that Lady Jane had died shortly after her own departure from England. I myself was summoned back to Italy on pressing business; she was too unwell to journey with me as rapidly as I was obliged to travel; indeed, illness detained her several weeks in England. In this interval she might have made acquaintances. Ah, now I see; I guess. You say the name began with B. Paulina, in my absence, engaged a companion,—a Mrs. Bertram. This lady accompanied her abroad. Paulina became excessively attached to her, she knew Italian so well. Mrs. Bertram left her on the road, and returned to England, for some private affairs of her own. I forget why or wherefore; if, indeed, I ever asked or learned. Paulina missed her sadly, often talked of her, wondered why she never heard from

her. No doubt it was to this Mrs. Bertram that she wrote!"

"And you don't know the lady's friends, or address?"

"No."

"Nor who recommended her to your wife?"

"No."

"Probably Lady Jane Horton?"

"It may be so.

"Very likely."

"I will follow up this track, slight as it is."

"But if Mrs. Bertram received the communication, how comes it that it never reached myself—Oh, fool that I am, how should it! I, who guarded so carefully my incognito!"

"True. This your wife could not foresee; she would naturally imagine that your residence in England would be easily discovered. But many years must have passed since your wife lost sight of this Mrs. Bertram, if their acquaintance was made so soon after your marriage; and now it is a long time to retrace,—before even your *Violante* was born."

"Alas! yes. I lost two fair sons in the interval. *Violante* was born to me as the child of sorrow."

"And to make sorrow lovely! how beautiful she is!" The father smiled proudly.

"Where, in the loftiest houses of Europe, find a husband worthy of such a prize?"

"You forget that I am still an exile, she still dowerless. You forget that I am pursued by *Peschiera*; that I would rather see her a beggar's wife—than—Pah, the very thought maddens me, it is so foul. /Corpo di Bacco!/ I have been glad to find her a husband already."

"Already! Then that young man spoke truly?"

"What young man?"

"Randal Leslie. How! You know him?" Here a brief explanation followed. Harley heard with attentive ear, and marked vexation, the particulars of *Riccabocca's* connection and implied engagement with Leslie.

"There is something very suspicious to me in all this," said he.

"Why should this young man have so sounded me as to *Violante's* chance of losing fortune if she married, an Englishman?"

"Did he? Oh, pooh! Excuse him. It was but his natural wish to seem ignorant of all about me. He did not know enough of my intimacy with you to betray my secret."

But he knew enough of it—must have known enough—to have made it right that he should tell you I was in England. He does not seem to have done so."

"No; that is strange—yet scarcely strange; for, when we last met, his head was full of other things,—love and marriage. /Basta!/ youth will be youth."

"He has no youth left in him!" exclaimed Harley, passionately. "I doubt if he ever had any. He is one of those men who come into the world with the pulse of a centenarian. You and I never shall be as old as he was in long clothes. Ah, you may laugh; but I am never wrong in my instincts. I disliked him at the first,—his eye, his smile, his voice, his very footstep. It is madness in you to countenance such a marriage; it may destroy all chance of your restoration."

"Better that than infringe my word once passed."

"No, no," exclaimed Harley; "your word is not passed, it shall not be passed. Nay, never look so piteously at me. At all events, pause till we know more of this young man. If he be worthy of her without a dower, why, then, let him lose you your heritage. I should have no more to say."

"But why lose me my heritage? There is no law in Austria which can dictate to a father what husband

to choose for his daughter."

"Certainly not. But you are out of the pale of law itself just at present; and it would surely be a reason for State policy to withhold your pardon, and it would be to the loss of that favour with your own countrymen, which would now make that pardon so popular, if it were known that the representative of your name were debased by your daughter's alliance with an English adventurer,—a clerk in a public office. Oh, sage in theory, why are you such a simpleton in action?"

Nothing moved by this taunt, Riceabocca rubbed his hands, and then stretched them comfortably over the fire.

"My friend," said he, "the representation of my name would pass to my son."

"But you have no son."

"Hush! I am going to have one; my Jemima informed me of it yesterday morning; and it was upon that information that I resolved to speak to Leslie. Am I a simpleton now?"

"Going to have a son," repeated Harley, looking very bewildered; "how do you know it is to be a son?"

"Physiologists are agreed," said the sage, positively, "that where the husband is much older than the wife, and there has been a long interval without children before she condescends to increase the population of the world, she (that is, it is at least as nine to four)—she brings into the world a male. I consider that point therefore as settled, according to the calculations of statisticians and the researches of naturalists."

Harley could not help laughing, though he was still angry and disturbed.

"The same man as ever; always the fool of philosophy."

"/Cospetto!/" said Riccabocca. "I am rather the philosopher of fools. And talking of that, shall I present you to my Jemima?"

"Yes; but in turn I must present you to one who remembers with gratitude your kindness, and whom your philosophy, for a wonder, has not ruined. Some time or other you must explain that to me. Excuse me for a moment; I will go for him.

"For him,—for whom? In my position I must be cautious; and—"

"I will answer for his faith and discretion. Meanwhile order dinner, and let me and my friend stay to share it."

"Dinner? /Corpo di Bacco!/--not that Bacchus can help us here. What will Jemima say?"

"Henpecked man, settle that with your connubial tyrant. But dinner it must be."

I leave the reader to imagine the delight of Leonard at seeing once more Riccabocca unchanged and Violante so improved, and the kind Jemima too; and their wonder at him and his history, his books and his fame. He narrated his struggles and adventures with a simplicity that removed from a story so personal the character of egotism. But when he came to speak of Helen he was brief and reserved.

Violante would have questioned more closely; but, to Leonard's relief, Harley interposed.

"You shall see her whom he speaks of before long, and question her yourself."

With these words, Harley turned the young man's narrative into new directions; and Leonard's words again flowed freely. Thus the evening passed away happily to all save Riccabocca. For the thought of his dead wife rose ever and anon before the exile; but when it did, and became too painful, he crept nearer to Jemima, and looked in her simple face, and pressed her cordial hand. And yet the monster had implied to Harley that his comforter was a fool,—so she was, to love so contemptible a slanderer of herself and her sex.

Violante was in a state of blissful excitement; she could not analyze her own joy. But her conversation was chiefly with Leonard; and the most silent of all was Harley. He sat listening to Leonard's warm yet unpretending eloquence,—that eloquence which flows so naturally from genius, when thoroughly at its ease, and not chilled back on itself by hard, unsympathizing hearers; listened, yet more charmed, to the sentiments less profound, yet no less earnest,—sentiments so feminine, yet so noble, with which Violante's fresh virgin heart responded to the poet's kindling soul. Those sentiments of hers were so

unlike all he heard in the common world, so akin to himself in his gone youth! Occasionally—at some high thought of her own, or some lofty line from Italian song, that she cited with lighted eyes, and in melodious accents —occasionally he reared his knightly head, and his lip quivered, as if he had heard the sound of a trumpet. The inertness of long years was shaken. The Heroic, that lay deep beneath all the humours of his temperament, was reached, appealed to; and stirred within him, rousing up all the bright associations connected with it, and long dormant. When he arose to take leave, surprised at the lateness of the hour, Harley said, in a tone that bespoke the sincerity of the compliment, "I thank you for the happiest hours I have known for years." His eye dwelt on Violante as he spoke.

But timidity returned to her with his words, at his look; and it was no longer the inspired muse, but the bashful girl that stood before him.

"And when shall I see you again?" asked Riccabocca, disconsolately, following his guest to the door.

"When? Why, of course, to-morrow. Adieu! my friend. No wonder you have borne your exile so patiently,—with such a child!"

He took Leonard's arm, and walked with him to the inn where he had left his horse. Leonard spoke of Violante with enthusiasm. Harley was silent.

CHAPTER III.

The next day a somewhat old-fashioned, but exceedingly patrician, equipage stopped at Riccabocca's garden-gate. Giacomo, who, from a bedroom window, had caught sight of its winding towards the house, was seized with undefinable terror when he beheld it pause before their walls, and heard the shrill summons at the portal. He rushed into his master's presence, and implored him not to stir,—not to allow any one to give ingress to the enemies the machine might disgorge. "I have heard," said he, "how a town in Italy—I think it was Bologna—was once taken and given to the sword, by incautiously admitting a wooden horse full of the troops of Barbarossa and all manner of bombs and Congreve rockets."

"The story is differently told in Virgil," quoth Riccabocca, peeping out of the window. "Nevertheless, the machine looks very large and suspicious; unloose Pompey."

"Father," said Violante, colouring, "it is your friend, Lord L'Estrange; I hear his voice."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite. How can I be mistaken?"

"Go, then, Giacomo; but take Pompey with thee,—and give the alarm if we are deceived."

But Violante was right; and in a few moments Lord L'Estrange was seen walking up the garden, and giving the arm to two ladies.

"Ah," said Riccabocca, composing his dressing-robe round him, "go, my child, and summon Jemima. Man to man; but, for Heaven's sake, woman to woman."

Harley had brought his mother and Helen, in compliment to the ladies of his friend's household.

The proud countess knew that she was in the presence of Adversity, and her salute to Riccabocca was only less respectful than that with which she would have rendered homage to her sovereign. But Riccabocca, always gallant to the sex that he pretended to despise, was not to be outdone in ceremony; and the bow which replied to the courtesy would have edified the rising generation, and delighted such surviving relics of the old Court breeding as may linger yet amidst the gloomy pomp of the Faubourg St. Germain. These dues paid to etiquette, the countess briefly introduced Helen as Miss Digby, and seated herself near the exile. In a few moments the two elder personages became quite at home with each other; and, really, perhaps Riccabocca had never, since we have known him, showed to such advantage as by the side of his polished, but somewhat formal visitor. Both had lived so little with our modern, ill-bred age! They took out their manners of a former race, with a sort of pride in airing once more such fine lace and superb brocade. Riccabocca gave truce to the shrewd but homely wisdom of his proverbs, perhaps he remembered that Lord Chesterfield denounces proverbs as vulgar; and gaunt

though his figure, and far from elegant though his dressing-robe, there was that about him which spoke undeniably of the grand seigneur,—of one to whom a Marquis de Dangeau would have offered a fauteuil by the side of the Rohans and Montmorencies.

Meanwhile Helen and Harley seated themselves a little apart, and were both silent,—the first, from timidity; the second, from abstraction. At length the door opened, and Harley suddenly sprang to his feet,—Violante and Jemima entered. Lady Lansinere's eyes first rested on the daughter, and she could scarcely refrain from an exclamation of admiring surprise; but then, when she caught sight of Mrs. Riccabocca's somewhat humble, yet not obsequious mien,—looking a little shy, a little homely, yet still thoroughly a gentlewoman (though of your plain, rural kind of that genus), she turned from the daughter, and with the *savoir vivre* of the fine old school, paid her first respects to the wife; respects literally, for her manner implied respect,—but it was more kind, simple, and cordial than the respect she had shown to Riccabocca; as the sage himself had said, here "it was Woman to Woman." And then she took Violante's hand in both hers, and gazed on her as if she could not resist the pleasure of contemplating so much beauty. "My son," she said softly, and with a half sigh,— "my son in vain told me not to be surprised. This is the first time I have ever known reality exceed description!"

Violante's blush here made her still more beautiful; and as the countess returned to Riccabocca, she stole gently to Helen's side.

"Miss Digby, my ward," said Harley, pointedly, observing that his mother had neglected her duty of presenting Helen to the ladies. He then reseated himself, and conversed with Mrs. Riccabocca; but his bright, quick eye glanced over at the two girls. They were about the same age— and youth was all that, to the superficial eye, they seemed to have in common. A greater contrast could not well be conceived; and, what is strange, both gained by it. Violante's brilliant loveliness seemed yet more dazzling, and Helen's fair, gentle face yet more winning. Neither had mixed much with girls of her own age; each took to the other at first sight. Violante, as the less shy, began the conversation.

"You are his ward,—Lord L'Estrange's?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you came with him from Italy?"

"No, not exactly; but I have been in Italy for some years."

"Ah! you regret—nay, I am foolish—you return to your native land. But the skies in Italy are so blue,— here it seems as if Nature wanted colours."

"Lord L'Estrange says that you were very young when you left Italy; you remember it well. He, too, prefers Italy to England."

"He! Impossible!"

"Why impossible, fair sceptic?" cried Harley, interrupting himself in the midst of a speech to Jemima.

Violante had not dreamed that she could be overheard—she was speaking low; but, though visibly embarrassed, she answered distinctly,

"Because in England there is the noblest career for noble minds."

Harley was startled, and replied, with a slight sigh, "At your age I should have said as you do. But this England of ours is so crowded with noble minds that they only jostle each other, and the career is one cloud of dust."

"So, I have read, seems a battle to a common soldier, but not to the chief."

"You have read good descriptions of battles, I see."

Mrs. Riccabocca, who thought this remark a taunt upon her step-daughter's studies, hastened to Violante's relief.

"Her papa made her read the history of Italy, and I believe that is full of battles."

HARLEY.—"All history is, and all women are fond of war and of warriors. I wonder why?"

VIOLANTE (turning to Helen, and in a very low voice, resolved that Harley should not hear this time). —" We can guess why,—can we not?"

HARLEY (hearing every word, as if it had been spoken in St. Paul's Whispering Gallery).—"If you can guess, Helen, pray tell me."

HELEN (shaking her pretty head, and answering with a livelier smile than usual).—"But I am not fond of war and warriors."

HARLEY (to Violante).—"Then I must appeal at once to you, self-convicted Bellona that you are. Is it from the cruelty natural to the female disposition?"

VIOLANTE (with a sweet musical laugh). "From two propensities still more natural to it."

HARLEY.—"YOU puzzle me: what can they be?"

VIOLANTE.—"Pity and admiration; we pity the weak and admire the brave."

Harley inclined his head, and was silent.

Lady Lansmere had suspended her conversation with Riccabocca to listen to this dialogue. "Charming!" she cried.

"You have explained what has often perplexed me. Ah, Harley, I am glad to see that your satire is foiled: you have no reply to that."

"No; I willingly own myself defeated, too glad to claim the signorina's pity, since my cavalry sword hangs on the wall, and I can have no longer a professional pretence to her admiration."

He then rose, and glanced towards the window. "But I see a more formidable disputant for my conqueror to encounter is coming into the field,—one whose profession it is to substitute some other romance for that of camp and siege."

"Our friend Leonard," said Riccabocca, turning his eye also towards the window. "True; as Quevedo says, wittily, 'Ever since there has been so great a demand for type, there has been much less lead to spare for cannon-balls.'"

Here Leonard entered. Harley had sent Lady Lansmere's footman to him with a note, that prepared him to meet Helen. As he came into the room, Harley took him by the hand and led him to Lady Lansmere.

"The friend of whom I spoke. Welcome him now for my sake, ever after for his own;" and then, scarcely allowing time for the countess's elegant and gracious response, he drew Leonard towards Helen. "Children," said he, with a touching voice, that thrilled through the hearts of both, "go and seat yourselves yonder, and talk together of the past. Signorina, I invite you to renewed discussion upon the abstruse metaphysical subject you have started; let us see if we cannot find gentler sources for pity and admiration than war and warriors." He took Violante aside to the window. "You remember that Leonard, in telling you his history last night, spoke, you thought, rather too briefly of the little girl who had been his companion in the rudest time of his trials. When you would have questioned more, I interrupted you, and said, 'You should see her shortly, and question her yourself.' And now what think you of Helen Digby? Hush, speak low. But her ears are not so sharp as mine."

VIOLANTE.—"Ah! that is the fair creature whom Leonard called his child-angel? What a lovely innocent face!—the angel is there still."

HARLEY (pleased both at the praise and with her who gave it).—"You think so; and you are right. Helen is not communicative. But fine natures are like fine poems,—a glance at the first two lines suffices for a guess into the beauty that waits you if you read on."

Violante gazed on Leonard and Helen as they sat apart. Leonard was the speaker, Helen the listener; and though the former had, in his narrative the night before, been indeed brief as to the episode in his life connected with the orphan, enough had been said to interest Violante in the pathos of their former position towards each other, and in the happiness they must feel in their meeting again,—separated for years on the wide sea of life, now both saved from the storm and shipwreck. The tears came into her eyes. "True," she said, very softly, "there is more here to move pity and admiration than in—" She paused.

HARLEY.—"Complete the sentence. Are you ashamed to retract? Fie on your pride and obstinacy!"

VIOLANTE.—"No; but even here there have been war and heroism,—the war of genius with adversity, and heroism in the comforter who shared it and consoled. Ah, wherever pity and admiration are both felt, something nobler than mere sorrow must have gone before: the heroic must exist."

"Helen does not know what the word 'heroic' means," said Harley, rather sadly; "you must teach her."

"Is it possible," thought he as he spoke, "that a Randal Leslie could have charmed this grand creature? No 'Heroic' surely, in that sleek young placeman.—"Your father," he said aloud, and fixing his eyes on her face, "sees much, he tells me, of a young man about Leonard's age, as to date; but I never estimate the age of men by the parish register, and I should speak of that so-called young man as a contemporary of my great-grandfather,—I mean Mr. Randal Leslie. Do you like him?"

"Like him," said Violante, slowly, and as if sounding her own mind,— "like him—yes."

"Why?" asked Harley, with dry and curt indignation. "His visits seem to please my dear father. Certainly I like him."

"Hum. He professes to like you, I suppose?"

Violante laughed unsuspectingly. She had half a mind to reply, "Is that so strange?" But her respect for Harley stopped her. The words would have seemed to her pert. "I am told he is clever," resumed Harley.

"Oh, certainly."

"And he is rather handsome. But I like Leonard's face better."

"Better—that is not the word. Leonard's face is as that of one who has gazed so often upon Heaven; and Mr. Leslie's—there is neither sunlight nor starlight reflected there."

"My dear Violante?" exclaimed Harley, overjoyed; and he pressed her hand.

The blood rushed over the girl's cheek and brow; her hand trembled in his. But Harley's familiar exclamation might have come from a father's lips.

At this moment Helen softly approached them, and looking timidly into her guardian's face, said, "Leonard's mother is with him: he asks me to call and see her. May I?"

"May you! A pretty notion the signorina must form of your enslaved state of pupilage, when she hears you ask that question. Of course you may."

"Will you come with us?"

Harley looked embarrassed. He thought of the widow's agitation at his name; of that desire to shun him, which Leonard had confessed, and of which he thought he divined the cause. And so divining, he too shrank from such a meeting.

"Another time, then," said he, after a pause. Helen looked disappointed, but said no more.

Violante was surprised at this ungracious answer. She would have blamed it as unfeeling in another; but all that Harley did was right in her eyes.

"Cannot I go with Miss Digby?" said she, "and my mother will go too. We both know Mrs. Fairfield. We shall be so pleased to see her again."

"So be it," said Harley; "I will wait here with your father till you come back. Oh, as to my mother, she will excuse the—excuse Madame Riccabocca, and you too. See how charmed she is with your father. I must stay to watch over the conjugal interests of mine."

But Mrs. Riccabocca had too much good old country breeding to leave the countess; and Harley was forced himself to appeal to Lady Lansmere. When he had explained the case in point, the countess rose and said,

"But I will call myself, with Miss Digby."

"No," said Harley, gravely, but in a whisper. "No; I would rather not. I will explain later."

"Then," said the countess aloud, after a glance of surprise at her son, "I must insist on your performing this visit, my dear madam, and you, Signorina. In truth, I have something to say confidentially to—"

"To me," interrupted Riccabocca. "Ah, Madame la Comtesse, you restore me to five-and-twenty. Go, quick, O jealous and injured wife; go, both of you, quick; and you, too, Harley."

"Nay," said Lady Lansmere, in the same tone, "Harley must stay, for my design is not at present upon destroying your matrimonial happiness, whatever it may be later. It is a design so innocent that my son will be a partner in it."

Here the countess put her lips to Harley's ear, and whispered. He received her communication in attentive silence; but when she had done, pressed her hand, and bowed his head, as if in assent to a proposal.

In a few minutes the three ladies and Leonard were on their road to the neighbouring cottage.

Violante, with her usual delicate intuition, thought that Leonard and Helen must have much to say to each other; and (ignorant, as Leonard himself was, of Helen's engagement to Harley) began already, in the romance natural to her age, to predict for them happy and united days in the future. So she took her stepmother's arm, and left Helen and Leonard to follow.

"I wonder," she said musingly, "how Miss Digby became Lord L'Estrange's ward. I hope she is not very rich, nor very high-born."

"La, my love," said the good Jemima, "that is not like you; you are not envious of her, poor girl?"

"Envious! Dear mamma, what a word! But don't you think Leonard and Miss Digby seem born for each other? And then the recollections of their childhood—the thoughts of childhood are so deep, and its memories so strangely soft!" The long lashes drooped over Violante's musing eyes as she spoke. "And therefore," she said, after a pause,— "therefore I hoped that Miss Digby might not be very rich nor very high-born."

"I understand you now, Violante," exclaimed Jemima, her own early passion for match-making instantly returning to her; "for as Leonard, however clever and distinguished, is still the son of Mark Fairfield the carpenter, it would spoil all if—Miss Digby was, as you say, rich and high-born. I agree with you,—a very pretty match, a very pretty match, indeed. I wish dear—Mrs. Dale were here now,—she is so clever in settling such matters."

Meanwhile Leonard and Helen walked side by side a few paces in the rear. He had not offered her his arm. They had been silent hitherto since they left Riccabocca's house.

Helen now spoke first. In similar cases it is generally the woman, be she ever so timid, who does speak first. And here Helen was the bolder; for Leonard did not disguise from himself the nature of his feelings, and Helen was engaged to another, and her pure heart was fortified by the trust reposed in it.

"And have you ever heard more of the good Dr. Morgan, who had powders against sorrow, and who meant to be so kind to us,—though," she added, colouring, "we did not think so then?"

"He took my child-angel from me," said Leonard, with visible emotion; "and if she had not returned, where and what should I be now? But I have forgiven him. No, I have never met him since."

"And that terrible Mr. Burley?"

"Poor, poor Burley! He, too, is vanished out of my present life. I have made many inquiries after him; all I can hear is that he went abroad, supposed as a correspondent to some journal. I should like so much to see him again, now that perhaps I could help him as he helped me."

"Helped you—ah!"

Leonard smiled with a beating heart, as he saw again the dear prudent, warning look, and involuntarily drew closer to Helen. She seemed more restored to him and to her former self.

"Helped me much by his instructions; more, perhaps, by his very faults. You cannot guess, Helen,—I beg pardon, Miss Digby, but I forgot that we are no longer children,—you cannot guess how much we men, and more than all, perhaps, we writers whose task it is to unravel the web of human actions, owe even to our own past errors; and if we learned nothing by the errors of others, we should be dull indeed. We must know where the roads divide, and have marked where they lead to, before we can erect our sign-post; and books are the sign-posts in human life."

"Books! and I have not yet read yours. And Lord L'Estrange tells me you are famous now. Yet you remember me still,—the poor orphan child, whom you first saw weeping at her father's grave, and with whom you burdened your own young life, over-burdened already. No, still call me Helen—you must always be to me a brother! Lord L'Estrange feels that; he said so to me when he told me that we were to meet again. He is so generous, so noble. Brother!" cried Helen, suddenly, and extending her hand, with a sweet but sublime look in her gentle face,— "brother, we will never forfeit his esteem; we will

both do our best to repay him! Will we not? —say so!"

Leonard felt overpowered by contending and unanalyzed emotions. Touched almost to tears by the affectionate address, thrilled by the hand that pressed his own, and yet with a vague fear, a consciousness that something more than the words themselves was implied,—something that checked all hope. And this word "brother," once so precious and so dear, why did he shrink from it now; why could he not too say the sweet word "sister"?

"She is above me now and evermore!" he thought mournfully; and the tones of his voice, when he spoke again, were changed. The appeal to renewed intimacy but made him more distant, and to that appeal itself he made no direct answer; for Mrs. Riccabocca, now turning round, and pointing to the cottage which came in view, with its picturesque gable-ends, cried out,

"But is that your house, Leonard? I never saw anything so pretty."

"You do not remember it then," said Leonard to Helen, in accents of melancholy reproach,— "there where I saw you last? I doubted whether to keep it exactly as it was, and I said, '—No! the association is not changed because we try to surround it with whatever beauty we can create; the dearer the association, the more the Beautiful becomes to it natural.' Perhaps you don't understand this,—perhaps it is only we poor poets who do."

"I understand it," said Helen, gently. She looked wistfully at the cottage.

"So changed! I have so often pictured it to myself, never, never like this; yet I loved it, commonplace as it was to my recollection; and the garret, and the tree in the carpenter's yard."

She did not give these thoughts utterance. And they now entered the garden.

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs. Fairfield was a proud woman when she received Mrs. Riccabocca and Violante in her grand house; for a grand house to her was that cottage to which her boy Lenny had brought her home. Proud, indeed, ever was Widow Fairfield; but she thought then in her secret heart, that if ever she could receive in the drawing-room of that grand house the great Mrs. Hazeldean, who had so lectured her for refusing to live any longer in the humble, tenement rented of the squire, the cup of human bliss would be filled, and she could contentedly die of the pride of it. She did not much notice Helen,—her attention was too absorbed by the ladies who renewed their old acquaintance with her, and she carried them all over the house, yea, into the very kitchen; and so, somehow or other, there was a short time when Helen and Leonard found themselves alone. It was in the study. Helen had unconsciously seated herself in Leonard's own chair, and she was gazing with anxious and wistful interest on the scattered papers, looking so disorderly (though, in truth, in that disorder there was method, but method only known to the owner), and at the venerable well-worn books, in all languages, lying on the floor, on the chairs—anywhere. I must confess that Helen's first tidy womanlike idea was a great desire to arrange the litter. "Poor Leonard," she thought to herself, "the rest of the house so neat, but no one to take care of his own room and of him!"

As if he divined her thought, Leonard smiled and said, "It would be a cruel kindness to the spider, if the gentlest band in the world tried to set its cobweb to rights."

HELEN.—"You were not quite so bad in the old days."

LEONARD.—"Yet even then you were obliged to take care of the money. I have more books now, and more money. My present housekeeper lets me take care of the books, but she is less indulgent as to the money."

HELEN (archly).—"Are you as absent as ever?"

LEONARD.—"Much more so, I fear. The habit is incorrigible, Miss Digby—"

HELEN.—"Not Miss Digby; sister, if you like."

LEONARD (evading the word that implied so forbidden an affinity).—"Helen, will you grant me a

favour? Your eyes and your smile say 'yes.' Will you lay aside, for one minute, your shawl and bonnet? What! can you be surprised that I ask it? Can you not understand that I wish for one minute to think that you are at home again under this roof?"

Helen cast down her eyes, and seemed troubled; then she raised them, with a soft angelic candour in their dovelike blue, and, as if in shelter from all thoughts of more warm affection, again murmured "brother," and did as he asked her.

So there she sat, amongst the dull books, by his table, near the open window, her fair hair parted on her forehead, looking so good, so calm, so happy! Leonard wondered at his own self-command. His heart yearned to her with such inexpressible love, his lips so longed to murmur, "Ah, as now so could it be forever! Is the home too mean?" But that word "brother" was as a talisman between her and him. Yet she looked so at home—perhaps so at home she felt!—more certainly than she had yet learned to do in that stiff stately house in which she was soon to have a daughter's rights. Was she suddenly made aware of this, that she so suddenly arose, and with a look of alarm and distress on her face.

"But—we are keeping Lady Lansmere too long," she said falteringly. "We must go now," and she hastily took up her shawl and bonnet.

Just then Mrs. Fairfield entered with the visitors, and began making excuses for inattention to Miss Digby, whose identity with Leonard's child-angel she had not yet learned.

Helen received these apologies with her usual sweetness. "Nay," she said, "your son and I are such old friends, how could you stand on ceremony with me?"

"Old friends!" Mrs. Fairfield stared amazed, and then surveyed the fair speaker more curiously than she had yet done. "Pretty, nice-spoken thing," thought the widow; "as nice-spoken as Miss Violante, and humbler-looking like,—though, as to dress, I never see anything so elegant out of a picture."

Helen now appropriated Mrs. Riccabocca's arm; and, after a kind leave-taking with the widow, the ladies returned towards Riccabocca's house.

Mrs. Fairfield, however, ran after them with Leonard's hat and gloves, which he had forgotten.

"Deed, boy," she said, kindly, yet scoldingly, "but there'd be no more fine books, if the Lord had not fixed your head on your shoulders. You would not think it, marm," she added to Mrs. Riccabocca, "but sin' he has left you, he's not the 'cute lad he was; very helpless at times, marm!"

Helen could not resist turning round, and looking at Leonard, with a sly smile.

The widow saw the smile, and catching Leonard by the arm, whispered, "But where before have you seen that pretty young lady? Old friends!"

"Ah, Mother," said Leonard, sadly, "it is a long tale; you have heard the beginning, who can guess the end?" and he escaped. But Helen still leaned on the arm of Mrs. Riccabocca, and, in the walk back, it seemed to Leonard as if the winter had re-settled in the sky.

Yet he was by the side of Violante, and she spoke to him with such praise of Helen! Alas! it is not always so sweet as folks say to hear the praises of one we love. Sometimes those praises seem to ask ironically, "And what right hast thou to hope because thou lovest? All love her."

CHAPTER V.

No sooner had Lady Lansmere found herself alone with Riccabocca and Harley than she laid her hand on the exile's arm, and, addressing him by a title she had not before given him, and from which he appeared to shrink nervously, said, "Harley, in bringing me to visit you, was forced to reveal to me your incognito, for I should have discovered it. You may not remember me, in spite of your gallantry; but I mixed more in the world than I do now, during your first visit to England, and once sat next to you at dinner at Carlton House. Nay, no compliments, but listen to me. Harley tells me you have cause for some alarm respecting the designs of an audacious and unprincipled adventurer, I may call him; for adventurers are of all ranks. Suffer your daughter to come to me on a visit, as long as you please. With me, at least, she will be safe; and if you, too, and the—"

"Stop, my dear madam," interrupted Riccabocca, with great vivacity; "your kindness overpowers me. I thank you most gratefully for your invitation to my child; but—"

"Nay," in his turn interrupted Harley, "no buts. I was not aware of my mother's intention when she entered this room. But since she whispered it to me, I have reflected on it, and am convinced that it is but a prudent precaution. Your retreat is known to Mr. Leslie, he is known to Peschiera. Grant that no indiscretion of Mr. Leslie's betray the secret; still I have reason to believe that the count guesses Randal's acquaintance with you. Audley Egerton this morning told me he had gathered that, not from the young man himself, but from questions put to himself by Madame di Negra; and Peschiera might and would set spies to track Leslie to every house that he visits,—might and would, still more naturally, set spies to track myself. Were this man an Englishman, I should laugh at his machinations; but he is an Italian, and has been a conspirator. What he could do I know not; but an assassin can penetrate into a camp, and a traitor can creep through closed walls to one's hearth. With my mother, Violante must be safe; that you cannot oppose. And why not come yourself?"

Riccabocca had no reply to these arguments, so far as they affected Violante; indeed, they awakened the almost superstitious terror with which he regarded his enemy, and he consented at once that Violante should accept the invitation proffered. But he refused it for himself and Jemima.

"To say truth," said he, simply, "I made a secret vow, on re-entering England, that I would associate with none who knew the rank I had formerly held in my own land. I felt that all my philosophy was needed to reconcile and habituate myself to my altered circumstances. In order to find in my present existence, however humble, those blessings which make all life noble,—dignity and peace,—it was necessary for poor, weak human nature wholly to dismiss the past. It would unsettle me sadly, could I come to your house, renew awhile, in your kindness and respect— nay, in the very atmosphere of your society—the sense of what I have been; and then (should the more than doubtful chance of recall from my exile fail me) to awake, and find myself for the rest of life what I am. And though, were I alone, I might trust myself perhaps to the danger, yet my wife: she is happy and contented now; would she be so, if you had once spoiled her for the simple position of Dr. Riccabocca's wife? Should I not have to listen to regrets and hopes and fears that would prick sharp through my thin cloak of philosophy? Even as it is, since in a moment of weakness I confided my secret to her, I have had 'my rank' thrown at me,—with a careless hand, it is true, but it hits hard nevertheless. No stone hurts like one taken from the ruins of one's own home; and the grander the home, why, the heavier the stone! Protect, dear madam, protect my daughter, since her father doubts his own power to do so. But—ask no more."

Riccabocca was immovable here; and the matter was settled as he decided, it being agreed that Violante should be still styled but the daughter of Dr. Riccabocca.

"And now, one word more," said Harley. "Do not confide to Mr. Leslie these arrangements; do not let him know where Violante is placed,—at least, until I authorize such confidence in him. It is sufficient excuse that it is no use to know unless he called to see her, and his movements, as I said before, may be watched. You can give the same reason to suspend his visits to yourself. Suffer me, meanwhile, to mature my judgment on this young man. In the meanwhile, also, I think that I shall have means of ascertaining the real nature of Peschiera's schemes. His sister has sought to know me; I will give her the occasion. I have heard some things of her in my last residence abroad, which make me believe that she cannot be wholly the count's tool in any schemes nakedly villanous; that she has some finer qualities in her than I once supposed; and that she can be won from his influence. It is a state of war; we will carry it into the enemy's camp. You will promise me, then, to refrain from all further confidence in Mr. Leslie?"

"For the present, yes," said Riccabocca, reluctantly.

"Do not even say that you have seen me, unless he first tell you that I am in England, and wish to learn your residence. I will give him full occasion to do so. Pish! don't hesitate; you know your own proverb—

"'Boccha chiusa, ed occhio aperto
Non fece mai nissun deserto.'

"The closed mouth and the open eye,' etc."

"That's very true," said the doctor, much struck. "Very true. 'In boccha chiusa non c'entrano mosche.' One can't swallow flies if one keeps one's mouth shut. /Corpo di Bacco!/ that's very true indeed."

CHAPTER VI.

Violante and Jemima were both greatly surprised, as the reader may suppose, when they heard, on their return, the arrangements already made for the former. The countess insisted on taking her at once, and Riccabocca briefly said, "Certainly, the sooner the better." Violante was stunned and bewildered. Jemima hastened to make up a little bundle of things necessary, with many a woman's sigh that the poor wardrobe contained so few things befitting. But among the clothes she slipped a purse, containing the savings of months, perhaps of years, and with it a few affectionate lines, begging Violante to ask the countess to buy her all that was proper for her father's child. There is always something hurried and uncomfortable in the abrupt and unexpected withdrawal of any member from a quiet household. The small party broke into still smaller knots. Violante hung on her father, and listened vaguely to his not very lucid explanations. The countess approached Leonard, and, according to the usual mode with persons of quality addressing young authors, complimented him highly on the books she had not read, but which her son assured her were so remarkable. She was a little anxious to know where Harley had first met with Mr. Oran, whom he called his friend; but she was too highbred to inquire, or to express any wonder that rank should be friends with genius. She took it for granted that they had formed their acquaintance abroad.

Harley conversed with Helen.—"You are not sorry that Violante is coming to us? She will be just such a companion for you as I could desire; of your own years too."

HELEN (ingenuously).—"It is hard to think I am not younger than she is."

HARLEY.—"Why, my dear Helen?"

HELEN.—"She is so brilliant. She talks so beautifully. And I—"

HARLEY.—"And you want but the habit of talking, to do justice to your own beautiful thoughts."

Helen looked at him gratefully, but shook her head. It was a common trick of hers, and always when she was praised.

At last the preparations were made, the farewell was said, Violante was in the carriage by Lady Lansmere's side. Slowly moved on the stately equipage with its four horses and trim postilions, heraldic badges on their shoulders, in the style rarely seen in the neighbourhood of the metropolis, and now fast vanishing even amidst distant counties.

Riccabocca, Jemima, and Jackeymo continued to gaze after it from the gate.

"She is gone," said Jackeymo, brushing his eyes with his coat-sleeve.
"But it is a load off one's mind."

"And another load on one's heart," murmured Riccabocca. "Don't cry, Jemima; it may be bad for you, and bad for him that is to come. It is astonishing how the humours of the mother may affect the unborn. I should not like to have a son who has a more than usual propensity to tears."

The poor philosopher tried to smile; but it was a bad attempt. He went slowly in, and shut himself with his books. But he could not read. His whole mind was unsettled. And though, like all parents, he had been anxious to rid himself of a beloved daughter for life, now that she was gone but for a while, a string seemed broken in the Music of Home.

CHAPTER VII.

The evening of the same day, as Egerton, who was to entertain a large party at dinner, was changing his dress, Harley walked into his room.

Egerton dismissed his valet by a sign, and continued his toilet.

"Excuse me, my dear Harley, I have only ten minutes to give you. I expect one of the royal dukes, and punctuality is the stern virtue of men of business, and the graceful courtesy of princes."

Harley had usually a jest for his friend's aphorisms; but he had none now. He laid his hand kindly on

Egerton's shoulder. "Before I speak of my business, tell me how you are,—better?"

"Better,—nay, I am always well. Pooh! I may look a little tired,— years of toil will tell on the countenance. But that matters little: the period of life has passed with me when one cares how one looks in the glass."

As he spoke, Egerton completed his dress, and came to the hearth, standing there, erect and dignified as usual, still far handsomer than many a younger man, and with a form that seemed to have ample vigour to support for many a year the sad and glorious burden of power.

"So now to your business, Harley."

"In the first place, I want you to present me, at the earliest opportunity, to Madame di Negra. You say she wished to know me."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, she receives this evening. I did not mean to go; but when my party breaks up—"

"You can call for me at The Travellers. Do!"

"Next, you knew Lady Jane Horton better even than I did, at least in the last year of her life." Harley sighed, and Egerton turned and stirred the fire.

"Pray, did you ever see at her house, or hear her speak of, a Mrs. Bertram?"

"Of whom?" said Egerton, in a hollow voice, his face still turned towards the fire.

"A Mrs. Bertram; but heavens! my dear fellow, what is the matter? Are you ill?"

"A spasm at the heart, that is all; don't ring, I shall be better presently; go on talking. Mrs.—why do you ask?"

"Why? I have hardly time to explain; but I am, as I told you, resolved on righting my old Italian friend, if Heaven will help me, as it ever does help the just when they bestir themselves; and this Mrs. Bertram is mixed up in my friend's affairs."

"His! How is that possible?"

Harley rapidly and succinctly explained. Audley listened attentively, with his eyes fixed on the floor, and still seeming to labour under great difficulty of breathing.

At last he answered, "I remember something of this Mrs.—Mrs.—Bertram. But your inquiries after her would be useless. I think I have heard that she is long since dead; nay, I am sure of it."

"Dead!—that is most unfortunate. But do you know any of her relations or friends? Can you suggest any mode of tracing this packet, if it came to her hands?"

"No."

"And Lady Jane had scarcely any friend that I remember except my mother, and she knows nothing of this Mrs. Bertram. How unlucky! I think I shall advertise. Yet, no. I could only distinguish this Mrs. Bertram from any other of the same name, by stating with whom she had gone abroad, and that would catch the attention of Peschiera, and set him to counterwork us."

"And what avails it?" said Egerton. "She whom you seek is no more—no more!" He paused, and went on rapidly: "The packet did not arrive in England till years after her death, was no doubt returned to the post-office, is destroyed long ago."

Harley looked very much disappointed. Egerton went on in a sort of set, mechanical voice, as if not thinking of what he said, but speaking from the dry practical mode of reasoning which was habitual to him, and by which the man of the world destroys the hopes of an enthusiast. Then starting up at the sound of the first thundering knock at the street door, he said, "Hark! you must excuse me."

"I leave you, my dear Audley. But I must again ask, Are you better now?"

"Much, much,—quite well: I will call for you,—probably between eleven and twelve."

CHAPTER VIII.

If any one could be more surprised at seeing Lord L'Estrange at the house of Madame di Negra that evening than the fair hostess herself, it was Randal Leslie. Something instinctively told him that this visit threatened interference with whatever might be his ultimate projects in regard to Riccabocca and Violante. But Randal Leslie was not one of those who shrink from an intellectual combat. On the contrary, he was too confident of his powers of intrigue not to take a delight in their exercise. He could not conceive that the indolent Harley could be a match for his own restless activity and dogged perseverance. But in a very few moments fear crept on him. No man of his day could produce a more brilliant effect than Lord L'Estrange, when he deigned to desire it. Without much pretence to that personal beauty which strikes at first sight, he still retained all the charm of countenance, and all the grace of manner, which had made him in boyhood the spoiled darling of society. Madame di Negra had collected but a small circle round her; still it was of the elite of the great world,—not, indeed, those more precise and reserved /dames de chateau/, whom the lighter and easier of the fair dispensers of fashion ridicule as pruders; but nevertheless, ladies were there, as unblemished in reputation, as high in rank, flirts and coquettes, perhaps,—nothing more; in short, "charming women,"—the gay butterflies that hover over the stiff parterre. And there were ambassadors and ministers, and wits and brilliant debaters, and first-rate dandies (dandies, when first-rate, are generally very agreeable men). Amongst all these various persons, Harley, so long a stranger to the London world, seemed to make himself at home with the ease of an Alcibiades. Many of the less juvenile ladies remembered him, and rushed to claim his acquaintance, with nods and becks, and wreathed smiles. He had ready compliment for each. And few indeed were there, men or women, for whom Harley L'Estrange had not appropriate attraction. Distinguished reputation as soldier and scholar for the grave; whim and pleasantry for the gay; novelty for the sated; and for the more vulgar natures was he not Lord L'Estrange, unmarried, possessed already of a large independence, and heir to an ancient earldom, and some fifty thousands a year?

Not till he had succeeded in the general effect—which, it must be owned, he did his best to create—did Harley seriously and especially devote himself to his hostess. And then he seated himself by her side; and, as if in compliment to both, less pressing admirers insensibly slipped away and edged off.

Frank Hazeldean was the last to quit his ground behind Madame di Negra's chair; but when he found that the two began to talk in Italian, and he could not understand a word they said, he too—fancying, poor fellow, that he looked foolish, and cursing his Eton education that had neglected, for languages spoken by the dead, of which he had learned little, those still in use among the living, of which he had learned nought—retreated towards Randal, and asked wistfully, "Pray, what age should you say L'Estrange was? He must be devilish old, in spite of his looks. Why, he was at Waterloo!"

"He is young enough to be a terrible rival," answered Randal, with artful truth.

Frank turned pale, and began to meditate dreadful bloodthirsty thoughts, of which hair-triggers and Lord's Cricket-ground formed the staple.

Certainly there was apparent ground for a lover's jealousy; for Harley and Beatrice now conversed in a low tone, and Beatrice seemed agitated, and Harley earnest. Randal himself grew more and more perplexed. Was Lord L'Estrange really enamoured of the marchesa? If so, farewell to all hopes of Frank's marriage with her! Or was he merely playing a part in Riccabocca's interest; pretending to be the lover, in order to obtain an influence over her mind, rule her through her ambition, and secure an ally against her brother? Was this finesse compatible with Randal's notions of Harley's character? Was it consistent with that chivalric and soldierly spirit of honour which the frank nobleman affected, to make love to a woman in mere /ruse de guerre/? Could mere friendship for Riccabocca be a sufficient inducement to a man, who, whatever his weaknesses or his errors, seemed to wear on his very forehead a soul above deceit, to stoop to paltry means, even for a worthy end? At this question, a new thought flashed upon Randal,—might not Lord L'Estrange have speculated himself upon winning Violante; would not that account for all the exertions he had made on behalf of her inheritance at the court of Vienna,—exertions of which Peschiera and Beatrice had both complained? Those objections which the Austrian government might take to Violante's marriage with some obscure Englishman would probably not exist against a man like Harley L'Estrange, whose family not only belonged to the highest aristocracy of England, but had always supported opinions in vogue amongst the leading governments of Europe. Harley himself, it is true, had never taken part in politics, but his notions were, no doubt, those of a high-born soldier, who had fought, in alliance with Austria, for the restoration of the Bourbons. And this immense wealth—which Violante might lose, if she married one like Randal himself—her marriage with the heir of the Lansmeres might actually tend only to secure. Could Harley, with all his own expectations, be indifferent to such a prize?—and no doubt he had learned Violante's rare

beauty in his correspondence with Riccabocca.

Thus considered, it seemed natural to Randal's estimate of human nature that Harley's more prudish scruples of honour, as regards what is due to women, could not resist a temptation so strong. Mere friendship was not a motive powerful enough to shake them, but ambition was.

While Randal was thus cogitating, Frank thus suffering, and many a whisper, in comment on the evident flirtation between the beautiful hostess and the accomplished guest, reached the ears both of the brooding schemer and the jealous lover, the conversation between the two objects of remark and gossip had taken a new turn. Indeed, Beatrice had made an effort to change it.

"It is long, my Lord," said she, still speaking Italian, "since I have heard sentiments like those you address to me; and if I do not feel myself wholly unworthy of them, it is from the pleasure I have felt in reading sentiments equally foreign to the language of the world in which I live." She took a book from the table as she spoke: "Have you seen this work?"

Harley glanced at the title-page. "To be sure I have, and I know the author."

"I envy you that honour. I should so like also to know one who has discovered to me deeps in my own heart which I had never explored."

"Charming marchesa, if the book has done this, believe me that I have paid you no false compliment,—formed no overflattering estimate of your nature; for the charm of the work is but in its simple appeal to good and generous emotions, and it can charm none in whom those emotions exist not!"

"Nay, that cannot be true, or why is it so popular?"

"Because good and generous emotions are more common to the human heart than we are aware of till the appeal comes."

"Don't ask me to think that! I have found the world so base."

"Pardon me a rude question; but what do you know of the world?"

Beatrice looked first in surprise at Harley, then glanced round the room with significant irony.

"As I thought; you call this little room 'the world.' Be it so. I will venture to say, that if the people in this room were suddenly converted into an audience before a stage, and you were as consummate in the actor's art as you are in all others that please and command—"

"Well?"

"And were to deliver a speech full of sordid and base sentiments, you would be hissed. But let any other woman, with half your powers, arise and utter sentiments sweet and womanly, or honest and lofty, and applause would flow from every lip, and tears rush to many a worldly eye. The true proof of the inherent nobleness of our common nature is in the sympathy it betrays with what is noble wherever crowds are collected. Never believe the world is base; if it were so, no society could hold together for a day. But you would know the author of this book? I will bring him to you."

"Do."

"And now," said Harley, rising, and with his candid, winning smile, "do you think we shall ever be friends?"

"You have startled me so that I can scarcely answer. But why would you be friends with me?"

"Because you need a friend. You have none?"

"Strange flatterer!" said Beatrice, smiling, though very sadly; and looking up, her eye caught Randal's.

"Pooh!" said Harley, "you are too penetrating to believe that you inspire friendship there. Ah, do you suppose that; all the while I have been conversing with you, I have not noticed the watchful gaze of Mr. Randal Leslie? What tie can possibly connect you together I know not yet; but I soon shall."

"Indeed! you talk like one of the old Council of Venice. You try hard to make me fear you," said Beatrice, seeking to escape from the graver kind of impression Harley had made on her, by the affectation partly of coquetry, partly of levity.

"And I," said L'Estrange, calmly, "tell you already that I fear you no more." He bowed, and passed

through the crowd to rejoin Audley, who was seated in a corner whispering with some of his political colleagues. Before Harley reached the minister, he found himself close to Randal and young Hazeldean.

He bowed to the first, and extended his hand to the last. Randal felt the distinction, and his sullen, bitter pride was deeply galled,—a feeling of hate towards Harley passed into his mind. He was pleased to see the cold hesitation with which Frank just touched the hand offered to him. But Randal had not been the only person whose watch upon Beatrice the keen-eyed Harley had noticed. Harley had seen the angry looks of Frank Hazeldean, and divined the cause. So he smiled forgivingly at the slight he had received. "You are like me, Mr. Hazeldean," said he. "You think something of the heart should go with all courtesy that bespeaks friendship—

"The hand of Douglas is his own."

Here Harley drew aside Randal. "Mr. Leslie, a word with you. If I wished to know the retreat of Dr. Riccabocca, in order to render him a great service, would you confide to me that secret?"

"That woman has let out her suspicions that I know the exile's retreat," thought Randal; and with quick presence of mind, he replied at once,

"My Lord, yonder stands a connection of Dr. Riccabocca's. Mr. Hazeldean is surely the person to whom you should address this inquiry."

"Not so, Mr. Leslie; for I suspect that he cannot answer it, and that you can. Well, I will ask something that it seems to me you may grant without hesitation. Should you see Dr. Riccabocca, tell him that I am in England, and so leave it to him to communicate with me or not; but perhaps you have already done so?"

"Lord L'Estrange," said Randal, bowing low, with pointed formality, "excuse me if I decline either to disclaim or acquiesce in the knowledge you impute to me. If I am acquainted with any secret intrusted to me by Dr. Riccabocca, it is for me to use my own discretion how best to guard it. And for the rest, after the Scotch earl, whose words your Lordship has quoted, refused to touch the hand of Marmion, Douglas could scarcely have called Marmion back in order to give him—a message!"

Harley was not prepared for this tone in Mr. Egerton's protegee, and his own gallant nature was rather pleased than irritated by a haughtiness that at least seemed to bespeak independence of spirit. Nevertheless, L'Estrange's suspicions of Randal were too strong to be easily set aside, and therefore he replied, civilly, but with covert taunt,

"I submit to your rebuke, Mr. Leslie, though I meant not the offence you would ascribe to me. I regret my unlucky quotation yet the more, since the wit of your retort has obliged you to identify yourself with Marmion, who, though a clever and brave fellow, was an uncommonly—tricky one." And so Harley, certainly having the best of it, moved on, and joined Egerton, and in a few minutes more both left the room.

"What was L'Estrange saying to you?" asked Frank. "Something about Beatrice, I am sure."

"No; only quoting poetry."

"Then what made you look so angry, my dear fellow? I know it was your kind feeling for me. As you say, he is a formidable rival. But that can't be his own hair. Do you think he wears a toupet? I am sure he was praising Beatrice. He is evidently very much smitten with her. But I don't think she is a woman to be caught by mere rank and fortune! Do you? Why can't you speak?"

"If you do not get her consent soon, I think she is lost to you," said Randal, slowly; and before Frank could recover his dismay, glided from the house.

CHAPTER IX.

Violante's first evening at the Lansmeres had passed more happily to her than the first evening under the same roof had done to Helen. True that she missed her father much, Jemima somewhat; but she so identified her father's cause with Harley that she had a sort of vague feeling that it was to promote that cause that she was on this visit to Harley's parents. And the countess, it must be owned, was more

emphatically cordial to her than she had ever yet been to Captain Digby's orphan. But perhaps the real difference in the heart of either girl was this, that Helen felt awe of Lady Lansmere, and Violante felt only love for Lord L'Estrange's mother. Violante, too, was one of those persons whom a reserved and formal person, like the countess, "can get on with," as the phrase goes. Not so poor little Helen,—so shy herself, and so hard to coax into more than gentle monosyllables. And Lady Lansmere's favourite talk was always of Harley. Helen had listened to such talk with respect and interest. Violante listened to it with inquisitive eagerness, with blushing delight. The mother's heart noticed the distinction between the two, and no wonder that that heart moved more to Violante than to Helen. Lord Lansmere, too, like most gentlemen of his age, clumped all young ladies together as a harmless, amiable, but singularly stupid class of the genus-Petticoat, meant to look pretty, play the piano, and talk to each other about frocks and sweethearts. Therefore this animated, dazzling creature, with her infinite variety of look and play of mind, took him by surprise, charmed him into attention, and warmed him into gallantry. Helen sat in her quiet corner, at her work, sometimes listening with almost mournful, though certainly unenvious, admiration at Violante's vivid, yet ever unconscious, eloquence of word and thought, sometimes plunged deep into her own secret meditations. And all the while the work went on the same, under the small, noiseless fingers. This was one of Helen's habits that irritated the nerves of Lady Lansmere. She despised young ladies who were fond of work. She did not comprehend how often it is the resource of the sweet womanly mind, not from want of thought, but from the silence and the depth of it. Violante was surprised, and perhaps disappointed, that Harley had left the house before dinner, and did not return all the evening. But Lady Lansmere, in making excuse for his absence, on the plea of engagements, found so good an opportunity to talk of his ways in general,—of his rare promise in boyhood, of her regret at the inaction of his maturity, of her hope to see him yet do justice to his natural powers,—that Violante almost ceased to miss him.

And when Lady Lansmere conducted her to her room, and, kissing her cheek tenderly, said, "But you are just the person Harley admires,—just the person to rouse him from melancholy dreams, of which his wild humours are now but the vain disguise"—Violante crossed her arms on her bosom, and her bright eyes, deepened into tenderness, seemed to ask, "He melancholy—and why?"

On leaving Violante's room, Lady Lansmere paused before the door of Helen's; and, after musing a little while, entered softly.

Helen had dismissed her maid; and, at the moment Lady Lansmere entered, she was kneeling at the foot of the bed, her hands clasped before her face.

Her form, thus seen, looked so youthful and child-like, the attitude itself was so holy and so touching, that the proud and cold expression on Lady Lansmere's face changed. She shaded the light involuntarily, and seated herself in silence that she might not disturb the act of prayer.

When Helen rose, she was startled to see the countess seated by the fire, and hastily drew her hand across her eyes. She had been weeping.

Lady Lansmere did not, however, turn to observe those traces of tears, which Helen feared were too visible. The countess was too absorbed in her own thoughts; and as Helen timidly approached, she said—still with her eyes on the clear low fire—"I beg your pardon, Miss Digby, for my intrusion; but my son has left it to me to prepare Lord Lansmere to learn the offer you have done Harley the honour to accept. I have not yet spoken to my Lord; it may be days before I find a fitting occasion to do so; meanwhile I feel assured that your sense of propriety will make you agree, with me that it is due to Lord L'Estrange's father, that strangers should not learn arrangements of such moment in his family before his own consent be obtained."

Here the countess came to a full pause; and poor Helen, finding herself called upon for some reply to this chilling speech, stammered out, scarce audibly,

"Certainly, madam, I never dreamed of—"

"That is right, my dear," interrupted Lady Lansmere, rising suddenly, and as if greatly relieved. "I could not doubt your superiority to ordinary girls of your age, with whom these matters are never secret for a moment. Therefore, of course, you will not mention, at present, what has passed between you and Harley, to any of the friends with whom you may correspond."

"I have no correspondents, no friends, Lady Lansmere," said Helen, deprecatingly, and trying hard not to cry.

"I am very glad to hear it, my dear; young ladies never should have. Friends, especially friends who correspond, are the worst enemies they can have. Good-night, Miss Digby. I need not add, by the way, that though we are bound to show all kindness to this young Italian lady, still she is wholly unconnected

with our family; and you will be as prudent with her as you would have been with your correspondents, had you had the misfortune to have any."

Lady Lansmere said the last words with a smile, and left an ungenial kiss (the stepmother's kiss) on Helen's bended brow. She then left the room, and Helen sat on the seat vacated by the stately, unloving form, and again covered her face with her hands, and again wept. But when she rose at last, and the light fell upon her face, that soft face was sad indeed, but serene,—serene, as with some inward sense of duty, sad, as with the resignation which accepts patience instead of hope.

CHAPTER X.

The next morning Harley appeared at breakfast. He was in gay spirits, and conversed more freely with Violante than he had yet done. He seemed to amuse himself by attacking all she said, and provoking her to argument. Violante was naturally a very earnest person; whether grave or gay, she spoke with her heart on her lips, and her soul in her eyes. She did not yet comprehend the light vein of Harley's irony, so she grew piqued and chafed; and she was so lovely in anger; it so brightened the beauty and animated her words, that no wonder Harley thus maliciously teased her. But what, perhaps, she liked still less than the teasing— though she could not tell why—was the kind of familiarity that Harley assumed with her,—a familiarity as if he had known her all her life,— that of a good-humoured elder brother, or a bachelor uncle. To Helen, on the contrary, when he did not address her apart, his manner was more respectful. He did not call her by her Christian name, as he did Violante, but "Miss Digby," and softened his tone and inclined his head when he spoke to her. Nor did he presume to jest at the very few and brief sentences he drew from Helen, but rather listened to them with deference, and invariably honoured them with approval. After breakfast he asked Violante to play or sing; and when she frankly owned how little she had cultivated those accomplishments, he persuaded Helen to sit down to the piano, and stood by her side while she did so, turning over the leaves of her music-book with the ready devotion of an admiring amateur. Helen always played well, but less well than usual that day, for her generous nature felt abashed. It was as if she were showing off to mortify Violante. But Violante, on the other hand, was so passionately fond of music that she had no feeling left for the sense of her own inferiority. Yet she sighed when Helen rose, and Harley thanked Miss Digby for the delight she had given him.

The day was fine. Lady Lansmere proposed to walk in the garden. While the ladies went up-stairs for their shawls and bonnets, Harley lighted his cigar, and stepped from the window upon the lawn. Lady Lansmere joined him before the girls came out.

"Harley," said she, taking his arm. "what a charming companion you have introduced to us! I never met with any that both pleased and delighted me like this dear Violante. Most girls who possess some power of conversation, and who have dared to think for themselves, are so pedantic, or so masculine; but she is always so simple, and always still the girl. Ah, Harley!"

"Why that sigh, my dear mother?"

"I was thinking how exactly she would have suited you,—how proud I should have been of such a daughter-in-law, and how happy you would have been with such a wife."

Harley started. "Tut," said he, peevishly, "she is a mere child; you forget my years."

"Why," said Lady Lansmere, surprised, "Helen is quite as young as Violante."

"In dates—yes. But Helen's character is so staid; what it is now it will be ever; and Helen, from gratitude, respect, or pity, condescends to accept the ruins of my heart, while this bright Italian has the soul of a Juliet, and would expect in a husband all the passion of a Romeo. Nay, Mother, hush. Do you forget that I am engaged,—and of my own free will and choice? Poor dear Helen! /A propos/, have you spoken to my father, as you undertook to do?"

"Not yet. I must seize the right moment. You know that my Lord requires management."

"My dear mother, that female notion of managing us men costs you ladies a great waste of time, and occasions us a great deal of sorrow. Men are easily managed by plain truth. We are brought up to respect it, strange as it may seem to you!"

Lady Lansmere smiled with the air of superior wisdom, and the experience of an accomplished wife. "Leave it to me, Harley, and rely on my Lord's consent."

Harley knew that Lady Lansmere always succeeded in obtaining her way with his father; and he felt that the earl might naturally be disappointed in such an alliance, and, without due propitiation, evince that disappointment in his manner to Helen. Harley was bound to save her from all chance of such humiliation. He did not wish her to think that she was not welcomed into his family; therefore he said, "I resign myself to your promise and your diplomacy. Meanwhile, as you love me, be kind to my betrothed."

"Am I not so?"

"Hem. Are you as kind as if she were the great heiress you believe Violante to be?"

"Is it," answered Lady Lansmere, evading the question—"is it because one is an heiress and the other is not that you make so marked a difference in your own manner to the two; treating Violante as a spoilt child, and Miss Digby as—"

"The destined wife of Lord L'Estrange, and the daughter-in-law of Lady Lansmere,—yes."

The countess suppressed an impatient exclamation that rose to her lips, for Harley's brow wore that serious aspect which it rarely assumed save when he was in those moods in which men must be soothed, not resisted. And after a pause he went on, "I am going to leave you to-day. I have engaged apartments at the Clarendon. I intend to gratify your wish, so often expressed, that I should enjoy what are called the pleasures of my rank, and the privileges of single-blessedness,—celebrate my adieu to celibacy, and blaze once more, with the splendour of a setting sun, upon Hyde Park and May Fair."

"You are a positive enigma. Leave our house, just when you are betrothed to its inmate! Is that the natural conduct of a lover?"

"How can your woman eyes be so dull, and your woman heart so obtuse?" answered Harley, half laughing, half scolding. "Can you not guess that I wish that Helen and myself should both lose the association of mere ward and guardian; that the very familiarity of our intercourse under the same roof almost forbids us to be lovers; that we lose the joy to meet, and the pang to part. Don't you remember the story of the Frenchman, who for twenty years loved a lady, and never missed passing his evenings at her house. She became a widow. 'I wish you joy,' cried his friend; 'you may now marry the woman you have so long adored.' 'Alas!' said the poor Frenchman, profoundly dejected; 'and if so, where shall I spend my evenings?'"

Here Violante and Helen were seen in the garden, walking affectionately arm in arm.

"I don't perceive the point of your witty, heartless anecdote," said Lady Lansmere, obstinately. "Settle that, however, with Miss Digby. But to leave the very day after your friend's daughter comes as a guest!—what will she think of it?"

Lord L'Estrange looked steadfastly at his mother. "Does it matter much what she thinks of me,—of a man engaged to another; and old enough to be—"

"I wish to heaven you would not talk of your age, Harley; it is a reflection upon mine; and I never saw you look so well nor so handsome." With that she drew him on towards the young ladies; and, taking Helen's arm, asked her, aside, "If she knew that Lord L'Estrange had engaged rooms at the Clarendon; and if she understood why?" As while she said this she moved on, Harley was left by Violante's side.

"You will be very dull here, I fear, my poor child," said he.

"Dull! But why will you call me child? Am I so very—very child-like?"

"Certainly, you are to me,—a mere infant. Have I not seen you one; have I not held you in my arms?"

VIOLANTE.—"But that was a long time ago!"

HARLEY.—"True. But if years have not stood still for you, they have not been stationary for me. There is the same difference between us now that there was then. And, therefore, permit me still to call you child, and as child to treat you!"

VIOLANTE.—"I will do no such thing. Do you know that I always thought I was good-tempered till this

morning."

HARLEY.—"And what undeceived you? Did you break your doll?"

VIOLANTE (with an indignant flash from her dark eyes).—"There!—again! —you delight in provoking me!"

HARLEY.—"It was the doll, then. Don't cry; I will get you another."

Violante plucked her arm from him, and walked away towards the countess in speechless scorn. Harley's brow contracted, in thought and in gloom. He stood still for a moment or so, and then joined the ladies.

"I am trespassing sadly on your morning; but I wait for a visitor whom I sent to before you were up. He is to be here at twelve. With your permission, I will dine with you tomorrow, and you will invite him to meet me."

"Certainly. And who is your friend? I guess—the young author?"

"Leonard Fairfield," cried Violante, who had conquered, or felt ashamed, of her short-lived anger.

"Fairfield!" repeated Lady Lansmere. "I thought, Harley, you said the name was Oran."

"He has assumed the latter name. He is the son of Mark Fairfield, who married an Avenel. Did you recognize no family likeness?—none in those eyes, Mother?" said Harley, sinking his voice into a whisper.

"No;" answered the countess, falteringly.

Harley, observing that Violante was now speaking to Helen about Leonard, and that neither was listening to him, resumed in the same low tone, "And his mother—Nora's sister—shrank from seeing me! That is the reason why I wished you not to call. She has not told the young man why she shrank from seeing me; nor have I explained it to him as yet. Perhaps I never shall."

"Indeed, dearest Harley," said the countess, with great gentleness, "I wish you too much to forget the folly—well, I will not say that word—the sorrows of your boyhood, not to hope that you will rather strive against such painful memories than renew them by unnecessary confidence to any one; least of all to the relation of—"

"Enough! don't name her; the very name pains me. And as to confidence, there are but two persons in the world to whom I ever bare the old wounds,—yourself and Egerton. Let this pass. Ha!—a ring at the bell— that is he!"

CHAPTER XI.

Leonard entered on the scene, and joined the party in the garden. The countess, perhaps to please her son, was more than civil,—she was markedly kind to him. She noticed him more attentively than she had hitherto done; and, with all her prejudices of birth, was struck to find the son of Mark Fairfield the carpenter so thoroughly the gentleman. He might not have the exact tone and phrase by which Convention stereotypes those born and schooled in a certain world; but the aristocrats of Nature can dispense with such trite minutia? And Leonard had lived, of late at least, in the best society that exists for the polish of language and the refinement of manners,—the society in which the most graceful ideas are clothed in the most graceful forms; the society which really, though indirectly, gives the law to courts; the society of the most classic authors, in the various ages in which literature has flowered forth from civilization. And if there was something in the exquisite sweetness of Leonard's voice, look, and manner, which the countess acknowledged to attain that perfection in high breeding, which, under the name of "suavity," steals its way into the heart, so her interest in him was aroused by a certain subdued melancholy which is rarely without distinction, and never without charm. He and Helen exchanged but few words. There was but one occasion in which they could have spoken apart, and Helen herself contrived to elude it. His face brightened at Lady Lansmere's cordial invitation, and he glanced at Helen as he accepted it; but her eye did not meet his own.

"And now," said Harley, whistling to Nero, whom his ward was silently caressing, "I must take

Leonard away. Adieu! all of you, till to-morrow at dinner. Miss Violante, is the doll to have blue eyes or black?"

Violante turned her own black eyes in mute appeal to Lady Lansmere, and nestled to that lady's side as if in refuge from unworthy insult.

CHAPTER XII.

"Let the carriage go to the Clarendon," said Harley to his servant; "I and Mr. Oran will walk to town. Leonard, I think you would rejoice at an occasion to serve your old friends, Dr. Riccabocca and his daughter?"

"Serve them! Oh, yes." And there instantly returned to Leonard the recollection of Violante's words when, on leaving his quiet village, he had sighed to part from all those he loved; and the little dark-eyed girl had said, proudly, yet consolingly, "But to SERVE those you love!" He turned to L'Estrange, with beaming, inquisitive eyes.

"I said to our friend," resumed Harley, "that I would vouch for your honour as my own. I am about to prove my words, and to confide the secrets which your penetration has indeed divined,—our friend is not what he seems." Harley then briefly related to Leonard the particulars of the exile's history, the rank he had held in his native land, the manner in which, partly through the misrepresentations of a kinsman he had trusted, partly through the influence of a wife he had loved, he had been drawn into schemes which he believed bounded to the emancipation of Italy from a foreign yoke by the united exertions of her best and bravest sons.

"A noble ambition!" interrupted Leonard, manfully. "And pardon me, my Lord, I should not have thought that you would speak of it in a tone that implies blame."

"The ambition in itself was noble," answered Harley; "but the cause to which it was devoted became defiled in its dark channel through Secret Societies. It is the misfortune of all miscellaneous political combinations, that with the purest motives of their more generous members are ever mixed the most sordid interests, and the fiercest passions of mean confederates. When those combinations act openly, and in daylight, under the eye of Public Opinion, the healthier elements usually prevail; where they are shrouded in mystery, where they are subjected to no censor in the discussion of the impartial and dispassionate, where chiefs working in the dark exact blind obedience, and every man who is at war with law is at once admitted as a friend of freedom, the history of the world tells us that patriotism soon passes away. Where all is in public, public virtue, by the natural sympathies of the common mind, and by the wholesome control of shame, is likely to obtain ascendancy; where all is in private, and shame is but for him who refuses the abnegation of his conscience, each man seeks the indulgence of his private vice. And hence in Secret Societies (from which may yet proceed great danger to all Europe) we find but foul and hateful Eleusinia, affording pretexts to the ambition of the great, to the license of the penniless, to the passions of the revengeful, to the anarchy of the ignorant. In a word, the societies of these Italian Carbonari did but engender schemes in which the abler chiefs disguised new forms of despotism, and in which the revolutionary many looked forward to the overthrow of all the institutions that stand between Law and Chaos. Naturally, therefore," added L'Estrange, dryly, "when their schemes were detected, and the conspiracy foiled, it was for the silly, honest men entrapped into the league to suffer, the leaders turned king's evidence, and the common mercenaries became—banditti." Harley then proceeded to state that it was just when the /soi-disant/ Riccabocca had discovered the true nature and ulterior views of the conspirators he had joined, and actually withdrawn from their councils, that he was denounced by the kinsman who had duped him into the enterprise, and who now profited by his treason. Harley next spoke of the packet despatched by Riccabocca's dying wife, as it was supposed, to Mrs. Bertram; and of the hopes he founded on the contents of that packet, if discovered. He then referred to the design which had brought Peschiera to England,—a design which that personage had avowed with such effrontery to his companions at Vienna, that he had publicly laid wagers on his success.

"But these men can know nothing of England, of the safety of English laws," said Leonard, naturally. "We take it for granted that Riccabocca, if I am still so to call him, refuses his consent to the marriage between his daughter and his foe. Where, then, the danger? This count, even if Violante were not under your mother's roof, could not get an opportunity to see her. He could not attack the house and carry her off like a feudal baron in the middle ages."

"All this is very true," answered Harley. "Yet I have found through life that we cannot estimate danger by external circumstances, but by the character of those from whom it is threatened. This count is a man of singular audacity, of no mean natural talents,—talents practised in every art of duplicity and intrigue; one of those men whose boast it is that they succeed in whatever they undertake; and he is, here, urged on the one hand by all that can whet the avarice, and on the other, by all that can give invention to despair. Therefore, though I cannot guess what plan he may possibly adopt, I never doubt that some plan, formed with cunning and pursued with daring, will be embraced the moment he discovers Violante's retreat,—unless, indeed, we can forestall all peril by the restoration of her father, and the detection of the fraud and falsehood to which Peschiera owes the fortune he appropriates. Thus, while we must prosecute to the utmost our inquiries for the missing documents, so it should be our care to possess ourselves, if possible, of such knowledge of the count's machinations as may enable us to defeat them. Now, it was with satisfaction that I learned in Germany that Peschiera's sister was in London. I knew enough both of his disposition and of the intimacy between himself and this lady, to make me think it probable he will seek to make her his instrument and accomplice, should he require one. Peschiera (as you may suppose by his audacious wager) is not one of those secret villains who would cut off their right hand if it could betray the knowledge of what was done by the left,—rather one of those self-confident vaunting knaves of high animal spirits, and conscience so obtuse that it clouds their intellect, who must have some one to whom they can boast of their abilities and confide their projects. And Peschiera has done all he can to render this poor woman so wholly dependent on him as to be his slave and his tool. But I have learned certain traits in her character that show it to be impressionable to good, and with tendencies to honour. Peschiera had taken advantage of the admiration she excited, some years ago, in a rich young Englishman, to entice this admirer into gambling, and sought to make his sister both a decoy and an instrument in his designs of plunder. She did not encourage the addresses of our countryman, but she warned him of the snare laid for him, and entreated him to leave the place lest her brother should discover and punish her honesty. The Englishman told me this himself. In fine, my hope of detaching this lady from Peschiera's interests, and inducing her to forewarn us of his purpose, consists but in the innocent, and, I hope, laudable artifice, of redeeming herself,— of appealing to, and calling into disused exercise, the better springs of her nature."

Leonard listened with admiration and some surprise to the singularly subtle and sagacious insight into character which Harley evinced in the brief clear strokes by which he had thus depicted Peschiera and Beatrice, and was struck by the boldness with which Harley rested a whole system of action upon a few deductions drawn from his reasonings on human motive and characteristic bias. Leonard had not expected to find so much practical acuteness in a man who, however accomplished, usually seemed indifferent, dreamy, and abstracted to the ordinary things of life. But Harley L'Estrange was one of those whose powers lie dormant till circumstance applies to them all they need for activity,—the stimulant of a motive.

Harley resumed: "After a conversation I had with the lady last night, it occurred to me that in this part of our diplomacy you could render us essential service. Madame di Negra—such is the sister's name—has conceived an admiration for your genius, and a strong desire to know you personally. I have promised to present you to her; and I shall do so after a preliminary caution. The lady is very handsome, and very fascinating. It is possible that your heart and your senses may not be proof against her attractions."

"Oh, do not fear that!" exclaimed Leonard, with a tone of conviction so earnest that Harley smiled.

"Forewarned is not always forearmed against the might of beauty, my dear Leonard; so I cannot at once accept your assurance. But listen to me! Watch yourself narrowly, and if you find that you are likely to be captivated, promise, on your honour, to retreat at once from the field. I have no right, for the sake of another, to expose you to danger; and Madame di Negra, whatever may be her good qualities, is the last person I should wish to see you in love with."

"In love with her! Impossible!"

"Impossible is a strong word," returned Harley; "still I own fairly (and this belief alone warrants me in trusting you to her fascinations), that I do think, as far as one man can judge of another, that she is not the woman to attract you; and if filled by one pure and generous object in your intercourse with her, you will see her with purged eyes. Still I claim your promise as one of honour."

"I give it," said Leonard, positively. "But how can I serve Riccabocca?
How aid in—"

"Thus," interrupted Harley: "the spell of your writings is, that, unconsciously to ourselves, they make us better and nobler. And your writings are but the impressions struck off from your mind. Your conversation, when you are roused, has the same effect. And as you grow more familiar with Madame

di Negra, I wish you to speak of your boyhood, your youth. Describe the exile as you have seen him,—so touching amidst his foibles, so grand amidst the petty privations of his fallen fortunes, so benevolent while poring over his hateful Machiavelli, so stingless in his wisdom of the serpent, so playfully astute in his innocence of the dove—I leave the picture to your knowledge of humour and pathos. Describe Violante brooding over her Italian Poets, and filled with dreams of her fatherland; describe her with all the flashes of her princely nature, shining forth through humble circumstance and obscure position; waken in your listener compassion, respect, admiration for her kindred exiles,—and I think our work is done. She will recognize evidently those whom her brother seeks. She will question you closely where you met with them, where they now are. Protect that secret; say at once that it is not your own. Against your descriptions and the feelings they excite, she will not be guarded as against mine. And there are other reasons why your influence over this woman of mixed nature may be more direct and effectual than my own."

"Nay, I cannot conceive that."

"Believe it, without asking me to explain," answered Harley.

For he did not judge it necessary to say to Leonard: "I am high-born and wealthy, you a peasant's son, and living by your exertions. This woman is ambitious and distressed. She might have projects on me that would counteract mine on her. You she would but listen to, and receive, through the sentiments of good or of poetical that are in her; you she would have no interest to subjugate, no motive to ensnare."

"And now," said Harley, turning the subject, "I have another object in view. This foolish sage friend of ours, in his bewilderment and fears, has sought to save Violante from one rogue by promising her hand to a man who, unless my instincts deceive me, I suspect much disposed to be another. Sacrifice such exuberance of life and spirit to that bloodless heart, to that cold and earthward intellect! By Heaven, it shall not be!"

"But whom can the exile possibly have seen of birth and fortunes to render him a fitting spouse for his daughter? Whom, my Lord, except yourself?"

"Me!" exclaimed Harley, angrily, and changing colour. "I worthy of such a creature?—I, with my habits! I, silken egotist that I am! And you, a poet, to form such an estimate of one who might be the queen of a poet's dresn!"

"My Lord, when we sat the other night round Riccabocca's hearth, when I heard her speak, and observed you listen, I said to myself, from such knowledge of human nature as comes, we know not how, to us poets,—I said, 'Harley L'Estrange has looked long and wistfully on the heavens, and he now hears the murmur of the wings that can waft him towards them.' And then I sighed, for I thought how the world rules us all in spite of ourselves, and I said, 'What pity for both, that the exile's daughter is not the worldly equal of the peer's son!' And you too sighed, as I thus thought; and I fancied that, while you listened to the music of the wing, you felt the iron of the chain. But the exile's daughter is your equal in birth, and you are her equal in heart and in soul."

"My poor Leonard, you rave," answered Harley, calmly. "And if Violante is not to be some young prince's bride, she should be some young poet's."

"Poet's! Oh, no!" said Leonard, with a gentle laugh. "Poets need repose where they love!"

Harley was struck by the answer, and mused over it in silence. "I comprehend," thought he; "it is a new light that dawns on me. What is needed by the man whose whole life is one strain after glory—whose soul sinks, in fatigue, to the companionship of earth—is not the love of a nature like his own. He is right,—it is repose! While I!—it is true; boy that he is, his intuitions are wiser than all my experience! It is excitement, energy, elevation, that Love should bestow on me. But I have chosen; and, at least, with Helen my life will be calm, and my hearth sacred. Let the rest sleep in the same grave as my youth."

"But," said Leonard, wishing kindly to arouse his noble friend from a revery which he felt was mournful, though he did not divine its true cause,—"but you have not yet told me the name of the signorina's suitor. May I know?"

"Probably one you never heard of. Randal Leslie,—a placeman. You refused a place; you were right."

"Randal Leslie? Heaven forbid!" cried Leonard, revealing his surprise at the name.

"Amen! But what do you know of him?"

"Leonard related the story of Burley's pamphlet."

Harley seemed delighted to hear his suspicions of Randal confirmed. "The paltry pretender;—and yet I fancied that he might be formidable! However, we must dismiss him for the present,—we are approaching Madame di Negra's house. Prepare yourself, and remember your promise."

CHAPTER XIII.

Some days have passed by. Leonard and Beatrice di Negra have already made friends. Harley is satisfied with his young friend's report. He himself has been actively occupied. He has sought, but hitherto in vain, all trace of Mrs. Bertram; he has put that investigation into the hands of his lawyer, and his lawyer has not been more fortunate than himself. Moreover, Harley has blazed forth again in the London world, and promises again */de faire fureur/*; but he has always found time to spend some hours in the twenty-four at his father's house. He has continued much the same tone with Violante, and she begins to accustom herself to it, and reply saucily. His calm courtship to Helen flows on in silence. Leonard, too, has been a frequent guest at the Lansmeres: all welcome and like him there. Peschiera has not evinced any sign of the deadly machinations ascribed to him. He goes less into the drawing-room world; for in that world he meets Lord L'Estrange; and brilliant and handsome though Peschiera be, Lord L'Estrange, like Rob Roy Macgregor, is "on his native heath," and has the decided advantage over the foreigner. Peschiera, however, shines in the clubs, and plays high. Still, scarcely an evening passes in which he and Baron Levy do not meet.

Audley Egerton has been intensely occupied with affairs, only seen once by Harley. Harley then was about to deliver himself of his sentiments respecting Randal Leslie, and to communicate the story of Burley and the pamphlet. Egerton stopped him short.

"My dear Harley, don't try to set me against this young man. I wish to hear nothing in his disfavour. In the first place, it would not alter the line of conduct I mean to adopt with regard to him. He is my wife's kinsman; I charged myself with his career, as a wish of hers, and therefore as a duty to myself. In attaching him so young to my own fate, I drew him necessarily away from the professions in which his industry and talents (for he has both in no common degree) would have secured his fortunes; therefore, be he bad, be he good, I shall try to provide for him as I best can; and, moreover, cold as I am to him, and worldly though perhaps he be, I have somehow or other conceived an interest in him, a liking to him. He has been under my roof, he is dependent on me; he has been docile and prudent, and I am a lone childless man; therefore, spare him, since in so doing you spare me; and ah, Harley, I have so many cares on me now that—"

"Oh, say no more, my dear, dear Audley," cried the generous friend; "how little people know you!"

Audley's hand trembled. Certainly his nerves began to show wear and tear.

Meanwhile, the object of this dialogue—the type of perverted intellect, of mind without heart, of knowledge which had no aim but power—was in a state of anxious, perturbed gloom. He did not know whether wholly to believe Levy's assurance of his patron's ruin. He could not believe it when he saw that great house in Grosvenor Square, its hall crowded with lacqueys, its sideboard blazing with plate; when no dun was ever seen in the antechamber; when not a tradesman was ever known to call twice for a bill. He hinted to Levy the doubts all these phenomena suggested to him; but the baron only smiled ominously, and said,

"True, the tradesmen are always paid; but the how is the question! Randal, */mon cher/*, you are too innocent. I have but two pieces of advice to suggest, in the shape of two proverbs,—'Wise rats run from a falling house,' and, 'Make hay while the sun shines.' */A propos/*, Mr. Avenel likes you greatly, and has been talking of the borough of Lansmere for you. He has contrived to get together a great interest there. Make much of him."

Randal had indeed been to Mrs. Avenel's */soiree dansante/*, and called twice and found her at home, and been very bland and civil, and admired the children. She had two, a boy and a girl, very like their father, with open faces as bold as brass. And as all this had won Mrs. Avenel's good graces, so it had propitiated her husband's. Avenel was shrewd enough to see how clever Randal was. He called him "smart," and said "he would have got on in America," which was the highest praise Dick Avenel ever accorded to any man. But Dick himself looked a little careworn; and this was the first year in which he had murmured at the bills of his wife's dressmaker, and said with an oath, that "there was such a thing as going too much ahead."

Randal had visited Dr. Riccabocca, and found Violante flown. True to his promise to Harley, the Italian refused to say where, and suggested, as was agreed, that for the present it would be more prudent if Randal suspended his visits to himself. Leslie, not liking this proposition, attempted to make himself still necessary by working on Riccabocca's fears as to that espionage on his retreat, which had been among the reasons that had hurried the sage into offering Randal Violante's hand. But Riccabocca had already learned that the fancied spy was but his neighbour Leonard; and, without so saying, he cleverly contrived to make the supposition of such espionage an additional reason for the cessation of Leslie's visits. Randal then, in his own artful, quiet, roundabout way, had sought to find out if any communication had passed between L'Estrange and Riccabocca. Brooding over Harley's words to him, he suspected there had been such communication, with his usual penetrating astuteness. Riccabocca, here, was less on his guard, and rather parried the sidelong questions than denied their inferences.

Randal began already to surmise the truth. Where was it likely Violante should go but to the Lansmeres? This confirmed his idea of Harley's pretensions to her hand. With such a rival what chance had he? Randal never doubted for a moment that the pupil of Machiavelli would "throw him over," if such an alliance to his daughter really presented itself. The schemer at once discarded from his objects all further aim on Violante; either she would be poor, and he would not have her; or she would be rich, and her father would give her to another. As his heart had never been touched by the fair Italian, so the moment her inheritance became more doubtful, it gave him no pang to lose her; but he did feel very sore and resentful at the thought of being supplanted by Lord L'Estrange,—the man who had insulted him.

Neither, as yet, had Randal made any way in his designs on Frank. For several days Madame di Negra had not been at home either to himself or young Hazeldean; and Frank, though very unhappy, was piqued and angry; and Randal suspected, and suspected, and suspected, he knew not exactly what, but that the devil was not so kind to him there as that father of lies ought to have been to a son so dutiful. Yet, with all these discouragements, there was in Randal Leslie so dogged and determined a conviction of his own success, there was so great a tenacity of purpose under obstacles, and so vigilant an eye upon all chances that could be turned to his favour, that he never once abandoned hope, nor did more than change the details in his main schemes. Out of calculations apparently the most far-fetched and improbable, he had constructed a patient policy, to which he obstinately clung. How far his reasonings and patience served to his ends remains yet to be seen. But could our contempt for the baseness of Randal himself be separated from the faculties which he elaborately degraded to the service of that baseness, one might allow that there was something one could scarcely despise in this still self-reliance, this inflexible resolve. Had such qualities, aided as they were by abilities of no ordinary acuteness, been applied to objects commonly honest, one would have backed Randal Leslie against any fifty picked prize-men from the colleges. But there are judges of weight and metal who do that now, especially Baron Levy, who says to himself as he eyes that pale face all intellect, and that spare form all nerve, "This is a man who must make way in life; he is worth helping."

By the words "worth helping" Baron Levy meant "worth getting into my power, that he may help me."

CHAPTER XIV.

But parliament had met. Events that belong to history had contributed yet more to weaken the administration. Randal Leslie's interest became absorbed in politics, for the stake to him was his whole political career. Should Audley lose office, and for good, Audley could aid him no more; but to abandon his patron, as Levy recommended, and pin himself, in the hope of a seat in parliament, to a stranger,—an obscure stranger, like Dick Avenel,—that was a policy not to be adopted at a breath. Meanwhile, almost every night, when the House met, that pale face and spare form, which Levy so identified with shrewdness and energy, might be seen amongst the benches appropriated to those more select strangers who obtain the Speaker's order of admission. There, Randal heard the great men of that day, and with the half-contemptuous surprise at their fame, which is common enough amongst clever, well-educated young men, who know not what it is to speak in the House of Commons. He heard much slovenly English, much trite reasoning, some eloquent thoughts, and close argument, often delivered in a jerking tone of voice (popularly called the parliamentary twang), and often accompanied by gesticulations that would have shocked the manager of a provincial theatre. He thought how much better than these great dons (with but one or two exceptions), he himself could speak,—with what more refined logic, with what more polished periods, how much more like Cicero and Burke! Very probably he might have so spoken, and for that very reason have made that dearest of all dead failures,—a

pretentious imitation of Burke and Cicero. One thing, however, he was obliged to own,—namely, that in a popular representative assembly, it is not precisely knowledge which is power, or if knowledge, it is but the knowledge of that particular assembly, and what will best take with it; passion, invective, sarcasm, bold declamation, shrewd common-sense, the readiness so rarely found in a very profound mind,—he owned that all these were the qualities that told; when a man who exhibited nothing but "knowledge," in the ordinary sense of the word, stood an imminent chance of being coughed down.

There at his left—last but one in the row of the ministerial chiefs— Randal watched Audley Egerton, his arms folded on his breast, his hat drawn over his brows, his eyes fixed with steady courage on whatever speaker in the Opposition held possession of the floor. And twice Randal heard Egerton speak, and marvelled much at the effect that minister produced. For of those qualities enumerated above, and which Randal had observed to be most sure of success, Audley Egerton only exhibited to a marked degree the common-sense and the readiness. And yet, though but little applauded by noisy cheers, no speaker seemed more to satisfy friends, and command respect from foes. The true secret was this, which Randal might well not divine, since that young person, despite his ancient birth, his Eton rearing, and his refined air, was not one of Nature's gentlemen,—the true secret was, that Audley Egerton moved, looked, and spoke like a thorough gentleman of England,—a gentleman of more than average talents and of long experience, speaking his sincere opinions, not a rhetorician aiming at effect. Moreover, Egerton was a consummate man of the world. He said, with nervous simplicity, what his party desired to be said, and put what his opponents felt to be the strong points of the case. Calm and decorous, yet spirited and energetic, with little variety of tone, and action subdued and rare, but yet signalized by earnest vigour, Audley Egerton impressed the understanding of the dullest, and pleased the taste of the most fastidious.

But once, when allusions were made to a certain popular question, on which the premier had announced his resolution to refuse all concession, and on the expediency of which it was announced that the Cabinet was nevertheless divided, and when such allusions were coupled with direct appeals to Mr. Egerton, as "the enlightened member of a great commercial constituency," and with a flattering doubt that "that Right Honourable gentleman, member for that great city, identified with the cause of the Burgher class, could be so far behind the spirit of the age as his official chief,"—Randal observed that Egerton drew his hat still more closely over his brows, and turned to whisper with one of his colleagues. He could not be got up to speak.

That evening Randal walked home with Egerton, and intimated his surprise that the minister had declined what seemed to him a good occasion for one of those brief, weighty replies by which Audley was chiefly distinguished,—an occasion to which he had been loudly invited by the "hears" of the House.

"Leslie," answered the statesman, briefly, "I owe all my success in parliament to this rule,—I have never spoken against my convictions. I intend to abide by it to the last."

"But if the question at issue comes before the House, you will vote against it?"

"Certainly, I vote as a member of the Cabinet. But since I am not leader and mouthpiece of the party, I retain as an individual the privilege to speak or keep silence."

"Ah, my dear Mr. Egerton," exclaimed Randal, "forgive me. But this question, right or wrong, has got such hold of the public mind. So little, if conceded in time, would give content; and it is so clear (if I may judge by the talk I hear everywhere I go) that by refusing all concession, the Government must fall, that I wish—"

"So do I wish," interrupted Egerton, with a gloomy, impatient sigh,— "so do I wish! But what avails it? If my advice had been taken but three weeks ago—now it is too late—we could have doubled the rock; we refused, we must split upon it."

This speech was so unlike the discreet and reserved minister, that Randal gathered courage to proceed with an idea that had occurred to his own sagacity. And before I state it, I must add that Egerton had of late shown much more personal kindness to his protegee; whether his spirits were broken, or that at last, close and compact as his nature of bronze was, he felt the imperious want to groan aloud in some loving ear, the stern Audley seemed tamed and softened. So Randal went on,

"May I say what I have heard expressed with regard to you and your position—in the streets, in the clubs?"

"Yes, it is in the streets and the clubs that statesmen should go to school. Say on."

"Well, then, I have heard it made a matter of wonder why you, and one or two others I will not name, do not at once retire from the ministry, and on the avowed ground that you side with the public feeling

on this irresistible question."

"Eh!"

"It is clear that in so doing you would become the most popular man in the country,—clear that you would be summoned back to power on the shoulders of the people. No new Cabinet could be formed without you, and your station in it would perhaps be higher, for life, than that which you may now retain but for a few weeks longer. Has not this ever occurred to you?"

"Never," said Audley, with dry composure.

Amazed at such obtuseness, Randal exclaimed, "Is it possible! And yet, forgive me if I say I think you are ambitious, and love power."

"No man more ambitious; and if by power you mean office, it has grown the habit of my life, and I shall not know what to do without it."

"And how, then, has what seems to me so obvious never occurred to you?"

"Because you are young, and therefore I forgive you; but not the gossips who could wonder why Audley Egerton refused to betray the friends of his whole career, and to profit by the treason."

"But one should love one's country before a party."

"No doubt of that; and the first interest of a country is the honour of its public men."

"But men may leave their party without dishonour!"

"Who doubts that? Do you suppose that if I were an ordinary independent member of parliament, loaded with no obligations, charged with no trust, I could hesitate for a moment what course to pursue? Oh, that I were but the member for ————! Oh, that I had the full right to be a free agent! But if a member of a Cabinet, a chief in whom thousands confide, because he is outvoted in a council of his colleagues, suddenly retires, and by so doing breaks up the whole party whose confidence he has enjoyed, whose rewards he has reaped, to whom he owes the very position which he employs to their ruin,—own that though his choice may be honest, it is one which requires all the consolations of conscience."

"But you will have those consolations. And," added Randal, energetically, "the gain to your career will be so immense!"

"That is precisely what it cannot be," answered Egerton, gloomily. "I grant that I may, if I choose, resign office with the present Government, and so at once destroy that Government; for my resignation on such ground would suffice to do it. I grant this; but for that very reason I could not the next day take office with another administration. I could not accept wages for desertion. No gentleman could! and therefore—" Audley stopped short, and buttoned his coat over his broad breast. The action was significant; it said that the man's mind was made up.

In fact, whether Audley Egerton was right or wrong in his theory depends upon much subtler, and perhaps loftier, views in the casuistry of political duties, than it was in his character to take. And I guard myself from saying anything in praise or disfavour of his notions, or implying that he is a fit or unfit example in a parallel case. I am but describing the man as he was, and as a man like him would inevitably be, under the influences in which he lived, and in that peculiar world of which he was so emphatically a member. "Ce n'est pas moi qui parle, c'est Marc Aurele."

He speaks, not I.

Randal had no time for further discussion. They now reached Egerton's house, and the minister, taking the chamber candlestick from his servant's hand, nodded a silent goodnight to Leslie, and with a jaded look retired to his room.

CHAPTER XV.

But not on the threatened question was that eventful campaign of Party decided. The Government fell less in battle than skirmish. It was one fatal Monday—a dull question of finance and figures. Prosy and

few were the speakers,—all the Government silent, save the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and another business-like personage connected with the Board of Trade, whom the House would hardly condescend to hear. The House was in no mood to think of facts and figures. Early in the evening, between nine and ten, the Speaker's sonorous voice sounded, "Strangers must withdraw!" And Randal, anxious and foreboding, descended from his seat and went out of the fatal doors. He turned to take a last glance at Audley Egerton. The whipper-in was whispering to Audley; and the minister pushed back his hat from his brows, and glanced round the House, and up into the galleries, as if to calculate rapidly the relative numbers of the two armies in the field; then he smiled bitterly, and threw himself back into his seat. That smile long haunted Leslie.

Amongst the strangers thus banished with Randal, while the division was being taken, were many young men, like himself, connected with the administration,—some by blood, some by place. Hearts beat loud in the swarming lobbies. Ominous mournful whispers were exchanged. "They say the Government will have a majority of ten." "No; I hear they will certainly be beaten." "H—says by fifty." "I don't believe it," said a Lord of the Bedchamber; "it is impossible. I left five Government members dining at The Travellers." "No one thought the division would be so early." "A trick of the Whigs—shameful!" "Wonder some one was not set up to talk for time; very odd P—did not speak; however, he is so cursedly rich, he does not care whether he is out or in." "Yes; and Audley Egerton too, just such another: glad, no doubt, to be set free to look after his property; very different tactics if we had men to whom office was as necessary as it is—to me!" said a candid young placeman. Suddenly the silent Leslie felt a friendly grasp on his arm. He turned and saw Levy.

"Did I not tell you?" said the baron, with an exulting smile.

"You are sure, then, that the Government will be outvoted?"

"I spent the morning in going over the list of members with a parliamentary client of mine, who knows them all as a shepherd does his sheep. Majority for the Opposition at least twenty-five."

"And in that case must the Government resign, sir?" asked the candid young placeman, who had been listening to the smart, well-dressed baron, "his soul planted in his ears."

"Of course, sir," replied the baron, blandly, and offering his snuff-box (true Louis Quinze, with a miniature of Madame de Pompadour, set in pearls). "You are a friend to the present ministers? You could not wish them to be mean enough to stay in?" Randal drew aside the baron.

"If Audley's affairs are as you state, what can he do?"

"I shall ask him that question to-morrow," answered the baron, with a look of visible hate; "and I have come here just to see how he bears the prospect before him."

"You will not discover that in his face. And those absurd scruples of his! If he had but gone out in time—to come in again with the New Men!"

"Oh, of course, our Right Honourable is too punctilious for that!" answered the baron, sneering.

Suddenly the doors opened, in rushed the breathless expectants. "What are the numbers? What is the division?"

"Majority against ministers," said a member of Opposition, peeling an orange, "twenty-nine."

The baron, too, had a Speaker's order; and he came into the House with Randal, and sat by his side. But, to their disgust, some member was talking about the other motions before the House.

"What! has nothing been said as to the division?" asked the baron of a young county member, who was talking to some non-parliamentary friend in the bench before Levy. The county member was one of the baron's pet eldest sons, had dined often with Levy, was under "obligations" to him. The young legislator looked very much ashamed of Levy's friendly pat on his shoulder, and answered hurriedly, "Oh, yes; H——— asked if, after such an expression of the House, it was the intention of ministers to retain their places, and carry on the business of the Government."

"Just like H———! Very inquisitive mind! And what was the answer he got?"

"None," said the county member; and returned in haste to his proper seat in the body of the House.

"There comes Egerton," said the baron. And, indeed, as most of the members were now leaving the House, to talk over affairs at clubs or in saloons, and spread through town the great tidings, Audley Egerton's tall head was seen towering above the rest. And Levy turned away disappointed. For not only was the minister's handsome face, though pale, serene and cheerful, but there was an obvious courtesy,

a marked respect, in the mode in which that assembly—heated though it was—made way for the fallen minister as he passed through the jostling crowd. And the frank urbane nobleman, who afterwards, from the force, not of talent but of character, became the leader in that House, pressed the hand of his old opponent, as they met in the throng near the doors, and said aloud, "I shall not be a proud man if ever I live to have office; but I shall be proud if ever I leave it with as little to be said against me as your bitterest opponents can say against you, Egerton."

"I wonder," exclaimed the baron, aloud, and leaning over the partition that divided him from the throng below, so that his voice reached Egerton—and there was a cry from formal, indignant members, "Order in the strangers' gallery I wonder what Lord L'Estrange will say?"

Audley lifted his dark brows, surveyed the baron for an instant with flashing eyes, then walked down the narrow defile between the last benches, and vanished from the scene, in which, alas! so few of the most admired performers leave more than an actor's short-lived name!

CHAPTER XVI.

Baron Levy did not execute his threat of calling on Egerton the next morning. Perhaps he shrank from again meeting the flash of those indignant eyes. And indeed Egerton was too busied all the forenoon to see any one not upon public affairs, except Harley, who hastened to console or cheer him. When the House met, it was announced that the ministers had resigned, only holding their offices till their successors were appointed. But already there was some reaction in their favour; and when it became generally known that the new administration was to be formed of men few indeed of whom had ever before held office, the common superstition in the public mind that government is like a trade, in which a regular apprenticeship must be served, began to prevail; and the talk at the clubs was that the new men could not stand; that the former ministry, with some modification, would be back in a month. Perhaps that too might be a reason why Baron Levy thought it prudent not prematurely to offer vindictive condolences to Mr. Egerton. Randal spent part of his morning in inquiries as to what gentlemen in his situation meant to do with regard to their places; he heard with great satisfaction that very few intended to volunteer retirement from their desks. As Randal himself had observed to Egerton, "Their country before their party!"

Randal's place was of great moment to him; its duties were easy, its salary amply sufficient for his wants, and defrayed such expenses as were bestowed on the education of Oliver and his sister. For I am bound to do justice to this young man,—indifferent as he was towards his species in general, the ties of family were strong with him; and he stinted himself in many temptations most alluring to his age, in the endeavour to raise the dull honest Oliver and the loose-haired pretty Juliet somewhat more to his own level of culture and refinement. Men essentially griping and unscrupulous often do make the care for their family an apology for their sins against the world. Even Richard III., if the chroniclers are to be trusted, excused the murder of his nephews by his passionate affection for his son. With the loss of that place, Randal lost all means of support, save what Audley could give him; and if Audley were in truth ruined? Moreover, Randal had already established at the office a reputation for ability and industry. It was a career in which, if he abstained from party politics, he might rise to a fair station and to a considerable income. Therefore, much contented with what he learned as to the general determination of his fellow officials, a determination warranted by ordinary precedent in such cases, Randal dined at a club with good relish, and much Christian resignation for the reverse of his patron, and then walked to Grosvenor Square, on the chance of finding Audley within. Learning that he was so, from the porter who opened the door, Randal entered the library. Three gentlemen were seated there with Egerton: one of the three was Lord L'Estrange; the other two were members of the really defunct, though nominally still existing, Government. He was about to withdraw from intruding on this conclave, when Egerton said to him gently, "Come in, Leslie; I was just speaking about yourself."

"About me, sir?"

"Yes; about you and the place you hold. I had asked Sir ——[pointing to a fellow minister] whether I might not, with propriety, request your chief to leave some note of his opinion of your talents, which I know is high, and which might serve you with his successor."

"Oh, sir, at such a time to think of me!" exclaimed Randal, and he was genuinely touched.

"But," resumed Audley, with his usual dryness, "Sir ——, to my surprise, thinks that it would better

become you that you should resign. Unless his reasons, which he has not yet stated, are very strong, such would not be my advice."

"My reasons," said Sir —, with official formality, "are simply these: I have a nephew in a similar situation; he will resign, as a matter of course. Every one in the public offices whose relations and near connections hold high appointments in the Government will do so. I do not think Mr. Leslie will like to feel himself a solitary exception."

"Mr. Leslie is no relation of mine,—not even a near connection," answered Egerton.

"But his name is so associated with your own: he has resided so long in your house, is so well known in society (and don't think I compliment when I add, that we hope so well of him), that I can't think it worth his while to keep this paltry place, which incapacitates him too from a seat in parliament."

Sir — was one of those terribly rich men, to whom all considerations of mere bread and cheese are paltry. But I must add that he supposed Egerton to be still wealthier than himself, and sure to provide handsomely for Randal, whom Sir — rather liked than not; and for Randal's own sake, Sir — thought it would lower him in the estimation of Egerton himself, despite that gentleman's advocacy, if he did not follow the example of his avowed and notorious patron.

"You see, Leslie," said Egerton, checking Randal's meditated reply, "that nothing can be said against your honour if you stay where you are; it is a mere question of expediency; I will judge that for you; keep your place."

Unhappily the other member of the Government, who had hitherto been silent, was a literary man. Unhappily, while this talk had proceeded, he had placed his hand upon Randal Leslie's celebrated pamphlet, which lay on the library table; and, turning over the leaves, the whole spirit and matter of that masterly composition in defence of the administration (a composition steeped in all the essence of party) recurred to his too faithful recollection. He, too, liked Randal; he did more,—he admired the author of that striking and effective pamphlet. And therefore, rousing himself from the sublime indifference he had before felt for the fate of a subaltern, he said, with a bland and complimentary smile, "No; the writer of this most able publication is no ordinary placeman. His opinions here are too vigorously stated; this fine irony on the very person who in all probability will be the chief in his office has excited too lively an attention to allow him the /sedet eternumque sedebit/ on an official stool. Ha, ha! this is so good! Read it, L'Estrange. What say you?" Harley glanced over the page pointed out to him. The original was in one of Burley's broad, coarse, but telling burlesques, strained fine through Randal's more polished satire. It was capital. Harley smiled, and lifted his eyes to Randal. The unlucky plagiarist's face was flushed,—the beads stood on his brow. Harley was a good hater; he loved too warmly not to err on the opposite side; but he was one of those men who forget hate when its object is distressed and humbled. He put down the pamphlet and said, "I am no politician; but Egerton is so well known to be fastidious and over-scrupulous in all points of official etiquette, that Mr. Leslie cannot follow a safer counsellor."

"Read that yourself, Egerton," said Sir —; and he pushed the pamphlet to Audley.

Now Egerton had a dim recollection that that pamphlet was unlucky; but he had skimmed over its contents hastily, and at that moment had forgotten all about it. He took up the too famous work with a reluctant hand, but he read attentively the passages pointed out to him, and then said gravely and sadly,

"Mr. Leslie, I retract my advice. I believe Sir — is right,—that the nobleman here so keenly satirized will be the chief in your office. I doubt whether he will not compel your dismissal; at all events, he could scarcely be expected to promote your advancement. Under the circumstances, I fear you have no option as a—" Egerton paused a moment, and, with a sigh that seemed to settle the question, concluded with—"as a gentleman."

Never did Jack Cade, never did Wat Tyler, feel a more deadly hate to that word "gentleman" than the well-born Leslie felt then; but he bowed his head, and answered with his usual presence of mind,

"You utter my own sentiment."

"You think we are right, Harley?" asked Egerton, with an irresolution that surprised all present.

"I think," answered Harley, with a compassion for Randal that was almost over-generous, and yet with an equivoque on the words, despite the compassion,—"I think whoever has served Audley Egerton never yet has been a loser by it; and if Mr. Leslie wrote this pamphlet, he must have well served Audley Egerton. If he undergoes the penalty, we may safely trust to Egerton for the compensation."

"My compensation has long since been made," answered Randal, with grace; "and that Mr. Egerton could thus have cared for my fortunes, at an hour so occupied, is a thought of pride which—"

"Enough, Leslie! enough!" interrupted Egerton, rising and pressing his protegee's hand. "See me before you go to bed."

Then the two other ministers rose also and shook hands with Leslie, and told him he had done the right thing, and that they hoped soon to see him in parliament; and hinted, smilingly, that the next administration did not promise to be very long-lived; and one asked him to dinner, and the other to spend a week at his country-seat. And amidst these congratulations at the stroke that left him penniless, the distinguished pamphleteer left the room. How he cursed big John Burley!

CHAPTER XVII.

It was past midnight when Audley Egerton summoned Randal. The statesman was then alone, seated before his great desk, with its manifold compartments, and engaged on the task of transferring various papers and letters, some to the waste-basket, some to the flames, some to two great iron chests with patent locks, that stood, open-mouthed, at his feet. Strong, stern, and grim looked those iron chests, silently receiving the relics of power departed; strong, stern, and grim as the grave. Audley lifted his eyes at Randal's entrance, signed to him to take a chair, continued his task for a few moments, and then turning round, as if by an effort he plucked himself from his master-passion,—Public Life, he said, with deliberate tones,

"I know not, Randal Leslie, whether you thought me needlessly cautious, or wantonly unkind, when I told you never to expect from me more than such advance to your career as my then position could effect,—never to expect from my liberality in life, nor from my testament in death, an addition to your private fortunes. I see by your gesture what would be your reply, and I thank you for it. I now tell you, as yet in confidence, though before long it can be no secret to the world, that my pecuniary affairs have been so neglected by me in my devotion to those of the State, that I am somewhat like the man who portioned out his capital at so much a day, calculating to live just long enough to make it last. Unfortunately he lived too long." Audley smiled—but the smile was cold as a sunbeam upon ice—and went on with the same firm, unfaltering accents. "The prospects that face me I am prepared for; they do not take me by surprise. I knew long since how this would end, if I survived the loss of office. I knew it before you came to me, and therefore I spoke to you as I did, judging it manful and right to guard you against hopes which you might otherwise have naturally entertained. On this head, I need say no more. It may excite your surprise, possibly your blame, that I, esteemed methodical and practical enough in the affairs of the State, should be so imprudent as to my own."

"Oh, sir! you owe no account to me."

"To you, at least, as much as to any one. I am a solitary man; my few relations need nothing from me. I had a right do spend what I possessed as I pleased; and if I have spent it recklessly as regards myself, I have not spent it ill in its effect on others. It has been my object for many years to have no Private Life,—to dispense with its sorrows, joys, affections; and as to its duties, they did not exist for me. I have said." Mechanically, as he ended, the minister's hand closed the lid of one of the iron boxes, and on the closed lid he rested his firm foot. "But now," he resumed, "I have failed to advance your career. True, I warned you that you drew into a lottery; but you had more chance of a prize than a blank. A blank, however, it has turned out, and the question becomes grave,—What are you to do?"

Here, seeing that Egerton came to a full pause, Randal answered readily,

"Still, sir, to go by your advice."

"My advice," said Audley, with a softened look, "would perhaps be rude and unpalatable. I would rather place before you an option. On the one hand, recommence life again. I told you that I would keep your name on your college books. You can return, you can take your degree, after that, you can go to the Bar,—you have just the talents calculated to succeed in that profession. Success will be slow, it is true; but, with perseverance, it will be sure. And, believe me, Leslie, Ambition is only sweet while it is but the loftier name for Hope. Who would care for a fox's brush if it had not been rendered a prize by the excitement of the chase?"

"Oxford—again! It is a long step back in life," said Randal, drearily, and little heeding Egerton's

unusual indulgence of illustration. "A long step back—and to what? To a profession in which one never begins to rise till one's hair is gray. Besides, how live in the mean while?"

"Do not let that thought disturb you. The modest income that suffices for a student at the Bar, I trust, at least, to insure you from the wrecks of my fortune."

"Ah, sir, I would not burden you further. What right have I to such kindness, save my name of Leslie?" And in spite of himself, as Randal concluded, a tone of bitterness, that betrayed reproach, broke forth. Egerton was too much the man of the world not to comprehend the reproach, and not to pardon it.

"Certainly," he answered calmly, "as a Leslie you are entitled to my consideration, and would have been entitled perhaps to more, had I not so explicitly warned you to the contrary. But the Bar does not seem to please you?"

"What is the alternative, sir? Let me decide when I hear it," answered Randal, sullenly. He began to lose respect for the roan who owned he could do so little for him, and who evidently recommended him to shift for himself.

If one could have pierced into Egerton's gloomy heart as he noted the young man's change of tone, it may be a doubt whether one would have seen there pain or pleasure,—pain, for merely from the force of habit he had begun to like Randal, or pleasure at the thought that he might have reason to withdraw that liking. So lone and stoical had grown the man who had made it his object to have no private life! Revealing, however, neither pleasure nor pain, but with the composed calmness of a judge upon the bench, Egerton replied,—

"The alternative is, to continue in the course you have begun, and still to rely on me."

"Sir, my dear Mr. Egerton," exclaimed Randal, regaining all his usual tenderness of look and voice, "rely on you! But that is all I ask. Only"

"Only, you would say, I am going out of power, and you don't see the chance of my return?"

"I did not mean that."

"Permit me to suppose that you did: very true; but the party I belong to is as sure of return as the pendulum of that clock is sure to obey the mechanism that moves it from left to right. Our successors profess to come in upon a popular question. All administrations who do that are necessarily short-lived. Either they do not go far enough to please present supporters, or they go so far as to arm new enemies in the rivals who outbid them with the people. 'T is the history of all revolutions, and of all reforms. Our own administration in reality is destroyed for having passed what was called a popular measure a year ago, which lost us half our friends, and refusing to propose another popular measure this year, in the which we are outstripped by the men who hallooed us on to the last. Therefore, whatever our successors do, we shall by the law of reaction, have another experiment of power afforded to ourselves. It is but a question of time; you can wait for it,—whether I can is uncertain. But if I die before that day arrives, I have influence enough still left with those who will come in, to obtain a promise of a better provision for you than that which you have lost. The promises of public men are proverbially uncertain; but I shall entrust your cause to a man who never failed a friend, and whose rank will enable him to see that justice is done to you,—I speak of Lord L'Estrange."

"Oh, not he; he is unjust to me; he dislikes me; he—"

"May dislike you (he has his whims), but he loves me; and though for no other human being but you would I ask Harley L'Estrange a favour, yet for you I will," said Egerton, betraying, for the first time in that dialogue, a visible emotion,— "for you, a Leslie, a kinsman, however remote, to the wife from whom I received my fortune! And despite all my cautions, it is possible that in wasting that fortune I may have wronged you. Enough: you have now before you the two options, much as you had at first; but you have at present more experience to aid you in your choice. You are a man, and with more brains than most men; think over it well, and decide for yourself. Now to bed, and postpone thought till the morrow. Poor Randal, you look pale!"

Audley, as he said the last words, put his hand on Randal's shoulder, almost with a father's gentleness; and then suddenly drawing himself up, as the hard inflexible expression, stamped on that face by years, returned, he moved away and resettled to Public Life and the iron box.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Early the next day Randal Leslie was in the luxurious business-room of Baron Levy. How unlike the cold Doric simplicity of the statesman's library! Axminster carpets, three inches thick; /portieres a la Francaise/ before the doors; Parisian bronzes on the chimney-piece; and all the receptacles that lined the room, and contained title-deeds and postobits and bills and promises to pay and lawyer-like japan boxes, with many a noble name written thereon in large white capitals—"making ruin pompous," all these sepulchres of departed patrimonies veneered in rosewood that gleamed with French polish, and blazed with ormolu. There was a coquetry, an air of /petit maitre/, so diffused over the whole room, that you could not, for the life of you, recollect you were with a usurer! Plutus wore the, aspect of his enemy Cupid; and how realize your idea of Harpagon in that baron, with his easy French "/Mon cher/," and his white, warm hands that pressed yours so genially, and his dress so exquisite, even at the earliest morn? No man ever yet saw that baron in a dressing-gown and slippers! As one fancies some feudal baron of old (not half so terrible) everlastingly clad in mail, so all one's notions of this grand marauder of civilization were inseparably associated with varnished boots and a camellia in the button-hole.

"And this is all that he does for you!" cried the baron, pressing together the points of his ten taper fingers. "Had he but let you conclude your career at Oxford, I have heard enough of your scholarship to know that you would have taken high honours, been secure of a fellowship, have betaken yourself with content to a slow and laborious profession, and prepared yourself to die on the woolsack."

"He proposes to me now to return to Oxford," said Randal. "It is not too late!"

"Yes, it is," said the baron. "Neither individuals nor nations ever go back of their own accord. There must be an earthquake before a river recedes to its source."

"You speak well," answered Randal, "and I cannot gainsay you. But now!"

"Ah, the now is the grand question in life, the then is obsolete, gone by,—out of fashion; and now, /mon cher/, you come to ask my advice?"

"No, Baron, I come to ask your explanation." "Of what?"

"I want to know why you spoke to me of Mr. Egerton's ruin; why you spoke to me of the lands to be sold by Mr. Thornhill; and why you spoke to me of Count Peschiera. You touched on each of those points within ten minutes, you omitted to indicate what link can connect them."

"By Jove," said the baron, rising, and with more admiration in his face than you could have conceived that face, so smiling and so cynical, could exhibit,—"by Jove, Randal Leslie, but your shrewdness is wonderful. You really are the first young man of your day; and I will 'help you,' as I helped Audley Egerton. Perhaps you will be more grateful."

Randal thought of Egerton's ruin. The parallel implied by the baron did not suggest to him the rare enthusiasm of gratitude. However, he merely said, "Pray, proceed; I listen to you with interest."

"As for politics, then," said the baron, "we will discuss that topic later. I am waiting myself to see how these new men get on. The first consideration is for your private fortunes. You should buy this ancient Leslie property—Rood and Dulmansberry—only L20,000 down; the rest may remain on mortgage forever—or at least till I find you a rich wife,—as in fact I did for Egerton. Thornhill wants the L20,000 now,—wants them very much."

"And where," said Randal, with an iron smile, "are the L20,000 you ascribe to me to come from?"

"Ten thousand shall come to you the day Count Peschiera marries the daughter of his kinsman with your help and aid; the remaining ten thousand I will lend you. No scruple, I shall hazard nothing, the estates will bear that additional burden. What say you,—shall it be so?"

"Ten thousand pounds from Count Peschiera!" said Randal, breathing hard. "You cannot be serious? Such a sum—for what?—for a mere piece of information? How otherwise can I aid him? There must be trick and deception intended here."

"My dear fellow," answered Levy, "I will give you a hint. There is such a thing in life as being over-suspicious. If you have a fault, it is that. The information you allude to is, of course, the first assistance you are to give. Perhaps more may be needed, perhaps not. Of that you will judge yourself, since the L10,000 are contingent on the marriage aforesaid."

"Over-suspicious or not," answered Randal, "the amount of the sum is too improbable, and the

security too bad, for me to listen to this proposition, even if I could descend to—"

"Stop, /mon cher/. Business first, scruples afterwards. The security too bad; what security?"

"The word of Count di Peschiera."

"He has nothing to do with it, he need know nothing about it. 'T is my word you doubt. I am your security."

Randal thought of that dry witticism in Gibbon, "Abu Rafe says he will be witness for this fact, but who will be witness for Abu Rafe?" but he remained silent, only fixing on Levy those dark observant eyes, with their contracted, wary pupils.

"The fact is simply this," resumed Levy: "Count di Peschiera has promised to pay his sister a dowry of L20,000, in case he has the money to spare. He can only have it to spare by the marriage we are discussing. On my part, as I manage his affairs in England for him, I have promised that, for the said sum of L20,000, I will guarantee the expenses in the way of that marriage, and settle with Madame di Negra. Now, though Peschiera is a very liberal, warm-hearted fellow, I don't say that he would have named so large a sum for his sister's dowry, if in strict truth he did not owe it to her. It is the amount of her own fortune, which by some arrangements with her late husband, not exactly legal, he possessed himself of. If Madame di Negra went to law with him for it, she could get it back. I have explained this to him; and, in short, you now understand why the sum is thus assessed. But I have bought up Madame di Negra's debts, I have bought up young Hazeldean's (for we must make a match between these two a part of our arrangements). I shall present to Peschiera, and to these excellent young persons, an account that will absorb the whole L20,000. That sum will come into my hands. If I settle the claims against them for half the money, which, making myself the sole creditor, I have the right to do, the moiety will remain. And if I choose to give it to you in return for the services which provide Peschiera with a princely fortune, discharge the debts of his sister, and secure her a husband in my promising young client, Mr. Hazeldean, that is my lookout,—all parties are satisfied, and no one need ever be the wiser. The sum is large, no doubt; it answers to me to give it to you; does it answer to you to receive it?"

Randal was greatly agitated; but vile as he was, and systematically as in thought he had brought himself to regard others merely as they could be made subservient to his own interest, still, with all who have not hardened themselves in actual crime, there is a wide distinction between the thought and the act; and though, in the exercise of ingenuity and cunning, he would have had few scruples in that moral swindling which is mildly called "outwitting another," yet thus nakedly and openly to accept a bribe for a deed of treachery towards the poor Italian who had so generously trusted him—he recoiled. He was nerving himself to refuse, when Levy, opening his pocket-book, glanced over the memoranda therein, and said, as to himself, "Rood Manor—Dulmansberry, sold to the Thornhills by Sir Gilbert Leslie, knight of the shire; estimated present net rental L2,250 7s. 0d. It is the greatest bargain I ever knew. And with this estate in hand, and your talents, Leslie, I don't see why you should not rise higher than Audley Egerton. He was poorer than you once!"

The old Leslie lands—a positive stake in the country—the restoration of the fallen family; and on the other hand, either long drudgery at the Bar,—a scanty allowance on Egerton's bounty, his sister wasting her youth at slovenly, dismal Rood, Oliver debased into a boor!—or a mendicant's dependence on the contemptuous pity of Harley L'Estrange,—Harley, who had refused his hand to him, Harley, who perhaps would become the husband of Violante! Rage seized him as these contrasting pictures rose before his view. He walked to and fro in disorder, striving to re-collect his thoughts, and reduce himself from the passions of the human heart into the mere mechanism of calculating intellect. "I cannot conceive," said he, abruptly, "why you should tempt me thus,—what interest it is to you!"

Baron Levy smiled, and put up his pocket-book. He saw from that moment that the victory was gained.

"My dear boy," said he, with the most agreeable bonhommie, "it is very natural that you should think a man would have a personal interest in whatever he does for another. I believe that view of human nature is called utilitarian philosophy, and is much in fashion at present. Let me try and explain to you. In this affair I sha'n't injure myself. True, you will say, if I settle claims which amount to L20,000 for L10,000, I might put the surplus into my own pocket instead of yours. Agreed. But I shall not get the L20,000, nor repay myself Madame di Negra's debts (whatever I may do as to Hazeldean's), unless the count gets this heiress. You can help in this. I want you; and I don't think I could get you by a less offer than I make. I shall soon pay myself back the L10,000 if the count get hold of the lady and her fortune. Brief, I see my way here to my own interests. Do you want more reasons,—you shall have them. I am now a very rich man. How have I become so? Through attaching myself from the first to persons of expectations, whether from fortune or talent. I have made connections in society, and society has

enriched me. I have still a passion for making money. "/Que voulez- vous/?" It is my profession, my hobby. It will be useful to me in a thousand ways to secure as a friend a young man who will have influence with other young men, heirs to something better than Rood Hall. You may succeed in public life. A man in public life may attain to the knowledge of State secrets that are very profitable to one who dabbles a little in the Funds. We can perhaps hereafter do business together that may put yourself in a way of clearing off all mortgages on these estates,—on the encumbered possession of which I shall soon congratulate you. You see I am frank; 't is the only way of coming to the point with so clever a fellow as you. And now, since the less we rake up the mud in a pond from which we have resolved to drink the better, let us dismiss all other thoughts but that of securing our end. Will you tell Peschiera where the young lady is, or shall I? Better do it yourself; reason enough for it, that he has confided to you his hope, and asked you to help him; why should not you? Not a word to him about our little arrangement; he need never know it. You need never be troubled." Levy rang the bell: "Order my carriage round."

Randal made no objection. He was deathlike pale, but there was a sinister expression of firmness on his thin, bloodless lips.

"The next point," Levy resumed, "is to hasten the match between Frank and the fair widow. How does that stand?"

"She will not see me, nor receive him."

"Oh, learn why! And if you find on either side there is a hitch, just let me know; I will soon remove it."

"Has Hazeldean consented to the post-obit?"

"Not yet; I have not pressed it; I wait the right moment, if necessary."

"It will be necessary."

"Ah, you wish it. It shall be so."

Randal Leslie again paced the room, and after a silent self-commune came up close to the baron, and said,

"Look you, sir, I am poor and ambitious; you have tempted me at the right moment, and with the right inducement. I succumb. But what guarantee have I that this money will be paid, these estates made mine upon the conditions stipulated?"

"Before anything is settled," replied the baron, "go and ask my character of any of our young friends, Borrowell, Spendquick—whom you please; you will hear me abused, of course; but they will all say this of me, that when I pass my word, I keep it. If I say, '/Mon cher/, you shall have the money,' a man has it; if I say, 'I renew your bill for six months,' it is renewed. 'T, is my way of doing business. In all cases any word is my bond. In this case, where no writing can pass between us, my only bond must be my word. Go, then, make your mind clear as to your security, and come here and dine at eight. We will call on Peschiera afterwards."

"Yes," said Randal, "I will at all events take the day to consider. Meanwhile, I say this, I do not disguise from myself the nature of the proposed transaction, but what I have once resolved I go through with. My sole vindication to myself is, that if I play here with a false die, it will be for a stake so grand, as once won, the magnitude of the prize will cancel the ignominy of the play. It is not this sum of money for which I sell myself,—it is for what that sum will aid me to achieve. And in the marriage of young Hazeldean with the Italian woman, I have another, and it may be a larger interest. I have slept on it lately,— I wake to it now. Insure that marriage, obtain the post-obit. from Hazeldean, and whatever the issue of the more direct scheme for which you seek my services, rely on my gratitude, and believe that you will have put me in the way to render gratitude of avail. At eight I will be with you."

Randal left the room.

The baron sat thoughtful. "It is true," said he to himself, "this young man is the next of kin to the Hazeldean estate, if Frank displease his father sufficiently to lose his inheritance; that must be the clever boy's design. Well, in the long-run, I should make as much, or more, out of him than out of the spendthrift Frank. Frank's faults are those of youth. He will reform and retrench. But this man! No, I shall have him for life. And should he fail in this project, and have but this encumbered property—a landed proprietor mortgaged up to his ears—why, he is my slave, and I can foreclose when I wish, or if he prove useless; —no, I risk nothing. And if I did—if I lost L10,000—what then? I can afford it for revenge!—afford it for the luxury of leaving Audley Egerton alone with penury and ruin, deserted, in his hour of need, by the pensioner of his bounty, as he will be by the last friend of his youth, when it so

pleases me,—me whom he has called 'scoundrel'! and whom he—" Levy's soliloquy halted there, for the servant entered to announce the carriage. And the baron hurried his band over his features, as if to sweep away all trace of the passions that distorted their smiling effrontery. And so, as he took up his cane and gloves, and glanced at the glass, the face of the fashionable usurer was once more as varnished as his boots.

CHAPTER XIX.

When a clever man resolves on a villanous action, he hastens, by the exercise of his cleverness, to get rid of the sense of his villany. With more than his usual alertness, Randal employed the next hour or two in ascertaining how far Baron Levy merited the character he boasted, and how far his word might be his bond. He repaired to young men whom he esteemed better judges on these points than Spendquick and Borrowell,— young men who resembled the Merry Monarch, inasmuch as—

"They never said a foolish thing,
And never did a wise one."

There are many such young men about town,—sharp and able in all affairs except their own. No one knows the world better, nor judges of character more truly, than your half-beggared /roue/. From all these Baron Levy obtained much the same testimonials: he was ridiculed as a would-be dandy, but respected as a very responsible man of business, and rather liked as a friendly, accommodating species of the Sir Epicure Mammon, who very often did what were thought handsome, liberal things; and, "in short," said one of these experienced referees, "he is the best fellow going—for a money-lender! You may always rely on what he promises, and he is generally very forbearing and indulgent to us of good society; perhaps for the same reason that our tailors are,—to send one of us to prison would hurt his custom. His foible is to be thought a gentleman. I believe, much as I suppose he loves money, he would give up half his fortune rather than do anything for which we could cut him. He allows a pension of three hundred a year to Lord S——. True; he was his man of business for twenty years, and before then S—— was rather a prudent fellow, and had fifteen thousand a year. He has helped on, too, many a clever young man,—the best borough-monger you ever knew. He likes having friends in parliament. In fact, of course he is a rogue; but if one wants a rogue, one can't find a pleasanter. I should like to see him on the French stage,—a prosperous /Macaire/; Le Maitre could hit him off to the life."

From information in these more fashionable quarters, gleaned with his usual tact, Randal turned to a source less elevated, but to which he attached more importance. Dick Avenel associated with the baron,—Dick Avenel must be in his clutches. Now Randal did justice to that gentleman's practical shrewdness. Moreover, Avenel was by profession a man of business. He must know more of Levy than these men of pleasure could; and as he was a plain-spoken person, and evidently honest, in the ordinary acceptation of the word, Randal did not doubt that out of Dick Avenel he should get the truth.

On arriving in Eaton Square, and asking for Mr. Avenel, Randal was at once ushered into the drawing-room. The apartment was not in such good, solid, mercantile taste as had characterized Avenel's more humble bachelor's residence at Screwstown. The taste now was the Honourable Mrs. Avenel's; and, truth to say, no taste could be worse. Furniture of all epochs heterogeneously clumped together,—here a sofa /a la renaissance/ in Gobelin; there a rosewood Console from Gillow; a tall mock-Elizabethan chair in black oak, by the side of a modern Florentine table of Mosaic marbles; all kinds of colours in the room, and all at war with each other; very bad copies of the best-known pictures in the world in the most gaudy frames, and impudently labelled by the names of their murdered originals,—"Raphael," "Corregio," "Titian," "Sebastian del Piombo." Nevertheless, there had been plenty of money spent, and there was plenty to show for it. Mrs. Avenel was seated on her sofa /a la renaissance/, with one of her children at her feet, who was employed in reading a new Annual in crimson silk binding. Mrs. Avenel was in an attitude as if sitting for her portrait.

Polite society is most capricious in its adoptions or rejections. You see many a very vulgar person firmly established in the /beau monde/; others, with very good pretensions as to birth, fortune, etc., either rigorously excluded, or only permitted a peep over the pales. The Honourable Mrs. Avenel belonged to families unquestionably noble, both by her own descent and by her first marriage; and if poverty had kept her down in her earlier career, she now, at least, did not want wealth to back her pretensions. Nevertheless, all the dispensers of fashion concurred in refusing their support to the Honourable Mrs. Avenel. One might suppose it was solely on account of her plebeian husband; but indeed it was not so. Many a woman of high family can marry a low-born man not so presentable as

Avenel, and, by the help of his money, get the fine world at her feet. But Mrs. Avenel had not that art. She was still a very handsome, showy woman; and as for dress, no duchess could be more extravagant. Yet these very circumstances had perhaps gone against her ambition; for your quiet little plain woman, provoking no envy, slips into coteries, when a handsome, flaunting lady—whom, once seen in your drawing-room, can be no more over-looked than a scarlet poppy amidst a violet bed—is pretty sure to be weeded out as ruthlessly as a poppy would be in a similar position.

Mr. Avenel was sitting by the fire, rather moodily, his hands in his pockets, and whistling to himself. To say truth, that active mind of his was very much bored in London, at least during the fore part of the day. He hailed Randal's entrance with a smile of relief, and rising and posting himself before the fire—a coat tail under each arm—he scarcely allowed Randal to shake hands with Mrs. Avenel, and pat the child on the head, murmuring, "Beautiful creature!" (Randal was ever civil to children,—that sort of wolf in sheep's clothing always is; don't be taken in, O you foolish young mothers!)—Dick, I say, scarcely allowed his visitor these preliminary courtesies, before he plunged far beyond depth of wife and child into the political ocean. "Things now were coming right,—a vile oligarchy was to be destroyed. British respectability and British talent were to have fair play." To have heard him you would have thought the day fixed for the millennium! "And what is more," said Avenel, bringing down the fist of his right hand upon the palm of his left, "if there is to be a new parliament, we must have new men; not worn-out old brooms that never sweep clean, but men who understand how to govern the country, Sir. I INTEND TO COME IN MYSELF!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Avenel, hooking in a word at last, "I am sure, Mr. Leslie, you will think I did right. I persuaded Mr. Avenel that, with his talents and property, he ought, for the sake of his country, to make a sacrifice; and then you know his opinions now are all the fashion, Mr. Leslie; formerly they would have been called shocking and vulgar!"

Thus saying, she looked with fond pride at Dick's comely face, which at that moment, however, was all scowl and frown. I must do justice to Mrs. Avenel; she was a weak woman, silly in some things, and a cunning one in others, but she was a good wife as wives go. Scotch women generally are. "Bother!" said Dick. "What do women know about politics? I wish you'd mind the child,—it is crumpling up and playing almighty smash with that flim-flam book, which cost me one pound one."

Mrs. Avenel submissively bowed her head, and removed the Annual from the hands of the young destructive; the destructive set up a squall, as destructives usually do when they don't have their own way. Dick clapped his hand to his ears. "Whe-e-ew, I can't stand this; come and take a walk, Leslie: I want stretching!" He stretched himself as he spoke, first half-way up to the ceiling, and then fairly out of the room.

Randal, with his May Fair manner, turned towards Mrs. Avenel as if to apologize for her husband and himself.

"Poor Richard!" said she, "he is in one of his humours,—all men have them. Come and see me again soon. When does Almack's open?"

"Nay, I ought to ask you that question,—you who know everything that goes on in our set," said the young serpent. Any tree planted in "our set," if it had been but a crab-tree, would have tempted Mr. Avenel's Eve to jump at its boughs.

"Are you coming, there?" cried Dick, from the foot of the stairs.

CHAPTER XX.

"I have just been at our friend Levy's," said Randal, when he and Dick were outside the street door. "He, like you, is full of politics; pleasant man,—for the business he is said to do."

"Well," said Dick, slowly, "I suppose he is pleasant, but make the best of it—and still—"

"Still what, my dear Avenel?" (Randal here for the first time discarded the formal Mister.)

MR. AVENEL.—"Still the thing itself is not pleasant."

RANDAL (with his soft hollow laugh).—"You mean borrowing money upon more than five per cent?"

"Oh, curse the percentage. I agree with Bentham on the Usury Laws,—no shackles in trade for me, whether in money or anything else. That's not it. But when one owes a fellow money even at two per cent, and 't is not convenient to pay him, why, somehow or other, it makes one feel small; it takes the British Liberty out of a man!"

"I should have thought you more likely to lend money than to borrow it."

"Well, I guess you are right there, as a general rule. But I tell you what it is, sir; there is too great a mania for competition getting up in this rotten old country of ours. I am as liberal as most men. I like competition to a certain extent, but there is too much of it, sir,—too much of it." Randal looked sad and convinced. But if Leonard had heard Dick Avenel, what would have been his amaze? Dick Avenel rail against competition! Think there could be too much of it! "Of course heaven and earth are coming together," said the spider, when the housemaid's broom invaded its cobweb. Dick was all for sweeping away other cobwebs; but he certainly thought heaven and earth coming together when he saw a great Turk's-head besom poked up at his own.

Mr. Avenel, in his genius for speculation and improvement, had established a factory at Screwstown, the first which had ever eclipsed the church spire with its Titanic chimney. It succeeded well at first. Mr. Avenel transferred to this speculation nearly all his capital. "Nothing," quoth he, "paid such an interest. Manchester was getting worn out,—time to show what Screwstown could do. Nothing like competition." But by-and-by a still greater capitalist than Dick Avenel, finding out that Screwstown was at the mouth of a coal mine, and that Dick's profits were great, erected a still uglier edifice, with a still taller chimney. And having been brought up to the business, and making his residence in the town, while Dick employed a foreman and flourished in London, this infamous competitor so managed, first to share, and then gradually to sequester, the profits which Dick had hitherto monopolized, that no wonder Mr. Avenel thought competition should have its limits. "The tongue touches where the tooth aches," as Dr. Riccabocca would tell us. By little and little our Juvenile Talleyrand (I beg the elder great man's pardon) wormed out from Dick this grievance, and in the grievance discovered the origin of Dick's connection with the money-lender.

"But Levy," said Avenel, candidly, "is a decentish chap in his way,—friendly too. Mrs. A. finds him useful; brings some of your young highflyers to her soirees. To be sure, they don't dance,—stand all in a row at the door, like mutes at a funeral. Not but what they have been uncommon civil to me lately, Spendquick particularly. By-the-by, I dine with him to-morrow. The aristocracy are behindhand,—not smart, sir, not up to the march; but when a man knows how to take 'em, they beat the New Yorkers in good manners. I'll say that for them. I have no prejudice."

"I never saw a man with less; no prejudice even against Levy."

"No, not a bit of it! Every one says he's a Jew; he says he's not. I don't care a button what he is. His money is English,—that's enough for any man of a liberal turn of mind. His charges, too, are moderate. To be sure, he knows I shall pay them; only what I don't like in him is a sort of way he has of mon-cher-ing and my-good-fellow-ing one, to do things quite out of the natural way of that sort of business. He knows I have got parliamentary influence. I could return a couple of members for Screwstown, and one, or perhaps two, for Lansmere, where I have of late been cooking up an interest; and he dictates to—no, not dictates—but tries to humbug me into putting in his own men. However, in one respect, we are likely to agree. He says you want to come into parliament. You seem a smart young fellow; but you must throw over that stiff red-tapist of yours, and go with Public Opinion, and—Myself."

"You are very kind, Avenel; perhaps when we come to compare opinions we may find that we agree entirely. Still, in Egerton's present position, delicacy to him—However, we'll not discuss that now. But you really think I might come in for Lansmere,—against the L'Estrange interest, too, which must be strong there?"

"It was very strong, but I've smashed it, I calculate."

"Would a contest there cost very much?"

"Well, I guess you must come down with the ready. But, as you say, time enough to discuss that when you have squared your account with 'delicacy;' come to me then, and we'll go into it."

Randal, having now squeezed his orange dry, had no desire to waste his time in brushing up the rind with his coat-sleeve, so he unhooked his arm from Avenel's, and, looking at his watch, discovered he should be just in time for an appointment of the most urgent business,—hailed a cab, and drove off.

Dick looked hipped and disconsolate at being left alone; he yawned very loud, to the astonishment of three prim old maiden Belgravians who were passing that way; and then his mind began to turn towards his factory at Screwstown, which had led to his connection with the baron; and he thought

over a letter he had received from his foreman that morning, informing him that it was rumoured at Screwstown that Mr. Dyce, his rival, was about to have new machinery on an improved principle; and that Mr. Dyce had already gone up to town, it was supposed, with the intention of concluding a purchase for a patent discovery to be applied to the new machinery, and which that gentleman had publicly declared in the corn-market "would shut up Mr. Avenel's factory before the year was out." As this menacing epistle recurred to him, Dick felt his desire to yawn incontinently checked. His brow grew very dark; and he walked, with restless strides, on and on, till he found himself in the Strand. He then got into an omnibus, and proceeded to the city, wherein he spent the rest of the day looking over machines and foundries, and trying in vain to find out what diabolical invention the over-competition of Mr. Dyce had got hold of. "If," said Dick Avenel to himself, as he returned fretfully homeward—"if a man like me, who has done so much for British industry and go-a-head principles, is to be catawampously champed up by a mercenary, selfish cormorant of a capitalist like that interloping blockhead in drab breeches, Tom Dyce, all I can say is, that the sooner this cursed old country goes to the dogs, the better pleased I shall be. I wash my hands of it."

CHAPTER XXI.

Randal's mind was made up. All he had learned in regard to Levy had confirmed his resolves or dissipated his scruples. He had started from the improbability that Pesehiera would offer, and the still greater improbability that Peschiera would pay him, £10,000 for such information or aid as he could bestow in furthering the count's object. But when Levy took such proposals entirely on himself, the main question to Randal became this,—could it be Levy's interest to make so considerable a sacrifice? Had the baron implied only friendly sentiments as his motives, Randal would have felt sure he was to be taken in; but the usurer's frank assurance that it would answer to him in the long-run to concede to Randal terms so advantageous, altered the case, and led our young philosopher to look at the affair with calm, contemplative eyes. Was it sufficiently obvious that Levy counted on an adequate return? Might he calculate on reaping help by the bushel if he sowed it by the handful? The result of Randal's cogitations was that the baron might fairly deem himself no wasteful sower. In the first place, it was clear that Levy, not without reasonable ground, believed that he could soon replace, with exceeding good interest, any sum he might advance to Randal, out of the wealth which Randal's prompt information might bestow on Levy's client, the count; and secondly, Randal's self-esteem was immense, and could he but succeed in securing a pecuniary independence on the instant, to free him from the slow drudgery of the Bar, or from a precarious reliance on Audley Egerton, as a politician out of power, his convictions of rapid triumph in public life were as strong as if whispered by an angel or promised by a fiend. On such triumphs, with all the social position they would secure, Levy might well calculate for repayment by a thousand indirect channels. Randal's sagacity detected that, through all the good-natured or liberal actions ascribed to the usurer, Levy had steadily pursued his own interests, he saw that Levy meant to get him into his power, and use his abilities as instruments for digging new mines, in which Baron Levy would claim the right of large royalties. But at that thought Randal's pale lip curled disdainfully; he confided too much in his own powers not to think that he could elude the grasp of the usurer, whenever it suited him to do so. Thus, on a survey, all conscience hushed itself; his mind rushed buoyantly on to anticipations of the future. He saw the hereditary estates regained,—no matter how mortgaged,—for the moment still his own, legally his own, yielding for the present what would suffice for competence to one of few wants, and freeing his name from that title of Adventurer, which is so prodigally given in rich old countries to those who have no estates but their brains. He thought of Violante but as the civilized trader thinks of a trifling coin, of a glass bead, which he exchanges with some barbarian for gold dust; he thought of Frank Hazeldean married to the foreign woman of beggared means, and repute that had known the breath of scandal,—married, and living on post-obit instalments of the Casino property; he thought of the poor squire's resentment; his avarice swept from the lands annexed to Rood on to the broad fields of Hazeldean; he thought of Avenel, of Lansmere, of parliament; with one hand he grasped fortune, with the next power. "And yet I entered on life with no patrimony (save a ruined hall and a barren waste),—no patrimony but knowledge. I have but turned knowledge from books to men; for books may give fame after death, but men give us power in life." And all the while he thus ruminated, his act was speeding his purpose. Though it was but in a miserable hack-cab that he erected airy scaffoldings round airy castles, still the miserable hack-cab was flying fast, to secure the first foot of solid ground whereon to transfer the mental plan of the architect to foundations of positive slime and clay. The cab stopped at the door of Lord Lansmere's house. Randal had suspected Violante to be there: he resolved to ascertain. Randal descended from his vehicle and rang the bell. The lodge-keeper opined the great wooden gates.

"I have called to see the young lady staying here,—the foreign young lady."

Lady Lansmere had been too confident of the security of her roof to condescend to give any orders to her servants with regard to her guest, and the lodge-keeper answered directly,—

"At home, I believe, sir. I rather think she is in the garden with my lady."

"I see," said Randal; and he did see the form of Violante at a distance. "But, since she is walking, I will not disturb her at present. I will call another day."

The lodge-keeper bowed respectfully, Randal jumped into his cab: "To Curzon Street,—quick!"

CHAPTER XXII.

Harley had made one notable oversight in that appeal to Beatrice's better and gentler nature, which he entrusted to the advocacy of Leonard,—a scheme in itself very characteristic of Harley's romantic temper, and either wise or foolish, according as his indulgent theory of human idiosyncrasies in general, and of those peculiar to Beatrice di Negra in especial, was the dream of an enthusiast, or the inductive conclusion of a sound philosopher.

Harley had warned Leonard not to fall in love with the Italian,—he had forgotten to warn the Italian not to fall in love with Leonard; nor had he ever anticipated the probability of that event. This is not to be very much wondered at; for if there be anything on which the most sensible men are dull-eyed, where those eyes are not lighted by jealousy, it is as to the probabilities of another male creature being beloved. All, the least vain of the whiskered gender, think it prudent to guard themselves against being too irresistible to the fair sex; and each says of his friend, "Good fellow enough, but the last man for that woman to fall in love with!"

But certainly there appeared on the surface more than ordinary cause for Harley's blindness in the special instance of Leonard.

Whatever Beatrice's better qualities, she was generally esteemed worldly and ambitious. She was pinched in circumstances, she was luxuriant and extravagant; how was it likely that she could distinguish any aspirant of the humble birth and fortunes of the young peasant-author? As a coquette, she might try to win his admiration and attract his fancy; but her own heart would surely be guarded in the triple mail of pride, poverty, and the conventional opinions of the world in which she lived. Had Harley thought it possible that Madame di Negra could stoop below her station, and love, not wisely, but too well, he would rather have thought that the object would be some brilliant adventurer of fashion, some one who could turn against herself all the arts of deliberate fascination, and all the experience bestowed by frequent conquest. One so simple as Leonard, so young and so new! Harley L'Estrange would have smiled at himself, if the idea of that image subjugating the ambitious woman to the disinterested love of a village maid had once crossed his mind. Nevertheless, so it was, and precisely from those causes which would have seemed to Harley to forbid the weakness.

It was that fresh, pure heart, it was that simple, earnest sweetness, it was that contrast in look, in tone, in sentiment, and in reasonings, to all that had jaded and disgusted her in the circle of her admirers,—it was all this that captivated Beatrice at the first interview with Leonard. Here was what she had confessed to the sceptical Randal she had dreamed and sighed for. Her earliest youth had passed into abhorrent marriage, without the soft, innocent crisis of human life,—virgin love. Many a wooer might have touched her vanity, pleased her fancy, excited her ambition—her heart had never been awakened; it woke now. The world, and the years that the world had wasted, seemed to fleet away as a cloud. She was as if restored to the blush and the sigh of youth,—the youth of the Italian maid. As in the restoration of our golden age is the spell of poetry with us all, so such was the spell of the poet himself on her.

Oh, how exquisite was that brief episode in the life of the woman palled with the "hack sights and sounds" of worldly life! How strangely happy were those hours, when, lured on by her silent sympathy, the young scholar spoke of his early struggles between circumstance and impulse, musing amidst the flowers, and hearkening to the fountain; or of his wanderings in the desolate, lamp-lit streets, while the vision of Chatterton's glittering eyes shone dread through the friendless shadows. And as he spoke, whether of his hopes or his fears, her looks dwelt fondly on the young face, that varied between pride

and sadness,—pride ever so gentle, and sadness ever so nobly touching. She was never weary of gazing on that brow, with its quiet power; but her lids dropped before those eyes, with their serene, unfathomable passion. She felt, as they haunted her, what a deep and holy thing love in such souls must be. Leonard never spoke to her of Helen—that reserve every reader can comprehend. To natures like his, first love is a mystery; to confide it is to profane. But he fulfilled his commission of interesting her in the exile and his daughter, and his description of them brought tears to her eyes. She inly resolved not to aid Peschiera in his designs on Violante. She forgot for the moment that her own fortune was to depend on the success of those designs. Levy had arranged so that she was not reminded of her poverty by creditors,—she knew not how. She knew nothing of business. She gave herself up to the delight of the present hour, and to vague prospects of a future associated with that young image,—with that face of a guardian angel that she saw before her, fairest in the moments of absence; for in those moments came the life of fairy-land, when we shut our eyes on the world, and see through the haze of golden reverie. Dangerous, indeed, to Leonard would have been the soft society of Beatrice di Negra, had not his heart been wholly devoted to one object, and had not his ideal of woman been from that object one sole and indivisible reflection. But Beatrice guessed not this barrier between herself and him. Amidst the shadows that he conjured up from his past life, she beheld no rival form. She saw him lonely in the world, as she was herself. And in his lowly birth, his youth, in the freedom from presumption which characterized him in all things (save that confidence in his intellectual destinies which is the essential attribute of genius), she but grew the bolder by the belief that, even if he loved her, he would not dare to hazard the avowal.

And thus, one day, yielding, as she had ever been wont to yield, to the impulse of her quick Italian heart—how she never remembered, in what words she could never recall—she spoke, she owned her love, she pleaded, with tears and blushes, for love in return. All that passed was to her as a dream,—a dream from which she woke with a fierce sense of agony, of humiliation,—woke as the woman "scorned." No matter how gratefully, how tenderly Leonard had replied, the reply was refusal.

For the first time she learned she had a rival; that all he could give of love was long since, from his boyhood, given to another. For the first time in her life, that ardent nature knew jealousy, its torturing stings, its thirst for vengeance, its tempest of loving hate. But, to outward appearance, silent and cold she stood as marble. Words that sought to soothe fell on her ear unheeded: they were drowned by the storm within. Pride was the first feeling which dominated the warring elements that raged in her soul. She tore her hand from that which clasped hers with so loyal a respect. She could have spurned the form that knelt at her feet, not for love, but for pardon. She pointed to the door with the gesture of an insulted queen. She knew no more till she was alone. Then came that rapid flash of conjecture peculiar to the storms of jealousy; that which seems to single from all nature the one object to dread and to destroy; the conjecture so often false, yet received at once by our convictions as the revelation of instinctive truth. He to whom she had humbled herself loved another; whom but Violante,—whom else, young and beautiful, had he named in the record of his life?—None! And he had sought to interest her, Beatrice di Negra, in the object of his love; hinted at dangers which Beatrice knew too well; implied trust in Beatrice's will to protect. Blind fool that she had been! This, then, was the reason why he had come, day after day, to Beatrice's house; this was the charm that had drawn him thither; this—she pressed her hands to her burning temples, as if to stop the torture of thought. Suddenly a voice was heard below, the door opened, and Randal Leslie entered.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Punctually at eight o'clock that evening, Baron Levy welcomed the new ally he had secured. The pair dined *en tete a tete*, discussing general matters till the servants left them to their wine. Then said the baron, rising and stirring the fire—then said the baron, briefly and significantly,

"Well!"

"As regards the property you spoke of," answered Randal, "I am willing to purchase it on the terms you name. The only point that perplexes me is how to account to Audley Egerton, to my parents, to the world, for the power of purchasing it."

"True," said the baron, without even a smile at the ingenious and truly Greek manner in which Randal had contrived to denote his meaning, and conceal the ugliness of it—"true, we must think of that. If we could manage to conceal the real name of the purchaser for a year or so, it might be easy,—you may be supposed to have speculated in the Funds; or Egerton may die, and people may believe that he had

secured to you something handsome from the ruins of his fortune."

"Little chance of Egerton's dying."

"Humph!" said the baron. "However, this is a mere detail, reserved for consideration. You can now tell us where the young lady is?"

"Certainly. I could not this morning,—I can now. I will go with you to the count. Meanwhile, I have seen Madame di Negra; she will accept Frank Hazeldean if he will but offer himself at once."

"Will he not?"

"No! I have been to him. He is overjoyed at my representations, but considers it his duty to ask the consent of his parents. Of course they will not give it; and if there be delay, she will retract. She is under the influence of passions on the duration of which there is no reliance."

"What passions? Love?"

"Love; but not for Hazeldean. The passions that bring her to accept his hand are pique and jealousy. She believes, in a word, that one who seems to have gained the mastery over her affections with a strange suddenness, is but blind to her charms because dazzled by Violante's. She is prepared to aid in all that can give her rival to Peschiera; and yet, such is the inconsistency of woman" (added the young philosopher, with a shrug of the shoulders), "that she is also prepared to lose all chance of securing him she loves, by bestowing herself on another!"

"Woman, indeed, all over!" said the baron, tapping his snuff-box (Louis Quinze), and regaling his nostrils with a scornful pinch. "But who is the man whom the fair Beatrice has thus honoured? Superb creature! I had some idea of her myself when I bought up her debts; but it might have embarrassed me, in more general plans, as regards the count. All for the best. Who's the man? Not Lord L'Estrange?"

"I do not think it is he; but I have not yet ascertained. I have told you all I know. I found her in a state so excited, so unlike herself, that I had no little difficulty in soothing her into confidence so far. I could not venture more."

"And she will accept Frank?"

"Had he offered to-day she would have accepted him!"

"It may be a great help to your fortunes, /mon cher/, if Frank Hazeldean marry this lady without his father's consent. Perhaps he may be disinherited. You are next of kin.

"How do you know that?" asked Randal, sullenly.

"It is my business to know all about the chances and connections of any one with whom I do money matters. I do money matters with young Mr. Hazeldean; so I know that the Hazeldean property is not entailed; and, as the squire's half-brother has no Hazeldean blood in him, you have excellent expectations."

"Did Frank tell you I was next of kin?"

"I rather think so; but I am sure you did."

"I—when?"

"When you told me how important it was to you that Frank should marry Madame di Negra. /Peste! mon cher/, do you think I am a blockhead?"

"Well, Baron, Frank is of age, and can marry to please himself. You implied to me that you could help him in this."

"I will try. See that he call at Madame di Negra's tomorrow, at two precisely."

"I would rather keep clear of all apparent interference in this matter. Will you not arrange that he call on her? And do not forget to entangle him in a post-obit."

"Leave it to me. Any more wine? No?—then let us go to the count's."

CHAPTER XXIV.

The next morning Frank Hazeldean was sitting over his solitary breakfast-table. It was long past noon. The young man had risen early, it is true, to attend his military duties, but he had contracted the habit of breakfasting late. One's appetite does not come early when one lives in London, and never goes to bed before daybreak.

There was nothing very luxurious or effeminate about Frank's rooms, though they were in a very dear street, and he paid a monstrous high price for them. Still, to a practised eye, they betrayed an inmate who can get through his money, and make very little show for it. The walls were covered with coloured prints of racers and steeple-chases, interspersed with the portraits of opera-dancers, all smirk and caper. Then there was a semi-circular recess covered with red cloth, and fitted up for smoking, as you might perceive by sundry stands full of Turkish pipes in cherry-stick and jessamine, with amber mouthpieces; while a great serpent hookah, from which Frank could no more have smoked than he could have smoked out of the head of a boa constrictor, coiled itself up on the floor; over the chimney-piece was a collection of Moorish arms. What use on earth ataghan and scimitar and damasquined pistols, that would not carry straight three yards, could be to an officer in his Majesty's Guards is more than I can conjecture, or even Frank satisfactorily explain. I have strong suspicions that this valuable arsenal passed to Frank in part payment of a bill to be discounted. At all events, if so, it was an improvement on the bear that he had sold to the hair-dresser. No books were to be seen anywhere, except a Court Guide, a Racing Calendar, an Army List, the Sporting Magazine complete (whole bound in scarlet morocco, at about a guinea per volume), and a small book, as small as an Elzevir, on the chimney-piece, by the side of a cigar-case. That small book had cost Frank more than all the rest put together; it was his Own Book, his book par excellence; book made up by himself,—his BETTING Book!

On a centre table were deposited Frank's well-brushed hat; a satinwood box, containing kid-gloves, of various delicate tints, from primrose to lilac; a tray full of cards and three-cornered notes; an opera-glass, and an ivory subscription-ticket to his opera stall.

In one corner was an ingenious receptacle for canes, sticks, and whips—I should not like, in these bad times, to have paid the bill for them; and mounting guard by that receptacle, stood a pair of boots as bright as Baron Levy's,—"the force of brightness could no further go." Frank was in his dressing-gown,—very good taste, quite Oriental, guaranteed to be true Indian cashmere, and charged as such. Nothing could be more neat, though perfectly simple, than the appurtenances of his breakfast-table: silver tea-pot, ewer, and basin, all fitting into his dressing-box—for the which may Storr and Mortimer be now praised, and some day paid! Frank looked very handsome, rather tired, and exceedingly bored. He had been trying to read the "Morning Post," but the effort had proved too much for him.

Poor dear Frank Hazeldean!—true type of many a poor dear fellow who has long since gone to the dogs. And if, in this road to ruin, there had been the least thing to do the traveller any credit by the way! One feels a respect for the ruin of a man like Audley Egerton. He is ruined /en roi! From the wrecks of his fortune he can look down and see stately monuments built from the stones of that dismantled edifice. In every institution which attests the humanity of England was a record of the princely bounty of the public man. In those objects of party, for which the proverbial sinews of war are necessary, in those rewards for service, which private liberality can confer, the hand of Egerton had been opened as with the heart of a king. Many a rising member of parliament, in those days when talent was brought forward through the aid of wealth and rank, owed his career to the seat which Audley Egerton's large subscription had secured to him; many an obscure supporter in letters and the Press looked back to the day when he had been freed from the jail by the gratitude of the patron. The city he represented was embellished at his cost; through the shire that held his mortgaged lands, which he had rarely ever visited, his gold had flowed as a Pactolus; all that could animate its public spirit, or increase its civilization, claimed kindred with his munificence, and never had a claim disallowed. Even in his grand, careless household, with its large retinue and superb hospitality, there was something worthy of a representative of that time-honoured portion of our true nobility, the untitled gentlemen of the land. The Great Commoner had, indeed, "something to show" for the money he had disdained and squandered. But for Frank Hazeldean's mode of getting rid of the dross, when gone, what would be left to tell the tale? Paltry prints in a bachelor's lodging; a collection of canes and cherry-sticks; half-a-dozen letters in ill-spelt French from a figurante; some long-legged horses, fit for nothing but to lose a race; that damnable Betting-Book; and—/sic transit gloria/—down sweeps some hawk of a Levy, on the wings of an I O U, and not a feather is left of the pigeon!

Yet Frank Hazeldean has stuff in him,—a good heart, and strict honour. Fool though he seem, there is sound sterling sense in some odd corner of his brains, if one could but get at it. All he wants to save him from perdition is, to do what he has never yet done,—namely, pause and think. But, to be sure, that

same operation of thinking is not so easy for folks unaccustomed to it, as people who think—think!

"I can't bear this," said Frank, suddenly, and springing to his feet. "This woman, I cannot get her out of my head. I ought to go down to the governor's; but then if he gets into a passion, and refuses his consent, where am I? And he will, too, I fear. I wish I could make out what Randal advises. He seems to recommend that I should marry Beatrice at once, and trust to my mother's influence to make all right afterwards. But when I ask, 'Is that your advice?' he backs out of it. Well, I suppose he is right there. I can understand that he is unwilling, good fellow, to recommend anything that my father would disapprove. But still—"

Here Frank stopped in his soliloquy, and did make his first desperate effort to—think!

Now, O dear reader, I assume, of course, that thou art one of the class to which thought is familiar; and, perhaps, thou hast smiled in disdain or incredulity at that remark on the difficulty of thinking which preceded Frank Hazeldean's discourse to himself. But art thou quite sure that when thou hast tried to think thou hast always succeeded? Hast thou not often been duped by that pale visionary simulacrum of thought which goes by the name of reverie? Honest old Montaigne confessed that he did not understand that process of sitting down to think, on which some folks express themselves so glibly. He could not think unless he had a pen in his hand and a sheet of paper before him; and so, by a manual operation, seized and connected the links of ratiocination. Very often has it happened to myself when I have said to Thought peremptorily, "Bestir thyself: a serious matter is before thee, ponder it well, think of it," that that same thought has behaved in the most refractory, rebellious manner conceivable; and instead of concentrating its rays into a single stream of light, has broken into all the desultory tints of the rainbow, colouring senseless clouds, and running off into the seventh heaven, so that after sitting a good hour by the clock, with brows as knit as if I was intent on squaring the circle, I have suddenly discovered that I might as well have gone comfortably to sleep—I have been doing nothing but dream,—and the most nonsensical dreams! So when Frank Hazeldean, as he stopped at that meditative "But still"—and leaning his arm on the chimney-piece, and resting his face on his hand, felt himself at the grave crisis of life, and fancied he was going "to think on it," there only rose before him a succession of shadowy pictures,—Randal Leslie, with an unsatisfactory countenance, from which he could extract nothing; the squire, looking as black as thunder in his study at Hazeldean; his mother trying to plead for him, and getting herself properly scolded for her pains; and then off went that Will-o'-the-wisp which pretended to call itself Thought, and began playing round the pale, charming face of Beatrice di Negra, in the drawing-room at Curzon Street, and repeating, with small elfin voice, Randal Leslie's assurance of the preceding day, "as to her affection for you, Frank, there is no doubt of that; she only begins to think you are trifling with her." And then there was a rapturous vision of a young gentleman on his knee, and the fair pale face bathed in blushes, and a clergyman standing by the altar, and a carriage- and-four with white favours at the church-door; and of a honeymoon, which would have astonished as to honey all the bees of Hymettus. And in the midst of these phantasmagoria, which composed what Frank fondly styled. "making up his mind," there came a single man's elegant rat-tat-tat at the street door.

"One never has a moment for thinking," cried Frank, and he called out to his valet, "Not at home."

But it was too late. Lord Spendquick was in the hall, and presently within the room. How d'ye do's were exchanged and hands shaken.

LORD SPENDQUICK.—"I have a note for you, Hazeldean."

FRANK (lazily).—"From whom?"

LORD SPENDQUICK.—"Levy. Just come from him,—never saw him in such a fidget. He was going into the city,—I suppose to see X. Y. Dashed off this note for you, and would have sent it by a servant, but I said I would bring it."

FRANK (looking fearfully at the note).—"I hope he does not want his money yet. 'Private and confidential,'—that looks bad."

SPENDQUICK.—"Devilish bad, indeed."

Frank opens the note, and reads, half aloud, "Dear Hazeldean—"

SPENDQUICK (interrupting).—"Good sign! He always Spendquicks me when he lends me money; and 't is 'My dear Lord' when he wants it back. Capital sign!"

Frank reads on, but to himself, and with a changing countenance,

DEAR HAZELDEAN,—I am very sorry to tell you that, in consequence of the sudden

failure of a house at Paris with which I had large dealings, I am pressed on a sudden for all the ready money I can get. I don't want to inconvenience you, but do try to see if you can take up those bills of yours which I hold, and which, as you know, have been due some little time. I had hit on a way of arranging your affairs; but when I hinted at it, you seemed to dislike the idea; and Leslie has since told me that you have strong objections to giving any security on your prospective property. So no more of that, my dear fellow. I am called out in haste to try what I can do for a very charming client of mine, who is in great pecuniary distress, though she has for her brother a foreign count, as rich as a Croesus. There is an execution in her house. I am going down to the tradesman who put it in, but have no hope of softening him; and I fear there will be others before the day is out. Another reason for wanting money, if you can help me, mon cher! An execution in the house of one of the most brilliant women in London,—an execution in Curzon Street, May Fair! It will be all over the town if I can't stop it.

Yours in haste,

LEVY.

P.S.—Don't let what I have said vex you too much. I should not trouble you if Spendquick and Borrowell would pay me something. Perhaps you can get them to do so.

Struck by Frank's silence and paleness, Lord Spendquick here, in the kindest way possible, laid his hand on the young Guardsman's shoulder. and looked over the note with that freedom which gentlemen in difficulties take with each other's private and confidential correspondence. His eye fell on the postscript. "Oh, damn it," cried Spendquick, "but that's too bad,—employing you to get me to pay him! Such horrid treachery. Make yourself easy, my dear Frank; I could never suspect you of anything so unhandsome. I could as soon suspect myself of—paying him—"

"Curzon Street! Count!" muttered Frank, as if waking from a dream. "It must be so." To thrust on his boots, change his dressing-robe for a frock-coat, snatch at his hat, gloves, and cane, break from Spendquick, descend the stairs, a flight at a leap, gain the street, throw himself into a cabriolet,—all this was done before his astounded visitor could even recover breath enough to ask "What's the matter?"

Left thus alone, Lord Spendquick shook his head,—shook it twice, as if fully to convince himself that there was nothing in it; and then re-arranging his hat before the looking-glass, and drawing on his gloves deliberately, he walked downstairs, and strolled into White's, but with a bewildered and absent air. Standing at the celebrated bow-window for some moments in musing silence, Lord Spendquick at last thus addressed an exceedingly cynical, sceptical old roue,

"Pray, do you think there is any truth in the stories about people in former times selling themselves to the devil?"

"Ugh," answered the rout, much too wise ever to be surprised. "Have you any personal interest in the question?"

"I!—no; but a friend of mine has just received a letter from Levy, and he flew out of the room in the most ex-tra-ordi-na-ry manner,—just as people did in those days when their time was up! And Levy, you know, is—"

"Not quite as great a fool as the other dark gentleman to whom you would compare him; for Levy never made such bad bargains for himself. Time up! No doubt it is. I should not like to be in your friend's shoes."

"Shoes!" said Spendquick, with a sort of shudder; "you never saw a neater fellow, nor one, to do him justice, who takes more time in dressing than he does in general. And talking of shoes, he rushed out with the right boot on the left foot, and the left boot on the right. Very mysterious!" And a third time Lord Spendquick shook his head,—and a third time that head seemed to him wondrous empty.

CHAPTER XXV.

Buy Frank had arrived in Curzon Street, leaped from the cabriolet, knocked at the door, which was opened by a strange-looking man in a buff waistcoat and corduroy smalls. Frank gave a glance at this personage, pushed him aside, and rushed upstairs. He burst into the drawing-room,—no Beatrice was there. A thin elderly man, with a manuscript book in his hands, appeared engaged in examining the furniture, and making an inventory, with the aid of Madame di Negra's upper servant. The thin man stared at Frank, and touched the hat which was on his head. The servant, who was a foreigner, approached Frank, and said, in broken English, that his lady did not receive,—that she was unwell, and kept her room. Frank thrust a sovereign into the servant's hand, and begged him to tell Madame di Negra. that Mr. Hazeldean entreated the honour of an interview. As soon as the servant vanished on this errand, Frank seized the thin man by the arm. "What is this?—an execution?"

"Yes, sir."

"For what sum?"

"Fifteen hundred and forty-seven pounds. We are the first in possession."

"There are others, then?"

"Or else, sir, we should never have taken this step. Most painful to our feelings, sir; but these foreigners are here to day, and gone to-morrow. And—"

The servant re-entered. Madame di Negra would see Mr. Hazeldean. Would he walk upstairs? Frank hastened to obey this summons.

Madame di Negra was in a small room which was fitted up as a boudoir. Her eyes showed the traces of recent tears, but her face was composed, and even rigid, in its haughty though mournful expression. Frank, however, did not pause to notice her countenance, to hear her dignified salutation. All his timidity was gone. He saw but the woman whom he loved in distress and humiliation. As the door closed on him, he flung himself at her feet. He caught at her hand, the skirt of her robe.

"Oh, Madame di Negra!—Beatrice!" he exclaimed, tears in his eyes, and his voice half-broken by generous emotion; "forgive me, forgive me! don't see in me a mere acquaintance. By accident I learned, or, rather, guessed—this—this strange insult to which you are so unworthily exposed. I am here. Think of me—but as a friend,—the truest friend. Oh, Beatrice,"—and he bent his head over the hand he held,— "I never dared say so before, it seems presuming to say it now, but I cannot help it. I love you,—I love you with my whole heart and soul; to serve you— if only but to serve you!—I ask nothing else." And a sob went from his warm, young, foolish heart.

The Italian was deeply moved. Nor was her nature that of the mere sordid adventuress. So much love and so much confidence! She was not prepared to betray the one, and entrap the other.

"Rise, rise," she said softly; "I thank you gratefully. But do not suppose that I—"

"Hush! hush!—you must not refuse me. Hush! don't let your pride speak."

"No, it is not my pride. You exaggerate what is occurring here. You forget that I have a brother. I have sent for him. He is the only one I can apply to. Ah, that is his knock! But I shall never, never forget that I have found one generous noble heart in this hollow world."

Frank would have replied, but he heard the count's voice on the stairs, and had only time to rise and withdraw to the window, trying hard to repress his agitation and compose his countenance. Count di Peschiera entered,—entered as a very personation of the beauty and magnificence of careless, luxurious, pampered, egotistical wealth,—his surtout, trimmed with the costliest sables, flung back from his splendid chest. Amidst the folds of the glossy satin that enveloped his throat gleamed a turquoise, of such value as a jeweller might have kept for fifty years before he could find a customer rich and frivolous enough to buy it. The very head of his cane was a masterpiece of art, and the man himself, so elegant despite his strength, and so fresh despite his years!—it is astonishing how well men wear when they think of no one but themselves!

"Pr-rr!" said the count, not observing Frank behind the draperies of the window; "Pr-rr—It seems to me that you must have passed a very unpleasant quarter of an hour. And now—/Dieu me damne, quoi faire!/"

Beatrice pointed to the window, and felt as if she could have sunk into the earth for shame. But as the count spoke in French, and Frank did not very readily comprehend that language, the words escaped him, though his ear was shocked by a certain satirical levity of tone.

Frank came forward. The count held out his hand, and with a rapid change of voice and manner, said,

"One whom my sister admits at such a moment must be a friend to me."

"Mr. Hazeldean," said Beatrice, with meaning, "would indeed have nobly pressed on me the offer of an aid which I need no more, since you, my brother, are here."

"Certainly," said the count, with his superb air of grand seigneur; "I will go down and clear your house of this impertinent canaille. But I thought your affairs were with Baron Levy. He should be here."

"I expect him every moment. Adieu! Mr. Hazeldean." Beatrice extended her hand to her young lover with a frankness which was not without a certain pathetic and cordial dignity. Restrained from further words by the count's presence, Frank bowed over the fair hand in silence, and retired. He was on the stairs when he was joined by Peschiera.

"Mr. Hazeldean," said the latter, in a low tone, "will you come into the drawing-room?"

Frank obeyed. The man employed in his examination of the furniture was still at his task: but at a short whisper from the count he withdrew.

"My dear sir," said Peschiera, "I am so unacquainted with your English laws, and your mode of settling embarrassments of this degrading nature, and you have evidently showed so kind a sympathy in my sister's distress, that I venture to ask you to stay here, and aid me in consulting with Baron Levy."

Frank was just expressing his unfeigned pleasure to be of the slightest use, when Levy's knock resounded at the streetdoor, and in another moment the baron entered.

"Ouf!" said Levy, wiping his brows, and sinking into a chair as if he had been engaged in toils the most exhausting,—"*ouf!* this is a very sad business,—very; and nothing, my dear count, nothing but ready money can save us here."

"You know my affairs, Levy," replied Peschiera, mournfully shaking his head, "and that though in a few months, or it may be weeks, I could discharge with ease my sister's debts, whatever their amount, yet at this moment, and in a strange land, I have not the power to do so. The money I brought with me is nearly exhausted. Can you not advance the requisite sum?"

"Impossible!—Mr. Hazeldean is aware of the distress under which I labour myself."

"In that case," said the count, "all we can do to-day is to remove my sister, and let the execution proceed. Meanwhile I will go among my friends, and see what I can borrow from them."

"Alas!" said Levy, rising and looking out of the window—"*alas!*—we cannot remove the marchesa,—the worst is to come. Look!—you see those three men; they have a writ against her person: the moment she sets her foot out of these doors she will be arrested."

[At that date the law of *mesne process* existed still.]

"Arrested!" exclaimed Peschiera and Frank in a breath. "I have done my best to prevent this disgrace, but in vain," said the baron, looking very wretched. "You see these English tradespeople fancy they have no hold upon foreigners. But we can get bail; she must not go to prison—"

"Prison!" echoed Frank. He hastened to Levy and drew him aside. The count seemed paralyzed by shame and grief. Throwing himself back on the sofa, he covered his face with his hands.

"My sister!" groaned the count—"daughter to a Peschiera, widow to a Di Negra!" There was something affecting in the proud woe of this grand patrician.

"What is the sum?" whispered Frank, anxious that the poor count should not overhear him; and indeed the count seemed too stunned and overwhelmed to hear anything less loud than a clap of thunder!

"We may settle all liabilities for L5,000. Nothing to Peschiera, who is enormously rich. *Entre nous*, I doubt his assurance that he is without ready money. It may be so, but—"

"Five thousand pounds! How can I raise such a sum?"

"You, my dear Hazeldean? What are you talking about? To be sure you could raise twice as much with a stroke of your pen, and throw your own debts into the bargain. But—to be so generous to an acquaintance!"

"Acquaintance!—Madame di Negra! the height of my ambition is to claim her as my wife!"

"And these debts don't startle you?"

"If a man loves," answered Frank, simply, "he feels it most when the woman he loves is in affliction. And," he added, after a pause, "though these debts are faults, kindness at this moment may give me the power to cure forever both her faults and my own. I can raise this money by a stroke of the pen! How?"

"On the Casino property."

Frank drew back.

"No other way?"

"Of course not. But I know your scruples; let us see if they can be conciliated. You would marry Madame di Negra; she will have £20,000 on her wedding-day. Why not arrange that, out of this sum, your anticipative charge on the Casino property be paid at once? Thus, in truth, it will be but for a few weeks that the charge will exist. The bond will remain locked in my desk; it can never come to your father's knowledge, nor wound his feelings. And when you marry (if you will but be prudent in the mean while), you will not owe a debt in the world."

Here the count suddenly started up.

"Mr. Hazeldean, I asked you to stay and aid us by your counsel; I see now that counsel is unavailing. This blow on our House must fall! I thank you, Sir,—I thank you. Farewell. Levy, come with me to my poor sister, and prepare her for the worst."

"Count," said Frank, "hear me. My acquaintance with you is but slight, but I have long known and— and esteemed your sister. Baron Levy has suggested a mode in which I can have the honour and the happiness of removing this temporary but painful embarrassment. I can advance the money."

"No, no!" exclaimed Peschiera. "How can you suppose that I will hear of such a proposition? Your youth and benevolence mislead and blind you. Impossible, sir,—impossible! Why, even if I had no pride, no delicacy of my own, my sister's fair fame—"

"Would suffer indeed," interrupted Levy, "if she were under such obligation to any one but her affianced husband. Nor, whatever my regard for you, Count, could I suffer my client, Mr. Hazeldean, to make this advance upon any less valid security than that of the fortune to which Madame di Negra is entitled."

"Ha!—is this indeed so? You are a suitor for my sister's hand, Mr. Hazeldean?"

"But not at this moment,—not to owe her hand to the compulsion of gratitude," answered gentleman Frank. "Gratitude! And you do not know her heart, then? Do not know—" the count interrupted himself, and went on after a pause. "Mr. Hazeldean, I need not say that we rank among the first Houses in Europe. My pride led me formerly into the error of disposing of my sister's hand to one whom she did not love, merely because in rank he was her equal. I will not again commit such an error, nor would Beatrice again obey me if I sought to constrain her. Where she marries, there she will love. If, indeed, she accepts you, as I believe she will, it will be from affection solely. If she does, I cannot scruple to accept this loan,—a loan from a brother-in-law—loan to me, and not charged against her fortune! That, sir," turning to Levy, with his grand air, "you will take care to arrange. If she do not accept you, Mr. Hazeldean, the loan, I repeat, is not to be thought of. Pardon me, if I leave you. This, one way or other, must be decided at once." The count inclined his head with much stateliness, and then quitted the room. His step was heard ascending the stairs.

"If," said Levy, in the tone of a mere man of business—"if the count pay the debts, and the lady's fortune be only charged with your own, after all, it will not be a bad marriage in the world's eye, nor ought it to be in a father's. Trust me, we shall get Mr. Hazeldean's consent, and cheerfully too."

Frank did not listen; he could only listen to his love, to his heart beating loud with hope and with fear.

Levy sat down before the table, and drew up a long list of figures in a very neat hand,—a list of figures on two accounts, which the post-obit on the Casino was destined to efface.

After a lapse of time, which to Frank seemed interminable, the count re-appeared. He took Frank aside, with a gesture to Levy, who rose, and retired into the drawing-room.

"My dear young friend," said Peschiera, "as I suspected, my sister's heart is wholly yours. Stop; hear me out. But, unluckily, I informed her of your generous proposal; it was most unguarded, most ill-judged in me, and that has well-nigh spoiled all; she has so much pride and spirit; so great a fear that

you may think yourself betrayed into an imprudence which you may hereafter regret, that I am sure she will tell you that she does not love you, she cannot accept you, and so forth. Lovers like you are not easily deceived. Don't go by her words; but you shall see her yourself and judge. Come."

Followed mechanically by Frank, the count ascended the stairs, and threw open the door of Beatrice's room. The marchesa's back was turned; but Frank could see that she was weeping.

"I have brought my friend to plead for himself," said the count, in French; "and take my advice, sister, and do not throw away all prospect of real and solid happiness for a vain scruple. Heed me!" He retired, and left Frank alone with Beatrice.

Then the marchesa, as if by a violent effort, so sudden was her movement, and so wild her look, turned her face to her wooer, and came up to him, where he stood.

"Oh," she said, clasping her hands, "is this true? You would save me from disgrace, from a prison—and what can I give you in return? My love! No, no. I will not deceive you. Young, fair, noble as you are, I do not love you as you should be loved. Go; leave this house; you do not know my brother. Go, go—while I have still strength, still virtue enough to reject whatever may protect me from him! whatever—may—Oh, go, go."

"You do not love me?" said Frank. "Well, I don't wonder at it; you are so brilliant, so superior to me. I will abandon hope,—I will leave you, as you command me. But at least I will not part with my privilege to serve you. As for the rest, shame on me if I could be mean enough to boast of love, and enforce a suit, at such a moment."

Frank turned his face and stole away softly. He did not arrest his steps at the drawing-room; he went into the parlour, wrote a brief line to Levy charging him quietly to dismiss the execution, and to come to Frank's rooms with the necessary deeds; and, above all, to say nothing to the count. Then he went out of the house and walked back to his lodgings.

That evening Levy came to him, and accounts were gone into, and papers signed; and the next morning Madame di Negra was free from debt; and there was a great claim on the reversion of the Casino estates; and at the noon of that next day, Randal was closeted with Beatrice; and before the night came a note from Madame di Negra, hurried, blurred with tears, summoning Frank to Curzon Street. And when he entered the marchesa's drawing-room, Peschiera was seated beside his sister; and rising at Frank's entrance, said, "My dear brother-in-law!" and placed Frank's hand in Beatrice's.

"You accept—you accept me—and of your own free will and choice?"

And Beatrice answered, "Bear with me a little, and I will try to repay you with all my—all my—" She stopped short, and sobbed aloud.

"I never thought her capable of such acute feelings, such strong attachment," whispered the count.

Frank heard, and his face was radiant. By degrees Madame di Negra recovered composure, and she listened with what her young lover deemed a tender interest, but what, in fact, was mournful and humbled resignation, to his joyous talk of the future. To him the hours passed by, brief and bright, like a flash of sunlight. And his dreams when he retired to rest were so golden! But when he awoke the next morning, he said to himself, "What—what will they say at the Hall?" At that same hour Beatrice, burying her face on her pillow, turned from the loathsome day, and could have prayed for death. At that same hour, Giulio Franzini, Count di Peschiera, dismissing some gaunt, haggard Italians, with whom he had been in close conference, sallied forth to reconnoitre the house that contained Violante. At that same hour, Baron Levy was seated before his desk, casting up a deadly array of figures, headed, "Account with the Right Hon. Audley Egerton, M. P., Dr. and Cr."—title-deeds strewed around him, and Frank Hazelden's post-obit peeping out fresh from the elder parchments. At that same hour, Audley Egerton had just concluded a letter from the chairman of his committee in the city he represented, which letter informed him that he had not a chance of being re-elected. And the lines of his face were as composed as usual, and his foot rested as firm on the grim iron box; but his hand was pressed to his heart, and his eye was on the clock, and his voice muttered, "Dr. F—should be here!" And that hour Harley L'Estrange, who the previous night had charmed courtly crowds with his gay humour, was pacing to and fro the room in his hotel with restless strides and many a heavy sigh; and Leonard was standing by the fountain in his garden, and watching the wintry sunbeams that sparkled athwart the spray; and Violante was leaning on Helen's shoulder, and trying archly, yet innocently, to lead Helen to talk of Leonard; and Helen was gazing steadfastly on the floor, and answering but by monosyllables; and Randal Leslie was walking down to his office for the last time, and reading, as he passed across the Green Park, a letter from home, from his sister; and then, suddenly crumpling the letter in his thin pale hand, he looked up, beheld in the distance the spires of the great national Abbey; and recalling the

words of our hero Nelson, he muttered, "Victory and Westminster, but not the Abbey!" And Randal Leslie felt that, within the last few days, he had made a vast stride in his ambition,—his grasp on the old Leslie lands, Frank Hazeldean betrothed, and possibly disinherited; and Dick Avenel, in the background, opening against the hated Lansmere interest that same seat in parliament which had first welcomed into public life Randal's ruined patron.

"But some must laugh, and some must weep;
Thus runs the world away!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK "MY NOVEL" — VOLUME 10 ***

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